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PRIVATE DETAIL, PUBLIC SPECTACLE:
SYLVIA PLATH'S AND ANNE SEXTON'S CONFESSIONAL POETICS AND THE POLITICS OF RECEPTION

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation studies the triangular relationship between reading practices, gender, and autobiography that is central to our understanding of Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry. In looking at the critical history and reception of confessional poetry and its continued influence on the publication, marketing, and current reception of Plath’s and Sexton’s work, what I have uncovered is a pervasive cultural anxiety about the emergence of a new kind of reader: a reader whose reading practices are insistently autobiographical and whom critics have gendered as female and diagnosed as “sick.” As a perceived extension of Plath’s and Sexton’s own pathologies, this figure of the woman reader, I argue, becomes the location where critics express a nexus of larger anxieties about the place of autobiography in poetry, the definition of art and aesthetics, and the diminishing size of poetry’s audience throughout the second half of this century. One of the principal aims of my dissertation is to recover this figure of the marginalized woman reader and the related practice of reading poetry as autobiography. Towards this end, I propose a redefinition of the term “confessional poetics,” one grounded in poststructuralist critiques of the autobiographical project and a close study of the ways Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry anticipates these critiques and, in the
process, constructs and even reconstructs its own reading public. By reformulating the terms of the debate over the label in this way, my dissertation demonstrates the critically important role Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry has played in the development of women’s autobiographical writing and reading practices over the past four decades, a role that has long been neglected by historians and theorists within literary studies.
In memory of my mom
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ever trying to be the good researcher, I read a number of acknowledgment pages before beginning this one. I am envious of how well they all express the authors’ gratitude and wish that I could express my own half as well. I fear that even my best efforts will fail to convey just how truly grateful, appreciative, and honored I feel.

First, my gratitude to everyone who helped to shape this dissertation through their generous readings and conversations. To Professors Jeredith Merrin, Marlene Longenecker, and Georgina Dodge, a special thank you for your prompt, insightful, and encouraging feedback on my chapters-in-progress. This dissertation is what it is because of your insistence that I not settle for easy answers. I wish also to thank the members of the First Draft Group at Ohio State, who over the last two years have read a number of selections from my dissertation and have provided rich and inspiring conversation about writing and literary scholarship.

Of course, the intellectual communities I’ve been privileged to be a part of would not have had the impact they had if it were not matched by generous material support from Ohio State. I feel particularly indebted to the English department for the numerous fellowships and research funds I have been awarded, which together have given me the time, concentration, and money I needed to complete this dissertation. Outside the English department, I would like to acknowledge both the Graduate School at Ohio State for making my trip to Sexton’s archives possible through a Graduate Student Alumni Research Award and the Department of Women’s Studies and the Elizabeth D. Gee Dissertation Fund for providing financial assistance during the final stages of this project.

Most importantly, I wish to express my love and gratitude to my friends and family—especially to those people who might just as well be counted in both categories. To all of the girls, a words-can’t-even-come-close thank you: your generous amounts of friendship, your commitment to good times, and your sanity-saving conversations about the profession have buoyed me during the times spent alone in front of the computer; they have also made the last six years unforgettable. To Jennifer Phegley and Lisa Tatonetti especially, the very fact that this dissertation is finished is proof of how much your friendship
and dissertation "coaching" have meant to me over the past two years. I simply can't imagine what graduate school would have been like without you.

And to my family, I offer the most humble thank you. Your love and understanding were never contingent on the existence of this dissertation, and yet you never doubted it would exist. Thank you for always providing perspective. While I could have appropriately dedicated this dissertation to all of my family, I wish to dedicate it to my mom, the late Mary Jane Badia, who encouraged me to get an education despite the great financial and emotional costs to herself. I doubt that I will ever fully understand the many ways her life and memory have shaped this dissertation.

And finally I wish to acknowledge my first debt of gratitude, which is to the two women who have made this piece of work possible, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. I hope this dissertation will stand as testament to how much their writings have meant to me over the years—as a literary scholar, a young woman, and an adoring fan.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 Autobiography, Confession, and Poetry: Towards a Unified Theory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 “Poetry as Confession”: M. L. Rosenthal and The Origins of an “Impure Art”</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 “Sub-Literary Circles”: Confessional Poetry and Its Readers</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 “The Ominous Taint of the Label”: Rosenblatt, Hoffman, and the Effort to Redeem Confessional Poetry</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 “Prose vs. Poetry”: The Binds of a Critical Paradigm</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The “High Priestess” and Her “Cult”: Sylvia Plath’s Confessional Poetics and the Mythology of Women Readers</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 From Confessional Poet to Priestess: The Mythology of Sylvia Plath (Or, What if Plath Had Been Ugly?)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 From Priestess Back to Poet: The (De)Mythology of Sylvia Plath</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 The Priestess-Poet: Towards a Theory of Plath’s Confessional Poetics</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

viii
3. "The Freak Show": Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics and the (Re)Construction of Women Readers ......................................................... 130

3.1 “A Monstrous Self-Indulgence”: The Critical Reception of Sexton’s Poetry ......................................................................................... 133
3.2 “Another Cult-Figure of Neurotic Breakdown”: Talking Sexton Back From the Edge ................................................................. 147
3.3 The “Sexton Freak” ..................................................................... 155

4. The Woman Poet as Public Spectacle: Plath and Sexton as Image and Icon ..................................................................................... 176

4.1 Sylvia Plath: The Face of “Case Study” ...................................... 181
4.2 Anne Sexton: Refusing the “Hospital Johnny” ............................ 193

Bibliography ..................................................................................... 226
**LIST OF FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Cover of <em>Sylvia Plath: Modern Critical Views</em>, designed by Vilma Ortiz</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Cover of <em>Haunting of Sylvia Plath</em>, designed by Senate Design Ltd.</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Cover of <em>Sylvia Plath: A Biography</em>, designed by Andy Carpenter</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Cover of <em>The Journals of Sylvia Plath</em>, designed by Mario Pulice</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Cover of <em>The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath</em>, designed by Steven Brower</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Drawing of Sylvia Plath, by Seymour Leichman</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Cover of <em>Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams</em>, by Sherry Sumerlin</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Photograph of Sylvia Plath from 1957, owned by the Corbis-Bettmann Archives (photographer unknown)</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Photograph of Sylvia Plath from 1957, featured in Anne Stevenson's <em>Bitter Fame: The Life of Sylvia Plath</em> (photographer unknown)</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>Cover of <em>Anne Sexton: A Biography</em>, designed by Michaela Sullivan</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>Cover to the hardback edition of <em>Searching for Mercy Street</em>, designed by Steve Snider</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.12 Cover to first paperback edition of *Searching for Mercy Street,* designed by Steve Snider. ........................................ 219
4.13 Cover of *The Complete Poems,* designed by Steven Cooley. ............. 220
4.14 Cover of *Love Poems,* designed by Steven Cooley. .......................... 221
4.15 Cover of *Selected Poems,* designed by Steven Cooley. ................. 222
INTRODUCTION

The Scene: A graduate seminar in twentieth-century literature. Under discussion is Sylvia Plath and her poetry. The poems selected for study are the usual ones, "The Colossus," "Daddy," "Ariel," and "Lady Lazarus"—those that have made Plath's name. The professor begins her lecture with the necessary biography: Plath hated her German father, who needlessly died when she was only nine, she married one of England's most famous and respected poets, and she killed herself after her husband abandoned her for another woman. The result of all of this, the professor continues, is the poetry, a portrait of a bitter proto-feminist intent on expressing her rage through her writing. With this as introduction, the conversation ignites and the battle over Plath begins. A long time Plath devotee, I closely attend to the conversation as one student dismisses her poetry as the "solipsistic" writings of a privileged, middle-class, white woman who was so "full of herself" that she appropriated the suffering of the Jews in Auschwitz as a metaphor for her own life. Another proclaims her a "minor poet" whose work is "merely confessional."

Stunned and even devastated by the discussion, I attempt to defend the writer and her poetry. My first strategy: to get the story straight. I am certain that if my fellow seminarians only knew the biographical truth about Plath—that she was a woman of the fifties, left alone and sick in a foreign country, with no money, no heat, no husband, no time to write, and two very small children to care for and
support—they could better appreciate the value of her writing. But biography, in this
case, is of no use. It persuades no one in this class. I hate to admit it, but it would
seem that Ted Hughes was right: "The Fantasia about Sylvia Plath is more needed
than the facts". I turn, then, to my second strategy: I point my peers back to the
text. "Daddy," I argue, is breathtaking, in its imagery, its tone, its mere existence.
Its illusion is the poet's apparent self-absorption. Look closer, I urge, and see the
struggle of a writer who desperately recognizes the perils of self-representation. But
two hours and my best efforts are not enough to persuade her detractors of the power
of Plath's poetry and her rightful place as major author. I leave the classroom and this
dissertation begins.

While time and my own need to remember this scene in a particular
way have undoubtedly shaped my memory of this classroom experience, it is
nevertheless a memory that has stayed foremost in my mind over the course
of researching and writing this dissertation. What the above scene marks, in
fact, is the birth of the critical questions at the center of this dissertation: how
did Plath become synonymous with proto-feminism, with solipsism, with
confessional poetry, and with (auto)biographical reading practices? how is it
possible that a label could not only stand in, as shorthand, for a discussion
about her work but also be deployed as the final word? and how did I, as
critic and reader, come to be forced into the stereotypical role of the Plath
defender? The above scene also marks the moment when I first fully
understood what is potentially at stake in the conversations we have as
literary scholars, indeed when I first fully understood that the ways we choose
to talk about literary texts—the words we use to describe the experience of
reading them, for example—matter a great deal. Perhaps this is common knowledge to most scholars within literary studies, but my own experiences as a student, teacher, and scholar who has observed a disturbing degree of carelessness in our conversations, such as in the above scene, suggest that many among us are not conscious of, or at least not all that concerned with, just how much the terms and paradigms we use matter. Retelling and reflecting on our critical conversations are perhaps ways to raise awareness about the potential stakes involved in the conversations we have about texts and the ways we read them, particularly about what is lost or gained, elided or privileged when we choose to practice one way of reading over another. In many ways, my dissertation is about just this—reflecting on and, more importantly, interrogating the conversations critics have had about confessional poetry, especially the confessional poetry written by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

More specifically, "Private Detail, Public Spectacle" is a study of the triangular relationship among reading practices, gender, and autobiography that has long been central to our understanding of Plath's and Sexton's poetry, even as it has gone largely uninterrogated by literary critics. My interest in this relationship grew out of what I intended to be a rather straightforward inquiry into the history of the label "confessional poetry," particularly its pejorative application to Plath's and Sexton's poetry. In looking at the critical history and reception of confessional poetry and its continued influence on the publication, marketing, and current reception of Plath's and Sexton's work, however, I realized that the complexity of confessional poetry's history would
not yield the kind of straightforward results I had anticipated. What I
discovered, in fact, is a pervasive cultural anxiety about the emergence of a
new kind of reader: a reader whose reading practices are insistently
autobiographical and whom critics have gendered as female and diagnosed as
"sick." As a perceived extension of Plath’s and Sexton’s own pathologies, this
figure of the woman reader, I further discovered, becomes the location where
critics, both past and present, express a nexus of larger anxieties about the
place of autobiography in poetry, the diminishing size of poetry’s audience
throughout the second half of this century, and the very definitions of art and
aesthetics. The task of recovering this figure of the marginalized woman
reader and the related practice of reading poetry as autobiography quickly
became the principal aim of my dissertation.

Towards this aim, my dissertation provides a close study of the critical
history of confessional poetry and the reception of Plath’s and Sexton’s work,
focusing particularly on how the reader becomes a point of contention in the
debate over the value of confessional poetry and how in the process the label
comes to signify the apparent shortcomings not simply of autobiographical
writing practices but also autobiographical reading practices. To better account
for such practices, I propose a redefinition of the term “confessional poetics,”
one grounded in poststructuralist critiques of the autobiographical project and
a close study of the ways Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry anticipates these critiques
and in the process envisions, constructs, and, in the case of Sexton,
reconstructs its own reading public. By reformulating the terms of the debate
over the label in this way, I hope my dissertation can better demonstrate the
critically important role Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry has played in the development of women’s autobiographical writing and reading practices over the past four decades and the significant impact women readers have had on Plath’s and Sexton’s careers as poets. Indeed, what I hope my dissertation shows is that Plath and Sexton helped to lay the foundation for women’s autobiographical writing as it exists today, authorizing the genre as one appropriate for the expression and exploration of women’s multivalent experiences and constructing a readership who would recognize and respond to the genre as such.

My first chapter, “‘The So-Called Confessional Poem’: Its Reception and Critical History,” closely examines confessional poetry’s reception and critical history from its origins to the present. Specifically, I look at the way the label has assumed a pejorative meaning and has thus come to encapsulate what to many readers are the poetry’s apparent aesthetic shortcomings. My close reading of the history of the label reveals the anxieties operating within critical evaluations of confessional poetry, anxieties about the role autobiography can and should play in poetry, the diminishing size and evolving shape of poetry’s audience over the course of the twentieth-century, and the possibility that artistic and aesthetic standards—indeed, the literary project itself—had been jeopardized by the popularity of the confessional poet. The significance of these anxieties lies not only in the complexity of their presence but in how they give way to and even produce the very terms and paradigms that have stalled the debate over the value and definition of the label “confessional poetry.”
My second chapter, “The ‘High Priestess’ and Her ‘Cult’: Sylvia Plath’s Confessional Poetics and the Mythology of Women Readers,” examines the initial reception of Plath’s work, as well as selections of more recent criticism, to show how in the case of Plath, specifically, the label “confessional poet” becomes a way for critics to denote both the figure of the “cult” reader and her insistence on reading Plath’s poetry as her autobiography. As my discussion shows, this kind of critical approach culminates with strategic efforts on the part of critics throughout the seventies and eighties to rescue Plath from the label, efforts best exemplified by Judith Kroll’s *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976). While such efforts were clearly meant to counter the harsh critiques that jeopardized Plath’s status as a poet during the late sixties and early seventies, they did so, I argue, at the cost of autobiographical reading practices and the young women readers who had become synonymous with such practices. As a corrective to this, I provide a close study of Plath’s poetry that demonstrates the ways she often takes the autobiographical project as her subject, exploring the relationship between experience, memory, identity, and relational self-representation.

Building on my examination of the reception of Plath’s work, my third chapter, “‘The Freak Show’: Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics and the(Re)Construction of Women Readers,” traces the reception of Sexton’s work and foregrounds three important points in the history: first, the perception among critics that her poetry deteriorated over the course of her career; second, the relationship between this perception and the parallel construction of her readers as “confused” women; and third, the way later
critics, many of them writing from what they themselves would call “feminist” agendas, have paradoxically adopted this construction as a strategy to recover Sexton’s reputation. Of particular interest to me here is the way Sexton herself responded to the construction, often internalizing the same anxieties about readership that shaped the criticism. Exploring the question of how Sexton regarded her readers, I look at a selection of poems and essays that show Sexton attempting to reconfigure her audience to meet what she saw as the expectations of the literary establishment. Her attempts to do so, I argue, further elide the figure of the woman reader as she is once again cast as an uncritical consumer. In an effort to recover her critical agency, I examine selections from Sexton’s “fan” letters, looking specifically at how women readers have defined her poetry and their own complex reading practices as autobiographical.

As this description may suggest, I have chosen to examine Plath and Sexton together in this dissertation for two interrelated reasons: namely, the similarities in the reception of both poets’ work and the fact that both poets shared and continue to share a readership. As I discuss in Chapters Two and Three, throughout their work’s reception, Plath and Sexton have both been dismissed as mere “confessional poets” who lack enduring literary value and whose work appeals, not to so-called “serious” readers, but to “cultists” who themselves lack sound critical judgment. Frequently at the center of such dismissals are women readers, a group that has long been identified as Plath’s and Sexton’s primary audience. At the same time, my discussion of Sexton departs significantly from my discussion of Plath, and for good reasons.
While both Plath and Sexton developed a confessional poetic grounded in autobiography, their work is also highly individualized. It would be misguided, then, to write two separate chapters on each poet that aimed to dissolve their differences in overarching, monolithic readings of their individual poetic oeuvres. Instead, what I have sought to do is provide similar examinations of the critical history of both poets' work that focus on the issue of readership, while also allowing each chapter to illuminate different facets of the larger questions that preoccupy this dissertation. For example, Chapter Two offers a close reading of "Daddy" in order to demonstrate the way Plath often explored the issue of self-representation in her poetry, while Chapter Three focuses on the way Sexton responded in her writing to both the labeling of her work as autobiography and the parallel construction of her readers as uncritical consumers. Maintaining the distinction between Plath and Sexton in this way becomes especially important as I turn towards a discussion of both poets' authorial identities in the final chapter of my dissertation.

Entitled "The Woman Poet as Public Spectacle: Plath and Sexton as Images and Icons," my last chapter extends the argument I make about the critical history and reception of confessional poetry and shows its continued influence on the publication, marketing, and current reception of Plath's and Sexton's work. As illustrations of this influence, I look at approximately fifteen different images of Plath and Sexton from book jackets and other promotional materials. By considering the way these materials construct authorial identities for Plath and Sexton—individual identities that are often opposed to or at least in tension with one another—I am able to demonstrate
the impact that perceptions of the Plath-Sexton reader have had on the marketing of their work. In the case of Plath's image, my examination clearly demonstrates how the current trends in marketing her work fetishize her depression and suicide in hopes of attracting a particular kind of young woman reader, namely the one constructed initially by early criticism about Plath's poetry and reinforced by larger cultural assumptions about her readers. The construction of Plath's readers evident in the images I examine assumes, moreover, that the appeal of her poetry lies in the facts of her illness and suicide. Such assumptions, I conclude, must be understood to deny Plath's "fans" the status of serious readers and potentially healthy, stable individuals who are capable of appreciating the complexities of her poetry and who identify with both her and Sexton in ways that cannot be explained simply by the poet's own troubled life. My conclusions about Plath's image are reinforced by my examination of Sexton's image, which is dramatically different from Plath's and from what we might expect given the notoriety of Sexton's mental troubles that her own writing helped to create. I argue, in fact, that the authorial identity constructed by the images of Sexton used to promote her work is one Sexton herself constructed in response to public perceptions of her writing, its relationship to her illnesses, and importantly to what she herself saw as the "Plath cult." That she did so helps us to understand, I think, just how powerfully ingrained the construction of Plath's and Sexton's readership had become. In that they also function as ways for Sexton to insist on the complexity of her work and its potential appeal to
readers, these images offer those of us in literary studies an opportunity to rethink our assumptions about the Plath-Sexton reader.

As this description perhaps suggests, throughout this project I have four principle objects of study: Plath's and Sexton's poetry, the reviews that have been written about it, the marketing strategies used to sell it today, and the readers who are often at the center of all three. The first requires little explanation, other than to say that my consideration of their work in this dissertation is highly selective. My aim in looking at their poetry is not to provide exhaustive readings of their oeuvres but rather to suggest paradigms of reading that are generative and inclusive of the kinds of autobiographical readings their readers have long practiced, paradigms, in other words, that might help us to understand Plath's and Sexton's readership better than we have. These paradigms grow out of my examination of the reception of Sexton's and Plath's work and respond very specifically to the central trend that defines the history of that reception, which is the tendency among critics to discount autobiographical reading practices and dismiss them as uncritical. The primary texts being studied here are, in fact, the reviews, critical essays, and books that have been written about Sexton's and Plath's work and about confessional poetry more generally. Together, these texts provide rich insight into what I call "the politics of reception," by which I mean the ideologies, biases, and agendas that produce certain responses to literary texts. Within conversations about confessional poetry, little attention has paid to these politics. Which is not at all to say that early critical literature written about confessional poetry has been ignored by contemporary critics. Just as one
would expect, this literature is routinely cited and discussed. However, it is seldom scrutinized for the way it constructs and even determines the current conversation by providing the very discourse by which we have understood confessional poetry—which is one of the principal points I am concerned with throughout my examination.

The impact of reviews has been especially overlooked, perhaps because the genre itself seems more like fleeting reflection than profound argument. In spite of such perceptions, I insist throughout this dissertation that the significance of reviews should not be underestimated. While perhaps not as carefully and thoroughly articulated as critical essays or book-length studies, reviews can have a powerful impact on readers, particularly on how they perceive books in relation to the canon and more practically on whether or not they purchase them. According to the Book Industry Study Group, which released its latest study, "Revealing the American Public's Book-Buying Habits," this June, the third most important factor in determining consumers' book purchases is the book review. While only tangentially concerned about the relationship between reviews and book sales, my dissertation does demonstrate the impact book reviews can have on how we talk about and value certain pieces of literature, and on how individual authors come to perceive their own work.

If reviews, essays, and books about confessional poetry constitute the primary texts of my study, then, the book covers I examine in the final chapter of my dissertation constitute the secondary texts of my study. I call them secondary not because they rank in importance behind the primary
texts but because they appear to respond to the reception. In fact, the impact of the reception of Plath's and Sexton's poetry can be seen most clearly, I think, in the covers I consider, specifically in the way they can be understood as either extensions or negations of the construction of reading practice that begins with the reception of both poets' work. Moreover, my decision to expand my examination of the reception of Plath's and Sexton's work to include book covers reflects the book cover's status as an important cultural and literary artifact that has for too long now been overlooked within literary studies. In fact, my own discussion may short-sell its importance: ranked as the most influential factor in readers' decisions to purchase a book, the book cover receives treatment here in only one chapter of my dissertation, while the book review, which ranks only third among the factors that influence book consumers, receives treatment in three chapters. The two looked at together provide an interesting vantage point from which to study Plath's and Sexton's work and literary reputations, especially if one considers that the two converge precisely at the point of the reader. In the case of Plath's and Sexton's work in particular, the two often mirror one another in their attempts to construct and even reconstruct readers.

If asked to describe, in a word, what this dissertation is about, then, I would answer: readers. More often than not, the so-called Plath "cultist" and the Sexton "freak" have been the object of concern in the reception of both poets' work. That this figure of the Plath-Sexton reader has also become an object of concern within popular culture, as my discussion in Chapter Two of Kat Stratford from the recent film 10 Things I Hate About You (1999)
demonstrates, raises the stakes of the conversation, for at issue is not simply
the value of Plath’s and Sexton’s work or even how their work is perceived by
mainstream culture but also the value of the young women who read their
work. In moving them to the forefront of the conversation and exposing the
assumptions that have shaped our understanding and construction of them, I
hope finally to offer new directions for the study of Plath’s and Sexton’s
writings and their readership. In mapping out these directions, I insist
throughout on the centrality of autobiography to Plath’s and Sexton’s work.
Just as we must account for Plath’s and Sexton’s readers, we must also account
for their reading practices, which are persistently and undeniably
autobiographical. For too long, I think, literary critics have overlooked or at
the very least simplified the relationship between Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry
and autobiography. It is now time for us to interrogate this relationship, to
consider what it is about their poetry that has elicited autobiographical
reading practices. Is it the nature of their subject matter? Is it the discursive
presentation of the “I” in their poetry? Is it the sensational nature of their
lives and deaths? More than we need definitive answers to these questions,
we need serious consideration of them, consideration that will lead us to new
questions and possibilities, which together may finally garner the attention of
scholars within the field of autobiography studies—scholars who have much
to offer those of us studying Plath’s and Sexton’s work and who can learn
themselves from both poets’ treatment of the autobiographical. In what
follows, I offer a preliminary discussion of autobiography that in order to
illuminate its importance to my own discussion of Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry
and to the larger conversations about confessional poetry that will hopefully take place in the future.

**Autobiography, Confession, and Poetry:**
**Towards A Unified Theory**

As I will show in Chapter One, confessional poetry has been defined as or against the "autobiographical" from its earliest reception: for one critic, Plath's poetry is "so autobiographical" that it fails to be poetry; for another, her poetry can be "proved" to be non-autobiographical—which is to say, fictionalized—and therefore aesthetically worthy; for one critic, the subject matter of Sexton's poetry is more suitable for prose; for another critic, Sexton alters what are seen as the facts of life sufficiently enough to demonstrate her commitment to the craft of poetry over the raw materials of autobiography. In all cases, as well as in those cases where the issue of autobiography is only gestured towards, it is clear that discussions of confessional poetry since the earliest days have been grounded in larger perceptions about autobiography and its relationship to the literary project. Just what those perceptions are exactly is often difficult to discern since autobiography seldom receives the treatment warranted by the nature of the autobiographical project itself. In the few instances where it does receive attention, the treatment itself is usually, if not always, undermined by the critic's ambivalence towards autobiography and his or her reluctance to explore it with too much scrutiny. Take, for example, three of the more important studies of confessional poetry to date that have tried to situate the poetry in relation to autobiography: Robert Phillips' *The Confessional Poets* (1973), Lawrence Lerner's "What is
confessional poetry?" (1987), and Diane Middlebrook's "What Was Confessional Poetry?" (1994).

Phillips' *The Confessional Poets* is perhaps the first truly definitional project to be written about confessional poetry and the only book length study on the subject to date. While Phillips insists that he is merely offering a "leisurely and informal definition" of confessional poetry, he in fact offers what may well be one of the most concrete definitions of the mode to have emerged from the criticism thus far (xi). Arguing that all confessional writing is "a means of killing the beasts which are within us," Phillips compiles a list, in true structuralist fashion, of the sixteen characteristics of confessional poetry that, when compressed, essentially define the confessional poem as a highly subjective, therapeutic, no-holds-barred expression of a personality that is written in ordinary speech and open form and that usually portrays unbalanced, afflicted, or alienated protagonists (16-17). Concrete, concise, and seemingly complete, Phillips' definition is seductively simple, which may paradoxically explain why his work has been mostly forgotten or ignored by critics since. But while others may have found his definition too simplistic, or perhaps too structuralist and constricting, to be useful, I find it significant for the way it is clearly grounded in the poetry's relationship to autobiography. Indeed, Phillips wants to situate confessional poetry within what he calls the "autobiographical frenzy" that swept through American literature during the second half of the twentieth century (xi). Unfortunately for Phillips, the best available definition of autobiography at that time leads him to describe the autobiographical act as one in which the author "let[s] it all hang out" (xi).
While such a description may well capture the element of self-display often central to confessional poetry, it cannot account for the way the poetry often resists pat definitions and problematizes the very conventions that have traditionally defined autobiography. Phillips' understanding of autobiography, then, is one hardly commensurate with the complexity of the poetry before him.

"What is confessional poetry?" by Lawrence Lerner makes a similar gesture towards theorizing the relationship between confessional poetry and autobiography, in this case by seeking to answer the two questions implicit in the label "confessional poetry": namely, "how does it differ from confession, and how does it differ from poetry?" (46). To answer both questions, as well as the one posed by his title, Lerner ventures back into literary history and attempts to distinguish confessional poetry from the transhistorical lyric. He tentatively concludes that the "lyric was never wholly detachable from confession, just as, if it is to have any claim to be poetry, it can never be wholly identified with it" (66). As this statement suggests, Lerner's conclusions stem, in part at least, from his desire to test the limits of the confessional poem. His interest in testing these limits further stems from his desire to elevate "true" confessional poetry, that is, the appropriately-aestheticized brand he thinks Sexton and Berryman write, from the pseudo-poetry he classifies as "mere confession" (58). In this way, then, Lerner becomes one of the first critics to consider seriously the confessional aspects of confessional poetry, even as he unfortunately relies on a rather simplistic definition of confession as "a deeply personal statement" (46). In the end,
however, it is not his definition of confession that limits his investigation but rather his motivation for considering the confessional aspects of the poetry in the first place, specifically the way he hopes to elevate certain brands of it over others. Given his clear biases, his work is not meant to advance discussions of confessional poetry's relationship to autobiography but to cast parameters around it. In this way, his work betrays a deep ambivalence towards autobiography and serves to reify the distance between autobiography and poetry, rather than to bridge it.

As its title suggests, Middlebrook's essay offers a revision of Lerner's essay. Like Lerner, Middlebrook approaches the question through the issue of the poetry's confessionality. Understanding confession as both an act of expiation and of faith, she concludes that "the faith affirmed in confessional poetry is Freudian, secular, and critical" (648). More specifically, it is concerned with family life, "with divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life" (636). Insofar as she situates confessional poetry historically and culturally and defines it as a Cold War product that responds to the fifties' institutional climate of decorum and conformity, Middlebrook breaks important new ground. Moreover, she too attempts to address the poetry's relationship to autobiography. She notes, for example, that the confessional poem contains "a first-person speaker, 'I,' and always seems to refer to a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem" (636). That Middlebrook carefully qualifies her definition with the appropriate measure of "seems" suggests that she is well
aware of the perils involved in writing about autobiography after poststructuralism. But at the same time, I think her qualifications can be read as an indication of her own reluctance to define confessional poetry through its relationship to autobiography. While offering the terms "real person," "actual life," and "real episodes," she clearly has no desire to take them up as points of discussion, as points upon which one might settle the question, "what was confessional poetry?" In addition, her curious disregard of the label's pejorative roots, which she only casually acknowledges, further suggests a reluctance, indeed ambivalence, about confession as a form of autobiography. Confessional poetry's autobiographical roots, then, are important enough to our understanding of what constitutes confessional poetry to be acknowledged but not enough to warrant thorough treatment or close inspection: at least this is what Middlebrook's own essay suggests.

Taken together, Middlebrook's, Lerner's, and Phillips's examinations certainly provide a foundation for a consideration of confessional poetry's relationship to autobiography, but it is important to recognize that it is one embedded in hesitation and ambivalence. Perhaps it is a well-found response; after all, the very existence of such attitudes provides a strong indication of how autobiography has been regarded by the literary establishment. Indeed, qualifications like Lerner's "mere confession" strongly indicate autobiography's perceived rank within literary culture if we understand the confessional act as a kind of autobiographical act, as I think we must. What can be seen in the critical history of confessional poetry is a clear correlation between autobiography's assumed status as an illegitimate or subliterary
genre and critics' evocation of it, not only by those critics who sought to
discredit confessional poetry but also by those critics who sought to elevate
the poetry precisely by not delving into the issue or scrutinizing the question
too closely. In other words, for those critics who wished to contain the
transgressiveness of confessional poetry, autobiography, insofar as it was
perceived to be a sub-literary genre, has served as a convenient and
shorthand way to demote the poetry; for those critics who wished to defend
the poetry’s aesthetic and literary merits, autobiography, the pariah of literary
culture with the potential to thwart their aims, had to be dealt with and
eventually elided from the discussion. Such manipulations of the status of
autobiography within literary culture can be better appreciated if one also
considers the history of autobiography and its emergence as a field of study
during the late fifties and early sixties, a date which suggestively coincides
with the emergence of confessional poetry and the critical conversation about
it.

Autobiography as a definable theory and field of study is widely
understood to have begun with the publication of Georges Gusdorf’s essay
“Conditions et Limites de L’autobiographie” in 1956 and Roy Pascal’s Design
and Truth in Autobiography in 1960. While not translated into English until
1980, Gusdorf’s essay has provided the foundation for traditional
autobiography studies, especially in its defense of autobiography as a “work
of art,” rather than as a “document of a life” that is purely of “historical
interest” (43). As one might expect, Gusdorf understands autobiography as a
largely male and Western tradition whose purpose is to reconstruct the “unity
of life across time," particularly the lives of great men (37). Similarly, Pascal
defines autobiography as a particularly European genre usually written by
older men of "outstanding achievement," who importantly have arrived at a
"sort of harmony" between "inward growth" and "outward experience" (10).
As later critics have pointed out, Gusdorf's and Pascal's work, while helping to
open a new field of study, actually did very little to help legitimate the field.
As James Olney notes in his essay "Autobiography and the Cultural
Moment," it was not until identity studies came into currency during the
seventies that autobiography began to shed its definition as an historical
account of the course of a life and truly come into its own as a field of literary
study.

Despite the limitations of Gusdorf's and Pascal's work, its significance in
relation to the historical period out of which it emerged is well-worth
consideration here. Indeed, reflecting on the growth of autobiography studies
as a field in the same essay mentioned above, Olney speculates on the
importance of the fifties in the formation of the field, suggesting that the rise
of interest in autobiographical texts during this time must certainly be a
reflection of the contemporary psyche and the intellectual and spiritual
atmosphere that gave shape to it. While Olney's project is more about
uncovering the direction autobiography studies followed after Gusdorf and
Pascal, certainly his acknowledgment of the roots of the field, however brief,
is an important one, with far-reaching implications for my own study of
confessional poetry. It becomes particularly important when one keeps in
mind that Gusdorf's and Pascal's work, as well as Olney's and that by a host of
other scholars writing after him, is concerned primarily with the question of autobiography's relationship to the traditional literary project. Previously regarded as a genre of mostly historical interest, autobiography emerges in literary discussions as a marginalized mode of writing, one regarded perhaps as something more significant than historical document but still well outside the literary trinity of fiction, poetry and drama. What legitimacy it did gain has hardly solved the problems that have plagued and defined the study of autobiography since its emergence in the fifties, including the most vexing one, which is encapsulated in critics’ quest to garner literary prestige for the field by defining autobiography as a distinct literary genre in and of itself, one unquestionably separate from but equal to fiction, poetry, and drama.

Paul de Man expresses the problems best in his seminal essay, “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979):

The theory of autobiography is plagued by a recurrent series of questions and approaches that are not simply false, in the sense that they take for granted assumptions about the autobiographical discourse that are in fact highly problematic. They keep therefore being stymied, with predictable monotony, by sets of problems that are inherent in their own use. One of those sets of problems is the attempt to define and treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre among others. . . . By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres. This does not go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic value. Whatever the reason may be, autobiography makes matters worse by responding poorly to this elevation in status.

Attempts at generic definition seem to founder in questions that are both pointless and unanswerable. (919)
Entering the debate about autobiography's relationship to traditional literary genres, de Man suggests that the problem with the field of autobiography studies is that it has failed to recognize the discrepancy between the aesthetic paradigms and reading practices that emerge out of traditional genres and those called for by autobiography, which for him is "not a genre or mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (921). "The autobiographical moment happens," moreover, "as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (921).

As I discuss in Chapter One, the study of confessional poetry is hindered by a similar conflict between aesthetic paradigms, a conflict that by the 1970s results in what I argue is a clear stalemate wherein the conversation about confessional poetry becomes trapped in and limited by its own discourse and preoccupation with generic distinction. I find it interesting that autobiography studies appears to reach a stalemate at the same moment, historically, in which the study of confessional poetry does. That both become bogged down in issues over generic distinctions suggests perhaps a larger preoccupation within literary studies, a preoccupation that was the likely result, one could reasonably conclude, of a kind of critical backlash against New Criticism's previous grip on literary studies. Given the powerful and residual grip of New Criticism, it is perhaps not all that surprising to find that those critics who do explore issues of generic definitions often reveal a great deal of anxiety in their efforts. James Olney suggests that in fact it is just such an anxiety which characterizes the study of autobiography:
In talking about autobiography, one always feels that there is a
great and present danger that the subject will slip away
altogether, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the
perception that there is no such creature as autobiography and
that there never has been—that there is no way to bring
autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper
form, terminology, and observances (4).

That the same critics who would insist on the legitimacy of autobiography
would also betray an uncertainty and ambivalence about their efforts is one of
the many paradoxes of autobiography studies. That critics writing about
confessional poetry would appear to share these anxieties leads one to
wonder if they might not be indicative of larger cultural anxieties, rather than
simply literary anxieties specific to a New Critical climate. One site for
exploring this question is through a consideration of confession, the very term
that links confessional poetry to autobiography.

As my review of confessional poetry’s history will show, the very
possibility that poetry could resemble confession, whether secular or religious
in nature, has elicited a variety of reactions, from unequivocal condemnation
to Pulitzer Prizes. But despite the mixed reactions it has provoked and
continues to provoke, one fact remains clear: when M. L. Rosenthal first
deployed the word in 1959, he did so, partially at least, to bemoan the turn
contemporary poetry had taken. Though he never directly says so in the
review in which he first uses the terms, Rosenthal’s tone makes clear that
confessional poetry is not a desirable accomplishment. As my close
examination of his review will show, he assumes, moreover, that his audience
will share his belief. Such shared understanding between Rosenthal and his
audience, even if only assumed, suggests perhaps that at this point in history,
confession, no matter its form, was perceived by those in literary studies not as a public utterance but as a private one that was best left as such. But as Foucault observes in his own work on confession, we have become (indeed, have been for some time now) "a singularly confessing society" (History 59). Perhaps it is this fact, the evident mundaneness of confession and its association with mainstream culture, that underlies and makes powerful Rosenthal's evocation of the word. In any case, Rosenthal's reliance on the apparent shared understanding, I would suggest, is evidence of a larger anxiety about the idea of confession and, to quote Rosenthal, the revelation of "personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" ("Poetry as Confession," 154). Of course, the idea of confession seldom evokes such anxiety today; confession is in fact so commonplace that most of us hardly react at all, let alone with anxiety, when another person discloses his or her personal confidences. That the word alone could apparently call up such anxieties in the fifties suggests that Rosenthal's use of confession in the review was entirely appropriate, despite his efforts a decade later to demonstrate the limitations and "dangers" of the construct." It would seem, then, that the value and usefulness of the descriptive term "confessional" lies in its origins as a marker, however pejorative in its initial use, that emerged almost simultaneously with the poetry itself and out of particular cultural attitudes towards the confessional and, by extension, the autobiographical act.

Compelling evidence for an argument about the label's usefulness and value can also be found in the most elementary understanding of the culture
of the late fifties and early sixties. As my earlier discussion of Middlebrook's work makes clear, the most illuminating discussions of confessional poetry thus far are those that have tried to situate it historically and culturally within the Cold War era. Projects like these have shown just how deeply embedded confessional poetry is not only in the cultural climate of the nuclear-Oedipal family but in the institutional climate of conformity that defined much of the fifties. As Middlebrook has shown, the paradigm of "oedipal rage" and the circumscribed feminine sphere now widely understood as central to white, middle class culture in the fifties are useful paradigms through which to read confessional poetry. In her recent essay "Penetrating Privacy: Confessional Poetry and the Surveillance Society," Deborah Nelson opens up additional and equally useful paradigms through her discussion of Sexton's confessional poetry within the context of the debate about privacy which arose out of and in response to Cold War politics. Both projects have gone a long way to advance the discussion of confessional poetry by providing a context in which to understand the poetry's preoccupation with familial relationships and the disclosure of the personal.

Examining the significance of the public disclosure of private lives gets us a step closer, I would argue, to a discussion that recognizes the complexities of the often competing discourses that gave shape to confessional poetry. As the chapter that follows demonstrates, discussions of confessional poetry are thoroughly rooted in a literary and intellectual culture preoccupied with issues of aesthetics and readership. These issues give rise to a larger concern about autobiography and its (improper) place within confessional poetry, indeed
within so-called "serious" literature in general. The anxieties manifest in all of the issues I have looked at here can be attributed, in part at least, to the cultural climate out of which they emerge, a climate best defined by its preoccupations with psychotherapy, self-confession, and surveillance, all of which coalesce in what might be understood as a broader cultural and institutional preoccupation with truth-telling. Importantly, this preoccupation often manifests itself at the time in mass culture fetishes. For example, in her essay, "On Inventing the Psychological," Nancy Schnog characterizes the Cold War era as a "watershed in the history of the exposure of Americans to psychological practices" as more people than ever sought out psychotherapies to ease their needs for "self-disclosure and solace." (6, 7). Reflected certainly in the popularization of therapy, these needs were also expressed in some strange and metaphoric ways, such as in the development and increased use of the lie-detector test and the correlative obsession in spy fiction with truth serums. Such technologies, fictional or not, reveal just how much truth-telling had been fetishized not only by institutions like the House Un-American Activities Committee and psychotherapy but just as importantly by mass culture. The specific example of the lie-detector test shows, moreover, how institutional preoccupations often fed into mass culture preoccupations, in this particular case into the truth serums of spy fiction.

It is clear that fifties culture, institutional and mass, was obsessed with truth-telling. For many literary critics at the time, undoubtedly, literary autobiography more closely resembled cultural discourses of truth-telling than traditional literature. In a way, what takes place in discussions of
confessional poetry from its emergence to even today can be seen as a reaction to modes of discourse perceived by many literary critics as mass culture and low brow. Lawrence Lerner suggests as much in his essay on confessional poetry when he notes how important it is to distinguish confessional poetry from "what the rest of us can do," which is of course confess (46). Indeed, as the self-appointed vanguards of culture and literature, many of confessional poetry's critics set out to preserve "serious" art from the taint of mass culture and, since it was often seen as a quality of mass culture, from the autobiographical imperative that seemed so all-pervasive at the time.

Working with this idea as my foundation—that is, that the shape of the critical history of confessional poetry is indicative of larger cultural attitudes towards confession and autobiography—I want to insist on an understanding of confessional poetry that asserts the aptness and possibilities of the term "confessional," rather than its limitations and dangers, an understanding that accounts moreover for the way poets, particularly Plath and Sexton, emerge as public spectacles through this particular kind of poetic production. That they are in fact spectacles can be seen not only in the way critics have cast them as writers who inappropriately transgress generic boundaries and literary decorum, thereby making spectacles of themselves, but in the way their authorial identities and images are often built around this element of transgressiveness. Considering Plath and Sexton as spectacles also allows us to see the potential of the label "confessional poet" as one that, while originally deployed to contain Plath's and Sexton's transgressiveness, could be
used now to recover and signal that same transgressiveness and its appeal to women readers.

At the same time, however, I recognize that one of the major problems with the label “confessional poet” is the way it homogenizes and pigeon-holes those poets labeled as such, a fact that has so often diminished the value of the term altogether. What does it mean, for example, to call W. D. Snodgrass a “confessional poet,” a poet who continues to write today and who as early as 1960 openly tried to break from the confessional mode he could be said to have initiated in his 1959 *Heart's Needle*? With these issues in mind and aware that the labels “confessional poet” or “confessional poetry” cannot be entirely avoided, I would like to shift the focus to “confessional poetics,” a mode of writing practiced by poets during a specific historical and cultural moment that has elicited a particular way of reading that is decidedly autobiographical.

As my gesture towards a definition here suggests, I am insisting that the way confessional poetry has been read is as important as the writing itself. Without question, the poetry has predominantly been read as autobiography, as my review of the criticism will show. Yet the issue of autobiography has been remarkably overlooked and neglected in the discussion. That is to say, while critics have evoked autobiography in their definitions, they seldom, if ever, ask the crucial question, what constitutes its representation? For this reason, my own consideration of this question tries to account for recent theories of autobiography and the work done in the field regarding the role of the reader in the autobiographical act. Rather than assume a stable definition of autobiography then, I want to challenge the boundaries of the construct, as
many in the field of autobiography have also begun to do. Autobiography, as I understand it, is a mode of self-narration that problematizes, rather than assumes, notions of experience, identity, and memory. As such, it is best understood as a mode of writing in service of other genres rather than as a distinct genre in itself. Additionally, I want to insist on the centrality of the reader to the autobiographical act. In fact, I would argue that the confessional poetic reveals itself as autobiography precisely through the practice of reading. What confessional poetry does, in other words, is illustrate one of the most important claims thus far made within the field of autobiography studies, a claim that originates with de Man and is perhaps now the mantra of the field itself: to repeat an earlier quotation, “autobiography . . . is not a genre or mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution” (921).

By emphasizing the practice of reading, as de Man and others in the field of autobiography studies have done, I seek to reformulate the terms by which we understand, not only Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry, but more generally women’s literature, women’s reading practices, and the ways both have been valued—or devalued, as the case may be—within literary studies and within our culture. That I do so through an examination of both the ways Plath’s and Sexton’s readers have been constructed and the consequences of such constructions means, I hope, that my dissertation has the potential to
shape future cultural attitudes towards real, one might say historical, women readers and their place within literary and popular culture.
Notes to Introduction


2 My attempts throughout the writing of this dissertation to locate critical discussions of book jackets dug up very little on the subject. What I was able to find tended to discuss the cover very narrowly as a piece of the larger book apparatus, an approach exemplified by Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997). But the most clear indication of how little valued book covers are as literary and cultural artifacts is the fact that most libraries, including Ohio State's, often destroy the book jackets that cover many scholarly books, using the images for bulletin board collages and eventually discarding them altogether.

3 Middlebrook acknowledges the label's roots with a nod to M. L. Rosenthal, who, for all intents and purposes, invented the label in 1959. As I show in Chapter One, Rosenthal's use of the label "confessional poetry" is charged with tension and anxiety. That Middlebrook overlooks (or chooses to overlook) the ambivalence Rosenthal himself embedded in the label is curious at best.

4 In tracing the history of autobiography, most critics locate the origins of autobiography in Augustine's *Confessions* or, alternatively, in Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In any case, critics as theoretically different as James Olney and Leigh Gilmore agree that autobiography as a literary mode emerges out of religious confession.

5 Gusdorf's and Pascal's configurations of autobiography as a particularly white, European, and male tradition that relies on an understanding of the self as a coherent, unified identity have been widely critiqued by both poststructuralist and feminist critics within autobiography studies. For examples of such critiques, see Paul de Man, "Autobiography as (De)facement," in *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979): 919-30; Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994); and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998).

6 In his work *The New Poets* (1967), Rosenthal essentially apologizes for the way his suggestion "caught on," noting that it is "very possible [that] the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage" (25).

7 By literary decorum, I mean the conventions that govern what could be properly used as the subject matter of poetry. In that they often wrote about so-called "women's issues," such as abortion, motherhood, and domestic life, Plath and Sexton were often seen as crossing boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate subject matters.
With rhetoric as dramatic as Anne Sexton herself, Maxine Kumin tells us in her foreword to Sexton’s *The Complete Poems* that her good friend “suffered and grieved over the label ‘confessional poet,’” even as she continued to project an image of herself as a flamboyant exhibitionist (xxvi). Though Kumin certainly exaggerates the case, it is also no secret how Sexton—or the other poets often included in the school—felt about the title “confessional poet.” Like most of her confessional cohorts, Sexton “railed against being put in this category” and often excoriated interviewers who asked if she considered herself to be one (Berg 7). But it is also true that over time Sexton insisted that she had grown comfortable with the generic marker, so comfortable in fact that in a 1969 *New York Times* interview she claimed the distinction for herself, revealing in true Sextonian fashion that she had recently decided that *she* was “the only confessional poet” (7).

I begin with this snapshot of Sexton’s re-evaluation of herself as confessional poet both to offer a teasing glimpse into Sexton’s personality, which will take front stage in Chapter Three, and to introduce the ways the
label "confessional poetry" has been critically evaluated and re-evaluated by poets, critics, and readers since it first came into use as a critical construct in 1959. As my review of the history will show, the use of the label "confessional poetry" to describe that distinct body of poetry written during the middle decades of this century by a small but influential group of American writers has neither been wholly embraced nor outright rejected. At its best, the label has usefully served to emphasize what many consider to be the "poetic breakthrough" of the late fifties and early sixties and to demarcate the poetry of the previous decades from the "hyper-personal" poetry written by Sexton and a school of other poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and W. D. Snodgrass, a demarcation that seems especially helpful in thinking about the career of a poet like Lowell who, after establishing a reputable career as a neoformalist with his first three books, began experimenting in the late fifties with autobiographical subjects and more direct language. But at its worst, the label has served as a convenient method of containment, a trash bin of sorts, that critics and readers alike have employed in order to relegate certain poets and their poetry to the margins of the literary canon. Yet despite the conflict and controversy, the label remains in currency today, and the confessional school continues to be recognized as a distinct literary movement in American literature. One need only glance over the latest editions of major literature anthologies like *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* and *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* to see how firmly the label remains in place and, importantly, wedded to its tainted past. Based on its present use, it seems
safe to conclude that the persistence of the label "confessional poetry" has been due largely, if not entirely, to its critical convenience.

At odds with most critics in the field who think the issue has been exhausted and would prefer to see the label quietly abandoned, I do not think that the debate over the value of the label "confessional poetry" needs to end here, with what I would describe as a complacent, if sometimes apologetic, reliance on the conveniently under-theorized label. One of the aims of this chapter, then, is to re-open discussion about the use and value of the label. Towards this end, I would like to begin by first examining the critical history of confessional poetry, tracing the use of the construct from its origins to the present, while also focusing particularly on those central moments that have defined and shaped the debate over the label’s value. Because so much of the work written about the topic of confessional poetry has been reactionary in some way, patterns or camps of critics quickly emerge from the body of criticism. In identifying these camps here, my goal is not to call attention to the limitations of previous work on the subject—such transhistorical gainsaying does little to advance discussions, I think—but rather to highlight the major issues involved in the debate and, perhaps more importantly, to uncover exactly what is at stake for both the critics and the poets whose work is being debated. As my language perhaps suggests, I am interested in the issues that seem to be just beyond or beneath the public debate over confessional poetry. So, while I will be asking some obvious questions about the critical history—for example, how has the definition of confessional poetry evolved over the past four decades? what are the defining terms? who has
been and can be included in the confessional school?—I also want to ask and explore several questions that are not so obvious, questions that have in fact gone largely unasked up to this point. For example, who has done the defining and for what agenda? What have been the effects of such definitions? What do the defining terms reveal about the study of confessional poetry, about the experience of reading it, and about the culture that consumes it? The importance of such questions becomes clear, I think, when one goes back to the beginning.

"Poetry as Confession": M. L. Rosenthal and The Origins of an "Impure Art"

Any discussion of confessional poetry must begin with M. L. Rosenthal. Not only is he the self-proclaimed originator of the label, but he has also been the most prolific critic on the subject, authoring at least seven individual, though often overlapping, reviews, articles, and books about the poetry he first described as "the poetry of confession" ("Poetry," 154). To begin my discussion of the critical history of confessional poetry, then, I want to look closely at the most important and influential of these pieces, his 1959 review of Robert Lowell’s fourth book of poetry, Life Studies.

In his 1967 book length study, The New Poets, Rosenthal himself explains the importance of his review of Life Studies:

The term 'confessional poetry' came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959, and perhaps it came to the minds of others just as naturally. Whoever invented it, it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage. (25)
Often quoted as evidence of why the label should be discarded, Rosenthal’s justification of the term and his apparent apology for the damage it has caused is interesting, both because it opens the chapter of the book devoted to Lowell’s confessional poetry and because of the way it reinforces Rosenthal’s authority as the inventor of the label. This claim to authority, not to mention Rosenthal’s cultural capital as a well-established literary critic, perhaps explains how his review of *Life Studies* came to set the terms for the debate that would eventually define the study of confessional poetry. It may also explain how, in setting the foundation for the discourse of confessional poetry, he also introduced the problems that have plagued the label, problems that are rooted in the way he coupled the two terms in order to convey his partial disapproval of and deep ambivalence about Lowell’s latest work and the new direction it seemed to be leading American poetry.

Rosenthal’s conflict is evident from the very beginning of the review. One need only listen for the sigh of regret that underlies his opening reference to Dickinson and to the state of contemporary poetry in 1959. Put off by what he describes as the current “use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession,” Rosenthal tries hard in his reading of *Life Studies* to overcome his initial dissatisfaction with the obvious “self-therapeutic motive” behind Lowell’s “impure art,” but he can do so only by focusing his attention on those parts of the book he calls the “historical overture,” namely those poems from Parts One and Two of *Life Studies* that by any measure would never warrant the label “confessional” on their own. Discussed at length in the review, the poems from these two opening sections of the book—poems that
to use Rosenthal’s words “are not personal in the sense of the rest of the book”—remind Rosenthal that Lowell is still the poet of a “driving aesthetic,” still capable of crafting “a beautifully articulated poetic sequence.” With the inclusion of such poems, Rosenthal can report that “the balance shifts decisively” (154). Of course, as anyone familiar with *Life Studies* knows, Parts One and Two are the least significant and least substantial sections of the book, comprising only eight poems altogether. Nonetheless, by emphasizing the way these two, small selections gesture towards some larger historical significance, Rosenthal is able finally to redeem *Life Studies* and Lowell’s reputation as a poet, even if only partially. But in the end it is Rosenthal’s provocative comparison between Lowell’s poetry and confession—and the deep ambivalence that underlies the comparison—that lingers over the review.

If Rosenthal admires Lowell’s work at all, his can only be described as the reserved admiration of a reader who wants badly to like the poetry he is reading but who at the same time cannot help but be disturbed by what he is forced to witness and the way it makes him feel. This is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the language Rosenthal relies on throughout his discussion of Parts Three and Four of the book: “91 Revere Street,” the prose section about Lowell’s family life as a child which takes up nearly half the book, and “Life Studies,” the final sequence of the book which chronicles, among other intensely personal subjects, Lowell’s stay at McLean Hospital and the time he spent in jail as a conscientious objector. In describing the “personal confidences” revealed in both sections, Rosenthal leaves little room for
misinterpretation: "91 Revere Street" and "Life Studies" consist, he writes, of
"grotesque glimpses" into the poet's life, including glimpses of the poet
"doing violence to himself" and to others (154).

In some rather interesting ways, phrases like the ones just quoted
suggest that more is going on in Rosenthal's review than an evaluation of the
poetry. I would argue, in fact, that Rosenthal regards Lowell's poetic decisions
in "91 Revere Street" and "Life Studies" with concern and worry that is
decidedly paternalistic: "I wonder," he writes, "if a man can allow himself this
kind of ghoulish operation on his father without doing his own spirit
incalculable damage." As this remark makes clear, Rosenthal, even as he
appears to envy Lowell his ability to "remove[] the mask" and speak
unequivocally as himself, feels compelled to note the potential, perhaps even
inevitable, damage that will result from Lowell's decision to cross the
boundaries between poetry and therapy (154). While the interest Rosenthal
takes in Lowell's well-being is almost poignant, especially in light of the
breakdowns and suicides that would eventually come to characterize the
confessional school, it is also suspicious in the way it reads as a kind of
warning to others—"Do not try this at home." And while Rosenthal may be a
genuine humanitarian, the motivation for his warning is probably not his
concern for those who might be tempted to imitate Lowell. Indeed, in the
context of the entire review, one must read Rosenthal's mindful warning as a
protective gesture directed as much towards literature, specifically towards
poetry, as it is towards Lowell. What Rosenthal anticipates in issuing such a
warning, in other words, is the impact confessional poetry seems destined to
have not only on its creators but on the very way critics and readers see and
define literature and poetry. At stake in the discussion, then, is the definition
of literature itself. What we call that work, therefore, becomes a question of
no small importance.

As I hope I have made clear, Rosenthal’s decision to describe such
poetry as “confessional,” regardless of how he intended it, is more than
simply an innocuous gesture or an acknowledgment on his part of Lowell’s
development as a poet, which is how he would eventually ask us to
understand it. When read in relation to the debate that would follow,
Rosenthal’s evocation of confession—and more specifically, the anxiety
underlying it—could be said to have predetermined the course later
discussions of confessional poetry would follow. At once both a perfectly
fitting and a dangerously loaded term, the label “confessional poetry” could
only become the subject of a contentious critical debate.

“Bared Breasts,” Not “Active Heads”: Irving Howe, James Dickey,
and the Containment of Confessional Poetry

Just as Rosenthal selected the label “confessional” to convey his
ambivalence and distrust of Lowell’s groundbreaking style in *Life Studies,*
other critics who were much less ambivalent about the new direction poetry
had taken during the late fifties and sixties responded to the new poetic mode
by adopting their own terminology, as if by naming the mode after what was
least appealing and most threatening about it, they could somehow contain it.
Like Rosenthal, these critics, writing mostly during the sixties and early
seventies, were put off by the element of confession that in their eyes pervaded the poetry that seemed to be streaming off the publishing presses in the wake of Lowell's and Allen Ginsberg's success. For many of these same critics, however, the term "confessional" could only hint at the perversity of such writing. To better call attention to the poetry's apparent shortcomings, some critics sought out what they thought to be more illustrative, and in most cases more offensive, terminology. In his 1963 review of recent works by Anne Sexton, Bink Noll, and Frederick Seidel, for example, William Jay Smith opted to call the new poetic mode "split-level grotesque" as a way to emphasize the suburban scene central to the poetry, specifically "the young married couple—their quarrels, children, divorces, and their moments of anguish, revelation and delight over too many martinis" (108). Others like Dan Jaffe argued that confessional poetry might be more appropriately renamed "solipsistic poetry" for the way it wrongly assumes that "if a man looks deeply enough into himself he will find something of value to others" (29). In the eyes of both Jaffe and Smith, as their concern with nomenclature suggests, confessional poetry, indeed the larger literary scene of the early sixties, had taken a profoundly wrong turn into mediocrity.

Importantly, Jaffe and Smith were not alone in their views. Their concern with alternative nomenclature merely reflects the debate critics and reviewers were having at the time over the value of confessional poetry. To call it a debate, however, may be misleading, since many of these same critics regarded their reviews as a means for ending the conversation entirely. In 1968, for example, Samuel French Morse suggested that critics and poets alike
needed to call a "moratorium" on confessional poetry (112). Numerous reviews and critical essays of the time suggest, moreover, that the future of confessional poetry, as well as its past, was bleak at best. Routinely coupled with demeaning descriptions such as "embarrassing," "solipsistic," "grotesque," and "hysterical," the label "confessional poetry" was deployed almost entirely for its apparent pejorative meaning, even during the early sixties as it initially came into currency. As for those critics who did not make nomenclature the issue of their arguments, the sentiment was generally the same, expressing the general consensus that confessional poetry was best seen as "case study" that was solely of "clinical interest" (Jaffe 29, Howe 90). Indeed, for many of these critics, calling the writing "confessional poetry" would simply be too generous a gesture, for such writing was mere statement—or as one critic put it, "not poetry at all"—and therefore did not even warrant the label "poetry."

All of this is not to say that nothing at all good was said during this time about the work of those poets typically labeled confessional. Some extremely positive reviews were in fact published during this same time, most of them about Robert Lowell's work. But by the early sixties, poets like Lowell and Snodgrass had developed new poetic styles and their emerging work seldom, if ever, provoked the confessional label. Nowhere is this made more clear than in M. L. Rosenthal's 1965 joint review of Lowell's *For the Union Dead* and Plath's *Ariel*, in which he announces that "the important news is that Robert Lowell, the chief figure of the 'confessional' movement in American poetry, has begun to leave its methods behind" (367). What Rosenthal does not say,
but what strikes one immediately upon reading the review, is that Lowell leaves the mode behind just as Plath emerges as a confessional poet with the posthumous publication of *Ariel*, a work some have described as the consummate example of the confessional mode. By the middle of the sixties, moreover, the only two poets still publishing work considered to be confessional were Sylvia Plath—or rather her husband Ted Hughes on her behalf—and Anne Sexton. In looking through the critical literature on confessional poetry for this project, what I have found in fact is the occasional bad review of Lowell's *Life Studies*, the almost complete neglect of Snodgrass's *Heart’s Needle*, and a plethora of ambivalent, if not outright negative, reviews of Sylvia Plath's posthumous publications and Anne Sexton's many volumes of poetry. It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that the discussion of confessional poetry in general, and the critical backlash against it, took place almost entirely in the context of Plath and Sexton's poetry. The implications of such a conclusion are clear: by the sixties, the question of the value of confessional poetry had become inextricably linked to the issue of gender.

Nowhere is this made more clear than in the criticism written by James Dickey and Irving Howe about Anne Sexton's and Sylvia Plath's poetry, respectively. Two of the most prolific literary critics of the second half of the century, their influence on the debate over the value of confessional poetry, specifically over the value of Plath's and Sexton's poetry, is in no way small. While it is important to note that neither Dickey nor Howe outright rejected the confessional school, or even Plath and Sexton individually, both held little regard for most of those poets of the younger generation writing in mid-
century America. For this reason their responses to confessional poetry are perhaps best understood in the context of their perceptions of the larger poetic landscape of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Before turning to their specific critiques of Sexton’s and Plath’s work in the following chapters, then, I want to look closely at their views of contemporary poetry.

In *Babel to Byzantium* (1968), in large part a response to Donald Allen’s seminal anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (1960), Dickey offers brief reviews of close to seventy contemporary poets, including a few of those featured in Allen’s anthology, as well as several other notable poets who emerged just after the publication of *The New American Poetry*, such as Anne Sexton and Ted Hughes. In what serves as the introduction to his book, Dickey addresses the purposes of anthologies as apparatuses that have often served as the “harbingers of lastingness” (8). That Dickey attributes such significance to anthologies may partially explain why his evaluation of Allen’s anthology is so harshly critical, even unkind. Indeed, his final judgment is unequivocal: “The fact is that few of those who fill up the 454 pages of *The New American Poetry* can write a lick. These few are occasionally good in some of the ways in which it matters to be good, but put against a really intelligent and resourceful poet like Howard Nemerov, even they show up pretty drably” (5). The problem, he goes on to explain, “is that much contemporary (and other) poetry is made up of a number of totally unconvincing postures . . . and is occasioned by the growing certainty that the writer has willfully betrayed his own experience” (6). On the one hand, Dickey’s words here, particularly the emphasis he places on the betrayal of experience, suggests
that what troubles Dickey is the insincerity and inauthenticity of the poetry he reads, specifically the poet’s tendency to misrepresent his experience, to betray it in such a way that it fails to persuade its readers. Given the preoccupation with the issue of sincerity evident in much of the criticism written during this time, such a reading of his words is certainly valid. However, another reading of his words seems equally valid, a reading predicated on a second meaning of “betrayed,” to show or reveal. Alternatively, then, what troubles Dickey is not simply that the poets included in Allen’s anthology have represented their experiences badly but that they have made the revelation of experience central to the poems in the first place. While the larger context of Dickey’s introduction suggests that he probably intended the first meaning of the word “betrayed,” the fact that both readings seem plausible speaks, I would suggest, to the difficult nature of the representational act Dickey describes, particularly the obvious fine line between the revelation of experience and its unconvincing representation. In other words, Dickey’s demands on poetry are in no way small: he would appear to want poetry that betrays experience without betraying experience. Perhaps Dickey is right to demand so much of published poetry. Regardless of whether he is or not, the presence of such demands on the part of critics, and confessional poetry’s apparent failure to meet them, point us towards some of the larger issues underlying the debate about confessional poetry, including issues about the role of autobiography in poetry, about the difficulties of representing in language what the confessonals sought to represent, and about the lack of a critical paradigm against which to read their
poetry, all issues that emerge more fully from a closer examination of Dickey’s discussion of the failings of contemporary poetry.

Preoccupied with poetic taste, Dickey clearly bases his judgments of his peers’ work on some strict and high aesthetic standards. At best, he finds value in only a few poems by a few poets, and must content himself finally with the discovery of a few favorable “passages” by a select group of poets (7). The exception Dickey does grant, and it is truly ironic I think, is the poetry of Robert Lowell. Given Lowell’s reputation at this point as the father of confessional poetry, his explicit exclusion from Dickey’s book would seem to contradict his larger claims about the state of poetry. Despite the fact that Dickey never treats Lowell’s poetry in the collection of critical snapshots, it seems reasonable to explain his exception of Lowell as a reflection of the poet’s rather secure reputation in 1960 or perhaps his association with the more reputable tradition of neo-formalism. Much less surprising is Dickey’s treatment of Allen Ginsberg. Used once again as the poster child for contemporary poetry, Ginsberg is merely “an ordinary and portentous man who screams,” and who, along with the 450-some other poets in Donald Allen’s work, fails to appeal to Dickey’s self-described “simple” tastes (6). That it is the counter-cultural Beat poet Ginsberg whom Dickey identifies with the ills of contemporary poetry suggests that Dickey’s tastes are not nearly as simple as he would have his readers believe. A close reading of his argument reveals, in fact, that his tastes are deeply embedded in New Criticism, a tradition certainly at odds with the emerging poetic climate of the fifties.
The influence of New Criticism is most clearly evident in Dickey's description of the critical faculty he believes all good poets exercise, a faculty he calls "the censor":

Both the public and 'critical' (or Rexrothian) success and the actual failure of these people (or the majority of them at any rate) can be traced to the absence in each of them of what W. H. Auden calls 'the censor': the faculty or indwelling being which determines what shall and what shall not come into a poem, and which has the final say as to how the admitted material shall be used. (7)

The presence of "the censor," Dickey goes on to explain, allows a poet to build "good details into coherent wholes" (7). An obvious gesture towards New Criticism, Dickey's desire for "coherent wholes" situates him firmly within those modernist circles of the previous decades that were dominated by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Moreover, Dickey makes no effort to hide his affiliation with modernism, noting at one point that of all the poets in Allen's anthology who might show potential, it is Gary Snyder who, because of his willingness to follow Pound's "example," "comes closest to valid expression" (7). If Dickey's tastes are simple, then, it is because of how clearly they can be traced to the New Critical tradition. I doubt, however, that one need know a great deal about Pound's and Eliot's "tastes" to know that they were never very simple. Neither are Dickey's tastes, I would argue.

Like Pound, Eliot, and a number of their contemporaries, Dickey expresses a preoccupation with audience which reveals that his aesthetic concerns are intricately wed to his perceptions of who comprises poetry's audience. Indeed, as he explains it in the passage above, the absence of "censor" has contributed not only to the failure of the poetry in Allen's
anthology but to its “public and ‘critical’ success.” The placing of ‘critical’ in scare quotes is obviously meant to signal Dickey’s sarcasm; the success is not critical at all, especially insofar as those reading and applauding contemporary poetry could benefit themselves, Dickey implies, from the presence of the “censor.” This implied insult is made more explicit in the following passage:

Nothing on God’s earth can shut [these poets] up, and the fact that a good many of their kind and a few curio-seekers from other walks of life listen to them bellow in coffeehouses convinces those who wish to be convinced that they are “bringing poetry back to the public,” restoring it to its true role, making it prophetic, and so on. Meanwhile their mentors keep telling the genteel, mildly interested middle-brow public that this is a real movement. (5)

If Dickey’s use of scare quotes signals his sarcasm, then the tone he takes in this passage indicates perhaps that his sarcasm masks a much deeper anxiety. At the very least, it is clear that Dickey is deeply troubled by what he sees as the tendency among the younger generation of poets to allow their work to be shaped, not by the tastes of the middle-brow public, which in Dickey’s mind is the arbiter of taste, but by the tastes of those who occupy the lower-brow quarters of the coffeehouses. In Dickey’s mind, then, the reading public is as guilty of critical indiscretion as the poets themselves. Given this, it is perhaps not all that surprising that the public, too, would become the object of Dickey’s indictment, as it does in the following passage:

The fact that a reasonably large segment of the reading public might now be persuaded that the ‘New Poets’ are ‘real’ and that poets like Nemerov are only ‘mandarin’ writers . . . indicates as nothing else has done for a long time how little we really care about poetry, how little we love it for what it is to us (and not for what we have been told it is), and above all how little we have learned about it. (5)
Dickey's concern here with poetry's audience—specifically its seeming irreverence for what is most noble about poetry—shows finally that much more is at stake for Dickey than simply the aesthetic value of contemporary poetry. As he makes clear in his final assessment of Donald Allen's anthology, the poetry, as it is, is no more than "fairly low-grade whale fat," and the best that could have ever come out of it, even with the help of the censor, is "usable oil" (8). Such a final assessment might reasonably lead one to wonder what all the fuss was about, then. For Dickey, of course, the final assessment is much less important than what gets said in the process of arriving at it, for his intention is not simply to review an anthology but to show how the fate of contemporary poetry and his idea of what its readership should be depends precariously upon it.

In 1972, in an essay entitled "Sylvia Plath: A Partial Disagreement," Irving Howe extends Dickey's argument and offers his own diagnosis of the ills of contemporary poetry and its readers. The article, written for Harper's Bazarre, is, as the title suggests, a partial critique of Plath's poetry, but it is also a less-than-partial critique of Plath's status as, in his words, "an interesting minor poet" who has been erroneously made into a "darling of our culture" (88). I will return to Howe's critique of Plath in the following chapter. More relevant to my purposes in this chapter is Howe's discussion of confessional poetry and, more generally, mid-twentieth-century poetry. For Howe, the major flaw of contemporary American poetry is its reliance on "the notion that a careful behavioral notation of an event or object is in itself sufficient basis for composing a satisfactory poem" (89). Gesturing towards imagism's
credo, Howe's words here—and his subsequent allusion to wheelbarrows—are without question intended to implicate William Carlos Williams, among others, suggesting that for Howe the roots of confessional poetry's shortcomings lie in the poetry of the preceding generation. In laying down roots in such soil, confessional poetry, Howe suggests, is predestined to provide little more than a "mere verbal snapshot... that has little reverberation" (89). At the same time, Howe also suggests that the failure of confessional poetry can be only partially explained by its relation to the poetry written by poets like Williams. Its shortcomings are also attributable, he explains, to its confessional impulses. In other words, as Howe sees it, confessional poetry is doubly damned: once for its proximity to certain brands of modernist poetry, and again for its proximity to confessional writing. While Howe never suggests that confessional writing is inherently bad, as he does in the case of Williams' particular brand of modernism, he clearly sees it strictly as a prose genre and further assumes a definition of it that insures its incompatibility with poetry. In trying to accomplish in poetry what Augustine and Rousseau have proved is best suited to long prose works, confessional poets, he argues, cannot but fail to transform their "personal wounds" from "local act to larger meaning" (89). Perhaps Howe is merely pointing out the obvious in his observation here: a compressed and restrained literary form, lyric poetry would appear to share little with the massive prose documents typically associated with confessional writing. The larger issues underlying his statement suggest to me, however, that the
distinctions he assumes between the genre of the lyric and the genre of confessional writing are much less obvious than he would have us think.

Howe's chief complaint about confessional poetry—that it relies on "careful behavioral notation"—is indicative of the larger problem he argues is inherent to the project of confessional poetry itself: namely, the problem of how it attempts to bring together personal confession and the short lyric, "a form likely to resist confessional writing since it does not allow for the sustained moral complication, the full design of social or historical setting that can transform confession from local act to larger meaning" (89). The effort can only result in failure, moreover, for the two genres that confessional poetry attempts to merge are fundamentally at odds, at least according to Howe's schema, as he explains in the following passage:

Insofar as a poem depends mainly on the substance of its confession, as blow or shock revealing some hidden shame in the writer's experience, it will rarely be a first-rate piece of work. It will lack that final composure that even the most excited composition requires. Insofar as it makes the confessional element into something integral to the poem, it ceases, to that extent, to be confessional. It becomes a self-sufficient poem, not dependent for its value on whatever experience may have evoked it. (89)

The distinction Howe tries to set up between confession and poetry, I would argue, is a questionable one, not only because confessional poetry in actuality defies the distinction, but because the distinction is predicated on an assumption about confession that is problematic at best: namely, that confession is a haphazard statement lacking "composure." It is out of this distinction that Howe's biases—and the centrality of these biases to his larger argument—emerge.
In what is one of the most telling and provocative passages of his article, for example, Howe makes clear just what it is that troubles him about confessional poetry, and in doing so reveals what is at stake in his argument:

The readiness with which Lowell exposed his own life caused many people to admire his courage rather than scrutinize his poems. Candor was raised to an absolute value, such as it need not often be in either morals or literature. Our culture was then starting to place an enormous stress on self-exposure, self-assault, self-revelation, as if spontaneity were a sure warrant of authenticity, and spilling out a sure road to comprehension. The bared breast replaced the active head (89).

While Howe seems willing here to grant confessional poetry an admirable aim, namely authenticity, he faults it for the means it employs: candor, which is suggestively metaphorized as “the bared breast.” That it is candor that Howe settles on as the defining feature in the decline of poetic standards is striking, not only for the way it works to undermine Howe’s statement—insofar as candor is virtually synonymous with sincerity, a widely-regarded prerequisite for good poetry at the time—but also for Howe’s insistence on its (mis)placement in morals and literature. That Howe makes a point of including morals in his discussion suggests that his complaints are not purely, if at all, aesthetic ones, despite his earlier points about “excited composition” and “final composure.” From his discussion about candor, in fact, one might conclude that it is not Lowell’s inadequate treatment of personal experience that bothers Howe but rather that Lowell indulges himself and allows it into his poems at all. Such a reading would certainly be in line with Howe’s position as a critic whose views on literature are heavily invested in socialist ideologies. His preoccupation with self in the above
passage—that is, with "self-exposure, self-assault, self-revelation"—further indicates an ideological bias, particularly one that privileges society over the individual. But before discounting Howe's complaints as mere reflections of his desire to contain individualism and self-preoccupation, I think it is important to recognize that his complaints are not leveled only at Lowell, or even at contemporary poetry, for that matter. For Howe, Lowell's candor reflects a larger cultural preoccupation with the self and the particular way contemporary culture prefers to have it represented: namely, through exposure, assault, and revelation. What Lowell seems to be guilty of, then, is giving in to the cultural preoccupation. Even more troublesome to Howe is that the preoccupation has resulted in the crippling of critical facility or what he calls the "active head." Indeed, Lowell's readers "admire his courage rather than scrutinize his poems," mistake "spontaneity" for "authenticity" and "spilling out" for "comprehension" (89). In this way, Howe's concern with culture and Lowell's readership echoes James Dickey's own anxieties about the reading public, a public more impressed by the poetic endeavors of Ginsberg and company than with the writing of more deserving poets, a fact which for both critics attests to "how little we have learned about [poetry]" (Dickey, Babel 5). It is clear, moreover, that Howe and Dickey are fundamentally in agreement about the state of poetry in mid-century America: having allowed their poetry to be influenced by an undemanding and easily gratified reading public, poets have plunged the genre into an (un)literary abyss and, in doing so, have jeopardized the poetic pursuit itself. That two critics situated so differently could arrive at the same central
preoccupation with readership shows I think just how serious the issue of audience had become.

"Sub-Literary Circles": Confessional Poetry and Its Readers

Concerned with the "tastes" of poetry's audience, both Irving Howe and James Dickey move the reader to the center of the conversation about confessional poetry and about contemporary poetry more generally. While perhaps unmatched in terms of their authority within literary culture, they were not alone in their concern for poetry's altered audience. For many other critics writing around the sixties and seventies, audience had become the pressing issue within conversations about contemporary poetry, one that had as much to do with the size of poetry's audience as it did with its tastes. In fact, in many ways Howe and Dickey are merely entering into an already existing dialogue that can be traced back to the earliest days of modernism when poets like Eliot and Pound set out to shape an audience of elite readers. Given Eliot's and Pound's seemingly untouchable authority within literary culture, it is not all that surprising to find Dickey and Howe preoccupied with the same issues throughout the sixties and into the seventies. Indeed, as recently as 1978 critics were still grappling with the residual effects of Eliot's poetic enterprise and his desire to shape what he describes in 1943 as "the right, small audience" (11). One notable example is Christopher Clausen, who, in his 1978 article for *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, traces what he calls in the article's title, "The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry." Not surprisingly, Clausen attributes the alienation of poetry's contemporary readers to the
influence of high modernism and its shaping of an elite audience, the impact of which is evident not only in the decline in the number of original books published each year and the subsequent extinction of the self-supporting poet, but also in the disappearance of poetry as a “major cultural force” (74). But as Clausen rightly points out, not all poets writing in the decades after modernism felt the decline. In fact, the success and fame of poets considered to be from what Clausen describes as “sub-literary circles”—Rod McKuen being the most notable example—are evidence that “poetry written on and for the lowest levels of literary sophistication continues to flourish today” (77). It is, to quote him again, the “serious poet” who has suffered from his or her place in an “age in which there are no longer generally accepted standards of poetic taste or merit” (85-86). Compounding the plight of the serious poet is the fact that the audience he or she has always depended on, namely the more discerning “literate and sophisticated” reader, had essentially stopped consuming poetry, while “uneducated” and the “half-educated,” the more easily manipulated readers that is, continued to support sub-literary poetry (78).

Clearly, Clausen’s argument depends, rather perilously I might add, on an assumption about the separation of “serious” and “popular” poetry, as well as on the separation of high and low culture. But what is most interesting about Clausen’s efforts, I think, are not the separations in and of themselves, but rather the tension and even contradiction that undermines his own project. Indeed, critics like Clausen want poetry’s audience to be sufficiently sophisticated but large enough to support the enterprise. In this way perhaps,
Clausen and others like him are merely guilty of wanting to have it all. Or perhaps Clausen's real motivation is simply a nostalgia for a pre-Eliotian poetic past that even he is not so sure existed. In any case, Clausen's argument and the anxiety that so obviously underlies it are indicative of a larger literary climate preoccupied with the issue of a diminishing, or at least evolving, audience. At the center of this preoccupation, I would argue, is confessional poetry itself, a mode that for many critics, including Clausen, served only to exacerbate what in their minds had already become a worrisome problem.

In his 1959 review of *Life Studies*, for example, Geoffrey Johnson blames Lowell for appealing to a narrow audience of "the expensively educated, the much-traveled and infinitely-bored sophisticate" and suggests, moreover, that he is the reason "poetry is increasingly regarded with such public indifference" (173). Given Lowell's reputation prior to *Life Studies* as a well-mannered poet whose talents were largely shaped under the direction of a neo-formalist tradition, and given the "breakthrough" *Life Studies* is said to represent, Johnson's commentary on Lowell's *Life Studies* is difficult to understand since it is this poetic tradition that, according to Clausen at least, has the best chance at popular success. In fact, *Life Studies*, especially insofar as it would seem to fall under Clausen's category of "obscurely private" poetry— which according to Howe at least is precisely what mainstream readers demand—ought to have appealed to a broader audience than the elite one Johnson describes. Additionally, there is the fact that Lowell, by any measure, could hardly be described as a poet to whom the public was
indifferent: the success of *Life Studies* and the subsequent poetry it engendered is evidence to the contrary. As the so-called father of the confessional school, Lowell in many ways could be said to have rejuvenated the genre of poetry, opening it up to new audiences and a new kind of reader. In this way, then, Johnson’s indictment of Lowell seems unfounded if not plain erroneous, for while Lowell might have begun his career appealing to the “infinitely-bored sophisticate,” with the publication of *Life Studies* he clearly had reached audiences that extended well beyond the scope of conventional divisions between the populace and the intellectual, though we would by no means call him a bestseller.

The importance of this tension within Johnson’s work and between the critics shaping the conversation becomes more clear, I think, when considered along side reviews of Sylvia Plath’s work, which perhaps not surprisingly received reactions that, in kind and tone, were quite different from those Lowell received. Whereas Lowell was faulted for having little to offer to anyone outside a coterie of intellectuals, Plath often provoked harsh criticism for writing poetry that appealed to and manipulated the mainstream reader. While I do not want to over-generalize by suggesting that the critical response to Plath’s work was more monolithic than it was in actuality (to be sure, reviews of Plath’s publications, in her lifetime and after her death, range from high praise to mixed acceptance to disdainful rebuke), I do think that it is impossible to ignore the anxieties about audience and genre that underlie most of the critical discussions. The headlines alone reveal just how central the issue of readership had become in the larger critical conversation about
contemporary poetry and about Plath's poetry in particular. Indeed, titles like "Sylvia Plath: The Cult and the Poems," "Poets in Search of a Public" and "The Cult of Plath" all demonstrate just how important the reader had become to the larger picture." And, as these titles well-illustrate, it is not the intellectual reader who concerns these critics. Rather, it is the cult reader, who, while she may often come from so-called "intellectual" culture, is most often associated with popular or mainstream culture. Even a cursory review of the critical literature from the sixties and seventies reveals just how pervasive the rhetoric of the cult had become; more than simply attention-getters, the headlines for reviews like the ones above reflect the substance of the article and the fact that, under the guise of a literary review, critics were frequently diagnosing the "ills" not only of the poet herself but also of her readers. However troubling they are in this way—and they are troubling—they mark an important shift in discussions of confessional poetry, particularly women's confessional poetry, whereby the binary between the popular and the intellectual reader so evident in Johnson's review of Life Studies is subsumed into the rhetoric of the cult that dominates the reception of Plath's work.

For critic Melvin Maddocks in 1966, in fact, the discussion was no longer centered on popular poets and serious poets; rather it was about "cult-poets" and "non-cult poets," about "pseudo-poems" and "real poems" (13). Still, while Maddocks couches his discussion of Plath in new terminology, it is clear that the issues remain much the same. At stake is still the value of the poetry, a point Maddock himself makes clear in his attempt to distinguish the cult-poet, who gets "read for different and lesser reasons," from the non-cult poet.
In this way, then, the revised terminology is more than simply an incidental substitution. In ways less direct language could not, the revised terminology crystallizes the impact that perceptions of audience (i.e., who reads it and how do they read it?) can have on perceptions of a text's literary value (i.e., is it then worth reading?). In this particular case, moreover, it is the audience that must first be critiqued and even admonished before Plath's poetry can even be considered for evaluation. Indeed, for Maddocks, Plath's talents as a poet, while exaggerated by "cultists" who lack "regard both for her potential and the potential of her poetry," are certainly notable and for this reason, he argues, "she deserves better" than the unenviable fate of the cult-poet. Significantly, it is not mainstream readers whom Maddocks identifies as "cultists" but rather Plath's fellow poets and critics, who in becoming Plath's "sponsors" have lost sight of the poetry. Unlike many of the other critics previously examined, then, Maddocks does not see a clear distinction between so-called "serious" and "popular" readers; he suggests in fact that the former are just as capable of reading "badly" as the latter.

By blurring the boundaries of readership in this way and by speaking directly and meta-critically about the critical response *Ariel* received in 1966, Maddocks shows the extent of the conversation. Preoccupied with every kind of audience, from sophisticated and mainstream readers to professional critics and cult critics, many of the most prolific and outspoken literary scholars writing during the sixties and early seventies looked to readers to try to explain what they intuitively felt to be the misdirection of contemporary poetry. This shift in the critical conversation, a shift that culminates
argue with the discourse of the "cult," suggests that the reception of confessional poetry is one that has been shaped by deep anxieties and tensions, anxieties and tensions about the nature of poetry's audience, about aesthetic standards, and about the poet's role within literary and popular culture. In many ways, the rhetoric of the cult merely encapsulates these issues, which is not at all to diminish its significance. In raising the issue in this chapter, in fact, I hope to foreground its importance to the critical conversation. Maddocks' own discussion of Plath's "cult" alone prompts several questions that are worth further consideration. Most certainly, one wonders what the very prevalence of cult rhetoric suggests about confessional poetry. How had the word "cult" come to signify so much in the literary conversations of the time? Does its application to Plath merely reflect her tragic suicide or something larger? What does it mean that for Maddocks, as well as for a number of other critics, the cult spoken of is not one of young, women readers, which eventually is how it would come to be thought of, but rather one of fellow poets and critics?

"The Ominous Taint of the Label": Rosenblatt, Hoffman, and the Effort to Redeem Confessional Poetry

For many critics and readers since its inception the label "confessional poetry" has become synonymous with the death of aesthetics and critical judgment in poetry and as such has often functioned as shorthand in critics' and readers' efforts to disparage and dismiss the poetry as inappropriate and unattractive verbal nakedness. During the first two decades of the poetry's
reception, detractors of confessional poetry had thoroughly worked the label to their advantage, relying in part of course on Rosenthal’s initial use and definition of the construct. Confession, and its implication of artless self-revelation, had been settled upon as the most appropriate label for a poetry that appeared to be more documentary than literary, more embarrassing than inspiring. As Steven Hoffman explains in his essay, “Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic,” by 1978 the label had become a “major stumbling block,” to such a degree in fact that even those critics who wished to defend the poetry’s aesthetic achievements were forced to deal first with what Hoffman aptly calls “the ominous taint of the label” (687). Indeed, many felt compelled to try to repair the damage done by the label “confessional.”

Replacement terminology, one of the more common methods of repair, proliferated during the late sixties and early seventies when nearly everyone writing about confessional poetry proposed new nomenclature as a solution to the problem: in 1965, A. Alvarez suggested “extremist poetry” to convey what he thought to be the defining feature of the poems, namely, the self-violence that produced them; in 1970, Monroe Spears proposed “open poetry” to reflect the poetry’s “openness and nakedness,” the chief moment of which was Lowell’s Life Studies (238); in 1973, Marjorie Perloff introduced the name “documentary verse” to highlight Lowell’s “superb manipulation of the realist convention” that for her distinguishes his work from the less accomplished poetry of his “disciples” (86); and in 1984, Alan Williamson offered the broader category “personal poetry” to draw attention to the similarities between confessional poetry and other poetry written around the
same time and since. Those critics less interested in making distinctions, like Joan Aleshire and Jon Rosenblatt, insisted that the fuss was really about nothing and proposed a commonsensical return to "lyric poetry.""

In all cases, as I hope the above catalogue of nomenclature suggests, the replacements are no less problematic than the original and as such they do little if anything to advance the discussion of confessional poetry. Whether the adjective used is "documentary," "extremist," or merely "personal," the names for the most part continue to suggest a poetry that is deviant from the norm in the way it resembles autobiography, and for this reason, they most often reinforce the taint of artlessness that apparently warranted the label "confessional" in the first place. Aware that previous efforts had done nothing to advance discussions of confessional poetry, another camp of critics emerged who refused even to engage the question of nomenclature, addressing the issue in some cases only to dismiss it as dubious or inconsequential. Moving on to what they felt to be more important issues and often directly countering earlier attacks about confessional poetry's aesthetic shortcomings, they focused their attention on the poetry's craft and set out to demonstrate its technical and formal accomplishments.

Perhaps the earliest critic to respond in this mode was Jon Rosenblatt, who in his 1976 essay entitled, "The Limits of the Confessional Mode in Recent American Poetry," insists that the application of the notion of confession to the lyric is "a short but treacherous step" (153). He argues, moreover, that the creation of a new category of poetry is unwarranted insofar as the poetry typically labeled confessional—Lowell's, Plath's and
Berryman’s in this case—reveals on closer examination a clear “dependency upon Romantic and modern models” and further demonstrates what is obvious about the lyric, namely, “that the lyric can possess various degrees of autobiographical directness” (156, 155). To insist on the label in the face of its clear semblance to the conventional lyric, then, would be “to deprive their poetry of any lasting significance” (156). With the problem of nomenclature swept under the rug, Rosenblatt hopes that criticism can finally get on to the important question that needs to be asked in regard to Plath’s, Lowell’s, and Berryman’s poetry, which is “whether the personal material has been raised to a symbolic and universal plane of significance” (159).

That Rosenblatt chooses to couch the discussion within the terms of “symbolic and universal significance” is no small matter. Nor is it one that can be divorced from questions of gender. In this particular case, however, the significance of the terms Rosenblatt uses is perhaps best understood, not in relation to issues of gender, but in relation to issues of genre. Indeed, one of the more interesting aspects of Rosenblatt’s essay is its treatment of autobiography. As my summary above suggests, Rosenblatt isolates “autobiographical directness” as one of the chief elements thus far used to differentiate confessional poetry from the lyric. Arguing against such an assumption, he insists instead that the poetry typically labeled “confessional” is “never directly autobiographical.” As case in point, he offers Plath’s poem “Daddy” and the facts of Plath’s life: “not a Nazi, a Panzer man, or a murderer,” Otto Plath could hardly be said to be the father figure of the
poem, nor Plath the Jewess speaker (156). To read it “autobiographically” would be to reduce the poem to “absurdity” (157).

As this example makes clear, the definition of autobiography from which Rosenblatt is working is a narrow one. Using personal fact as the litmus test of autobiography, Rosenblatt insists that a poet like Berryman never “directly transcribes his actual experience” in his poetry and is therefore not confessional (158). In its application of such a narrow and strict understanding of autobiography, Rosenblatt’s essay is indicative not only of the difficulties posed by generic boundaries and the apparent bifurcation of poetry and autobiography but also of how much contemporary autobiography studies has changed and enriched our understanding of the autobiographical project. Despite these understandable limitations, I think Rosenblatt’s treatment of autobiography is worth closer inspection. In particular, what makes his argument worth a closer look is his recognition, perhaps intuition, about the centrality of the reader to confessional poetry. While Rosenblatt argues against the necessity of separate nomenclature, indeed against the very possibility of confessional poetry, he clearly acknowledges that confessional poetry has elicited an untraditional reading practice, one based on what he sees as the “inadequate aesthetic formulations” of its readers. Importantly, these formulations are grounded in autobiography, or more specifically in the textual cues within the poems that have been erroneously identified as autobiographical by confessional poetry’s readers (157). In the end, Rosenblatt dismisses the reader of confessional poetry as one incapable, it would seem, of appreciating the aesthetization of
the personal that enables confessional poetry to be more than mere confession, more than mere autobiography. In this way, Rosenblatt's essay is seminal and in fact ushers in a new camp of criticism, one preoccupied with the aesthetic redemption of confessional poetry and the elision of the autobiographical reader.

Steven Hoffman's work also epitomizes this larger move to aestheticize and thereby redeem confessional poetry. In his essay, "Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic," Hoffman appears to agree with Rosenblatt on the issue of the label's limitations, calling it a "major stumbling block." Nevertheless, he wants to maintain an understanding of the confessional school as a "distinct historical movement," and so he continues to use the tainted terminology throughout his essay (688). He can follow such a contradictory course because his purpose, he explains, is "to delve beneath imprecation to consider confessional poetry as poetry" (687). Like Rosenblatt, Hoffman wants to consider confessional poetry as a mode of writing that evolves out of both the Romantic and modern traditions. Confessional poetry is, he argues, "a phenomenon that synthesizes the inclination to personalism and consciousness building of the nineteenth century with the elaborate masking techniques and objectifications of the twentieth" (688). In the words of his article's title, then, it is a poetry of "impersonal personalism." By positioning confessional poetry within the Romantic and modern traditions, Hoffman clearly hopes to elevate the work of poets like Lowell and Berryman to the same status as the Wordsworthian
personal epic and Eliotian dramatic monologue, both of which, he points out, share with confessionalism a tendency to poeticize the mundane.

His concern for a kind of poetic continuum is not the only point of agreement between Hoffman and his predecessor Rosenblatt. Clearly speaking directly to confessional poetry’s detractors, he accuses others of having overlooked the “conscious activities of selection and arrangement” involved in all great poetry, including confessional poetry. Lest his point be missed, he explains that for the confessionals, “the immersion in experience is not in itself poetry; rather, that experience must be transformed into images, the images into rhythmic patterns, the patterns, finally, into dramatically convincing poetic incidents” (696). Echoed in Hoffman’s statements about the poetry’s craft are Rosenblatt’s descriptions of both autobiography and autobiographical reading practices, where the former is merely the effortless “transcription of [] actual experience” and the latter are based on “inadequate aesthetic formulations.” Like Rosenblatt, then, Hoffman implicitly accuses confessional poetry’s readers of reading badly.

Clearly what is at stake for Hoffman and Rosenblatt is the poetry’s aesthetic redemption, and one can hardly fault either critic for their defense of the poetry’s craft, especially given the previous critical backlash against it. That Hoffman even found it necessary to remind his readers of the conscious activities of selection and arrangement that go into poetry only speaks to the degree to which confessional poetry had become a pariah that, despite the accolades it had received in the form of Pulitzer Prizes and Book Awards, still lacked a legitimacy within literary studies. That he should also seek to
separate confessional poetry from autobiography, a genre waging its own fight for legitimacy at the time, is hardly surprising. More surprising perhaps is the fact that in their attempts to legitimate confessional poetry Hoffman and Rosenblatt rely on the very binary that made possible the disparagement of confessional poetry to begin with: namely, that confessional poetry is either the expression of a "naked ego" or it is a "carefully constructed aesthetic entity" (694). Reversing this binary, they not only reinscribe the terms earlier critics predicated their own disparaging arguments upon; they firmly trap confessional poetry's readers within the binary logic. Indeed, the implications of Hoffman's and Rosenblatt's arguments are clear: if you read confessional poetry as poetry, then you are a "good" reader; but if you persist in reading it autobiographically, then you are a "bad" reader.

"Prose vs. Poetry": The Binds of a Critical Paradigm

More than a failure or misjudgment on his part, Hoffman's reliance on the binary logic and his elision of autobiographical reading practices are indicative, I think, of the very paradox that lies at the heart of the label "confessional poetry": namely, the way the label asks that the writing attached to it be considered at once as both poetry and autobiography. While this kind of demand on readers may today seem obvious—and even less an invitation than a demand—this particular kind of reading practice was obviously difficult for many of confessional poetry's earliest critics. Unwilling to consider the possibility that the placement of the autobiographical at the center of a poem could have aesthetic merit, critics have held tenaciously to a
set of already existing critical paradigms. Often based on rigid generic distinctions, these paradigms left little, if any, space for discussions of what might constitute autobiography in poetry. This is perhaps most clear in the sheer number of reviews from the poetry’s early critical history that, like Hoffman’s review from above, try to understand confessional poetry according to a poetry/prose binary. Showing just how ingrained the binary was, many critics, including William Jay Smith whom I cited earlier for his revisionist terminology, prescribed prose as the antidote to the ills of confessional poetry. In reference to the “less successful pieces” of Sexton’s All My Pretty Ones, for example, Smith suggests that what Sexton really offers her readers is “only the raw materials of autobiography,” a fact which only “makes one wonder if some such material could not be better dealt with in prose” (110). To paraphrase Smith, then, at issue is not simply Sexton’s choice of the subject matter, as one might think, but her choice of genre in representing that subject matter.

The implications of Smith’s speculations become more clear when considered in the context of the larger conversation that seemed to preoccupy critical circles at the time, a conversation encapsulated by Robert Bly’s 1962 essay, “Prose vs. Poetry.” Clearly concerned, indeed anxious, over current trends in contemporary poetry—trends towards the blurring of the prose-poetry boundary—Bly takes up the issue of the diminishing size of poetry’s audience, only to argue that the real problem is not with the audience necessarily but with a lack of good criticism. Chanting a kind of Eliotian mantra, he argues, in fact, that “The best thing that can happen to poetry
during the time when it is still possible for it to grow is to have a small readership” (65). Calling upon Dwight Macdonald’s argument about how the middle class magazine has sunk the standards of the novel, Bly suggests that it does poetry little, if any, good to have a large audience: “When an art receives a large audience, at least in this culture, it stops growing. The larger the audience, the more it acts as an invisible pull on the writer—backwards” (65). If these comments smack of a protective paternalism towards the poet, it is because Bly is in fact concerned about the direction in which younger poets are being led. His intention, moreover, is to prescribe a kind of criticism that will protectively redirect the poet away from the demands of the audience and back to the aesthetic ideal Bly sees as central to the poetic endeavor: namely, responsiveness only to the imagination. Dismissing the debate about poetry’s audience as an “irrelevant” one, then, Bly narrows in on the lack of good criticism and its inability to direct poets back to the important issue.

This lack is manifested most clearly for Bly in the “curious reviews” written about Lowell’s Life Studies. “Life Studies is a fine book,” he admits, “except that for the most part there is no poetry in it” (79). In failing to see the way books like Life Studies are merely “prose masquerading as poetry,” critics, Bly argues, have ignored “what is most essential in a poem—its poetry.” To remedy the problem, Bly proposes that “we need criticism which begins all over again—a criticism which attempts to distinguish what is poetry from what is not,” concluding finally that “the more American poetry grows away from prose, the greater it will be” (79-80). While Bly is obviously
concerned with the state of American poetry in general, it is significant that it is *Life Studies* that he foregrounds in his diagnosis of the ills of contemporary poetry and its critical reception. In that *Life Studies* includes within its pages, and under the masquerade of poetry, a substantial prose section, Bly's treatment of it seems commonsensical enough. However, his selection of *Life Studies* takes on added significance if one considers that it is the poet James Dickey that Bly holds out to the reader as a “genuine poet” (68). Clearly, and as early as 1962, camps of poetic ideologues had emerged.

Bly's affiliation with Dickey is especially evident in his reliance on a strict, inflexible critical paradigm. For Bly, good criticism must recognize that for poetry to be good poetry, it must be as far removed from prose as possible—indeed, the farther the better for poets and readers alike. And similarly for Dickey, as he explains in *Babel to Byzantium*, “there are four or five main ways of reacting to poems,” and the good poet is responsive to these reactions (3). While Bly's paradigm of the prose-poetry binary is in no way a perfect reiteration of Dickey's paradigms for reading, both clearly grow out of a web of anxieties and both appear to veil, however thinly, deep concerns about poetry's audience. After all, while Bly wants the question of the audience to be “irrelevant” in the poet's mind, it is far from an irrelevant question in Bly's own mind. The critical history of contemporary poetry and of confessional poetry in particular shows in fact that it was perhaps the most relevant question of the time, and an extremely difficult one to deal with, which may partially explain why so many of confessional poetry's critics have held tenaciously to established paradigms.
Indeed, more than simply a reflection of how old and new conventions can clash, the desire among critics to draw clear lines between poetry and prose, between good readers and bad readers, and between elite and mass culture indicates perhaps a larger desire for stability in a time of vast change. It is worth keeping in mind, for example, that much of the debate over confessional poetry took place during the late sixties and seventies, a period defined by turbulent social movements whose effects often spilled into the academy. To be sure, if poetry’s audience was changing during this time, it was because literary studies itself was changing in profound ways as teachers, scholars, and administrators responded to the imperatives of reform and all aspects of education—from student bodies to curricula—became subject to change. Within literary studies in particular, scholars and students were often confronted with new texts and new literatures, which in the way they often worked to preserve racial, ethnic, and women’s histories certainly complicated the once stable notion of imaginary literature. As James Olney has noted, confronting these new traditions of literature meant confronting autobiography as a legitimate field of study (“Autobiography” 15). It also meant, I would add, confronting new readers and new reading practices. While a largely white, middle-class mode of writing, confessional poetry offered similar complications to existing ideas about literature, its relationship to autobiography, and its audience—and for this reason perhaps, it could not help but become a site where critics contested change and held tight to existing paradigms.
Notes to Chapter One

1 Throughout the critical history of confessional poetry, critics have commonly expressed their concern and dismay over the label by prefacing it with the words, "so-called." Such qualifications allow them to talk about the literary construct while also distancing their own work from it. The words seemed like a fitting title for this chapter since one of my central concerns is the way critics have understood and used the label. For an example of how critics have adopted the label "the so-called confessional poem," see Linda Wagner-Martin's introduction to Critical Essays on Anne Sexton (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989).

2 The Heath Anthology of American Literature (Vol. 2) argues that Anne Sexton is "best known as a confessional poet, and is among that mode's most accomplished practitioners, but the label inadequately describes her aims and her achievement" (2416). The Anthology of Modern American Poetry reveals a similar anxiety about the label in its introductions to Sexton's and Lowell's works: about Sexton's writing, it explains, "Though often grounded in personal experience and emotion, even her more confessional poems mix biographical truth with invention" (921); about Lowell's writing, it insists that while his poems "came to herald what would be called the 'confessional' school of poetry ... from the outset of his career Lowell has actually been drawn to a more complex subject—the intersection of public history and autobiographical experience" (751). Paul Lauter, ed. The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 2. 3rd edition. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). Cary Nelson, ed. Anthology of Modern American Poetry (New York: Oxford UP, 2000).

1 Interestingly, and contrary to Rosenthal's claims here, in his 1959 review of Life Studies Rosenthal never explicitly calls Lowell's work by the name "confessional poetry." In fact, the only time the two words even appear together is in the title, "Poetry as Confession." The eventual metamorphosis of Rosenthal's phrase from an awkward coupling into a catchy literary construct would seem to reinforce Rosenthal's speculation that the term was a "natural" one and entirely appropriate. In any case, of course, the phrase eventually evolves into the form we know today.

1 However questionable Howe's distinction may be, it is essential to his argument and the case he clearly wishes to build against Plath and eventually, as I discuss in Chapter Two, against Plath's poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." Even before his treatment of Plath's poetry, however, Howe's biases and the centrality of these biases to his larger argument are evident.

5 For Clausen, unlike many of the other critics examined in this chapter, the problem with confessional poetry is that it is too much an extension of Eliot's modernism for its emphasis on the reflection of contemporary life. While this difference between Clausen's view of modernism and the one that dominates the larger conversation about confessional poetry is certainly important, I am less interested in the solutions Clausen offers, which is a return to the pre-Eliotian verse of Longfellow, than in the way he articulates the problem.


The essay by Dwight Macdonald which Bly references is “Masscult and Midcult” in Against the American Grain (New York: Random House, 1952).
Loosely based on Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, the recent film *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) tells the story of Kat Stratford, a darkly cynical and socially outcast teenager who has renounced dating after losing her virginity to the less-than-deserving boy now pursuing her younger sister Bianca. Having completely and contemptuously rejected the conventional high school scene, Kat is despised by her peers at Padua High and frequently referred to as “the heinous bitch.” While it is certainly true that Kat occasionally behaves badly—at one point purposely smashing her own car into the car of her former boyfriend—she is just as certainly not the “midol-deprived,” “muling wretch” her peers and teachers make her out to be. Quite to the contrary, Kat sees herself more as a non-conformist who simply locates her self-worth outside the rigid boundaries that shape the rest of the student body and the patriarchal order that surrounds her, an order symbolized most effectively by the male English teacher who routinely sends Kat to the principal’s office for “terrorizing” his class, including once after she challenges his omission of important women writers in his lectures. But even as Kat regards herself as someone above the conventional cliques of her peers, the
film’s writers typecast her in another way: wreathing sarcasm, grungily
dressed, and a fan of riot-grrl music, she is, in short, a millennial version of the
angry feminist intellectual, or at least one in the making.

The reason for my elaborate portrait of Kat Stratford in this chapter is
clear if one also considers another important fact about Kat: she is a Plath
reader. Indeed, it is Sylvia Plath, among other feminist writers, whom Kat
wishes to see added to her teacher’s syllabus. Underscoring this initial allusion
to Plath, the film also offers a revealing look at Kat as she sits on the family-
room sofa reading *The Bell Jar*. To anyone who has seen the film, the
importance of the scene of Kat reading is undeniable; the camera pans
through the front window of the Stratford home directly onto Kat, centering
carefully and deliberately in its frame the open cover of *The Bell Jar*. The
message, too, is clear: all that we need to know about Kat to prepare us for
her current behavior in school and at home can be encapsulated by a single
scene that, in Hollywood shorthand, figures her as the quintessential Plath
reader.

As a scholar who once devoured Plath’s writings in daily doses, I am
intrigued by this figure of the Plath reader. How did she come about, and
how exactly did a young woman reading one of the most important
bestsellers of the second half of this century come to signify so much in a
Hollywood movie? More important to my purposes here, what does her
presence express about Sylvia Plath, about her readers, and about cultural
attitudes towards both the author and her audience? Admittedly, this last
question assumes not only that there is a connection between Sylvia Plath, the
author, and this construction of the figure of the Plath reader but that it is worth our attention as literary and cultural scholars. One of the aims of my examination of Kat Stratford, in fact, is to call attention to how our assumptions about Plath and our assumptions about her readers have been mutually reinforcing, and almost always in ways that have been detrimental to both.

Of course, this figure of the young Plath reader is hardly new, even in Hollywood. In many ways, Kat Stratford is merely an updated version of the image Woody Allen evokes in his film *Annie Hall* (1977) when Allen’s character describes Plath, *Ariel* in hand, as an “interesting poetess whose tragic suicide was misinterpreted as romantic by the college-girl mentality.” Author Meg Wolitzer concretizes this college-girl mentality in her novel *Sleepwalking* (1982), in which she chronicles the interactions of three Plath- and Sexton-obsessed Swarthmore students who, the narrator explains, “had banded together, apparently drawn to each other by the lure of some secret signal as unintelligible to everyone else as the pitch of a dog whistle is to human beings,” a lure that earns them a reputation on campus as “the death girls” (3). Just as “the death girls” are instantly recognizable to the students on the Swarthmore campus, the Plath reader is instantly recognizable to us today, at least she is with the appropriate props, such as in the case of Kat Stratford.

And if she is recognizable to us, it is not because she exists solely as legend. Indeed, she partially owes her existence to those notorious “real” readers who have become virtually synonymous with Plath’s name, including the fans who have persistently chiseled off the name “Hughes” from Plath’s

75
gravestone in England, the young women who have written editorials to the London Guardian protesting Ted Hughes's alleged abuses as executor of Plath's literary estate, as well as his neglect of her grave, and the poet who has written a poem about Plath's "murder" at the hands of Hughes.¹ In other words, her presence is palpable and undeniable, even as she is circumscribed by stereotype. That she exists simultaneously as both actual reader and mere stereotype makes her all the more intriguing, even as it makes her origins all the more difficult to locate. Whatever the nature of her existence, it is clear that she is nearly as big a cultural icon as Plath herself. One might argue, in fact, that Plath owes her status as cultural icon to the recognizability of her readers. At the very least, it is clear that the figure of the Plath reader emerged almost simultaneously with Plath's commercial success as a writer, success that culminates with the publication in the U.S. of The Bell Jar and Crossing the Water in 1971 and Winter Trees in 1972, all of which sold exceptionally well, especially The Bell Jar, which held a spot on The New York Times bestseller list for twenty-four weeks.

As my portrait of the Plath reader may suggest, Sylvia Plath is a writer as remarkable for the kind of reader she attracts as for the writing she produced. But this is hardly a novel observation. Many critics since her work's earliest reception have used the observation as their entry point into her writing. My own examination of the reception of Plath's work suggests, moreover, that Plath's writing is and will likely continue to be overdetermined by perceptions of who reads it, as well as how and why they read it. In this chapter, I am interested in the consequences of these perceptions, particularly
the way they have served to stigmatize Plath and the label "confessional poet." In examining these consequences, I hope to demonstrate what is at stake in the critical conversation about Plath's writing: namely, her reputation as a poet and the cultural and literary value of the women who read her.

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At the time of her death in 1963, Sylvia Plath had achieved what might best be described as a solid reputation as a poet, though hardly one commensurate with the attention, energy, and labor she devoted to her writing throughout much of her adult life. Following several years of sometimes successful but mostly frustrating attempts to place her poems in leading magazines, her first book of poetry, The Colossus and Other Poems, was picked up in 1960 by Heinemann and released in England. With no American publisher, no prizes in its favor, and little publicity to promote it, the book received little critical attention other than a few minor notices. Those few magazines that took the time to review the book responded to it with what was at best tempered enthusiasm. A. Alvarez, a critic who would eventually champion her later poetry, characteristically summed up her abilities this way: "She simply writes good poetry. . . . She is not, of course, unwaveringly good" (12). While devastated by the book's rather tepid reception, Plath continued to seek out an American publisher for The Colossus. In early 1962, she finally found one in Alfred A. Knopf. Knopf released the book in the U.S. in the spring of 1962. Unfortunately for Plath, the reception the book saw in the U.S. proved even worse than the one it saw in England:
in the months that followed its publication, the book was the subject of only one review and was mentioned in only a handful of notices.

Perhaps because of the setbacks she had faced with the publication of her first book of poems, Plath devoted much of her writing time in 1961 to her novel, *The Bell Jar*. Contracted for publication in October 1961, Heinenmann released the novel in England under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas on January 14, 1963, just a month before Plath’s death. Coinciding with rejections from American publishers to whom she had sent the novel months earlier, *The Bell Jar* arrived on England’s literary scene to a reception as tempered as the one *The Colossus* had received. Once again, the attention her work received was hardly commensurate with the success she had long desired. Nor was it a harbinger of what was to come in the years following her death as the full extent of her talents as a writer became known to literary circles in England and the U.S. and, importantly, to the larger general public.

Plath’s reputation as poet and icon expanded gradually over the decade that followed her death as her work was slowly made available. Instrumental to the growth in her visibility and reputation were the notices and tributes that followed her death, many of which simply consisted of the publication of a few of her poems, often without even a mention of her death. Most notable perhaps is the tribute that appeared in London’s *The Observer*, which included a black and white photograph of Plath, four of her recently written poems—“Contusion,” “The Fearful,” “Kindness,” and “Edge”—and a paragraph contributed by A. Alvarez entitled “A Poet’s Epitaph” that read in part:

78
[Sylvia Plath] published her first and highly accomplished book of poems, *The Colossus*, in 1960. But it was only recently that the particular intensity of her genius found its perfect expression. For the last few months she had been writing continuously, almost as though possessed. In those last poems, she was systematically probing that narrow, violent area between the viable and the impossible, between experience which can be transmuted into poetry and that which is overwhelming. [Her final work] represents a totally new breakthrough in modern verse, and establishes her I think as the most gifted woman poet of her time. . . . The loss to literature is inestimable. (23)

While very few readers were aware of the real nature of Plath's death—the family reported the cause of her death as "virus pneumonia"—Alvarez's suggestion of the extent of the tragedy, as well as the presentation of previously unseen poems that must have stunned readers next to the news of Plath's death, certainly generated new interest in Plath's writing. As 1963 unfolded, her work appeared in more and more magazines, including *The Critical Quarterly, The Atlantic Monthly*, and perhaps most significantly, *The New Yorker*, which featured a portfolio of seven of her poems. In October 1963, during the month of what would have been Plath's thirty-first birthday, *Encounter* and *The Review* each devoted a portion of the issue to Plath's poetry.

At the same time that magazines were featuring her work, Ted Hughes, who as heir to Plath's estate also assumed copyright to her work, both published and unpublished, began negotiations with publishers over the release of the poems Plath had been working on at the time of her death. By the end of 1963, Hughes had arranged for Faber and Faber to publish *Ariel* in England. The book came out in England in March 1965. A year later Harper and Row released its own edition of *Ariel* in the U.S.. In both cases, the book received notable attention and was the subject of numerous reviews, including
a few from American mainstream magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*. While the reviews often revealed an ambivalence about the writing, *Ariel* was unsuppressable. It sold in unprecedented numbers, totaling more than a half-million copies its first two decades in print and making it one of the all-time best-selling volumes of poetry from the twentieth century.

After years of negotiation with Harper and Row and with Aurelia Plath, who did not wish to see her daughter’s scandalously autobiographical novel published in the U.S., Hughes finally arranged to have *The Bell Jar* released in the U.S. in 1971. Soon after Plath’s death, Heinemann, the original publisher of the novel, publicly identified Plath as the novel’s author, no doubt in an effort to capitalize on the recent attention brought to her name. In 1966, Faber and Faber had also come forward with its own edition of the novel under Plath’s name. In the five years between the novel’s publication in England and its release in the U.S., the reading public’s demand for more of Plath’s writings only increased, a fact most evident in the number of bootlegged copies of the novel acquired and sold by booksellers in New York City. Not surprisingly, then, when *The Bell Jar* was finally made available in the U.S. it immediately found its way onto *The New York Times* bestseller list, where it stayed for a remarkable twenty-four weeks.

The commercial success of both *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* marked Plath as one of the most notable authors of her time and signaled the beginning of what at least two critics have referred to as her reign as the “priestess” of contemporary poetry.¹ Bolstering her status as priestess, the release of *The Bell Jar* in the U.S. was quickly followed up by the publication of *Crossing the*
Water in May 1971 and Winter Trees in October of the same year, both in England. While delayed in the U.S., both volumes were available to American readers by September 1972. Despite the fact that the poems in both volumes were presented as “transitional poems,” implying their resemblance to those in The Colossus and therefore their inferiority to those in Ariel, both Crossing the Water and Winter Trees sold exceptionally well in England and the U.S. and were even featured as selections in the Saturday Review Book Club and The Book-of-the-Month Club.

By 1971, then, Plath had arrived full force on the literary scene. In addition, she had achieved the kind of commercial success that had driven her throughout much of her career as a writer. This commercial success, and the devoted reading public it signified, almost simultaneously gave way to perceptions of Plath as “cult poet,” a title meant to suggest an obsessive devotion by readers that ostensibly fed the sales. As Marjorie Perloff wrote in 1973, “During the past year or so, Sylvia Plath has become a true cult figure. At this writing, the Savile Book Shop in Georgetown, D.C., has a huge window display in which copies of The Colossus, The Bell Jar, Ariel, and Crossing the Water encircle a large photograph of Sylvia Plath, which rests against a copy of A. Alvarez's The Savage God: A Study of Suicide, that ultimate tribute to Sylvia Plath as our Extremist Poet par excellence” (94). As Perloff's ironic tone makes clear, the cult poet is one who has been falsely idealized and elaborately mythologized by her readers. For a critic like Perloff who felt the accolades bestowed on Plath's work were well-earned, the identification of Plath as a cult figure was one to be overcome, for only then could her work
receive the serious treatment it deserved. For many critics who did not share Perloff's final assessment of the work, the designation of Plath as a cult poet fit all too well. As evidence, they only needed to point to the general "hysteria" that had spread among Plath's readers, a phenomenon that culminated perhaps with the publication in 1972 of Robin Morgan's "Arraignment," a poem that can only be described as a scathing indictment of Ted Hughes for the "murder of Sylvia Plath" and for subsequent abuses of her literary estate. As Paul Alexander explains in his biography of Plath, the poem became a rallying cry for Plath's most devoted readers, who, already accustomed to harassing Hughes at his poetry readings, now recited "Arraignment" as part of their diatribes against him (358).

That Plath become an icon for the feminist movement of the seventies only fueled the controversy surrounding her work. In the literary reviews from this same time, as well as in those that would be written after the publication of Plath's *The Collected Poems* in 1982, Plath's readers were often seen as either an obstacle to a serious consideration of her work or as evidence of her work's inferiority. In either case, a clear portrait of them had emerged by the seventies, if not earlier: Plath's readers were seen as young women who in overprivileging the disturbed pathology that ostensibly fed the poetry had, to return to Woody Allen's words from *Annie Hall*, "misinterpreted" not only the tragedy of the situation but the work itself. Indeed, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the Plath reader, insofar as she is even granted the status of "reader" over mere "consumer," has from
the early reception of Plath's work been largely gendered female and diagnosed as depressed and sick.

Such a construction of Plath's readers leads us directly and unmistakably up to the character of Kat Stratford. When we see her holding her anniversary edition of *The Bell Jar*, it is difficult not to impose an aura of depression and darkness around her, even as she appears in contrast to the other girls that foil her to be a sensible and stable young woman. The film counts on us to respond this way. It hopes we do, I would argue, because only then can we accept the transformation of Kat from boy-hater to love-driven teen that is central to the film's closure as a romantic comedy. To insure this response, then, the film constructs Kat as a Plath reader who does not simply read the author's work but actually mirrors the much-accepted public image of the poet herself: the abandoned daughter (in this case, a literal abandonment by the mother), the woman scorned by male betrayal, and the attitude that she haughtily desires to be above it all. The most revealing image of Kat as a reflection of Plath comes towards the film's end when, in a gesture towards the film's title, Kat recites a poem she has written for her literature class. The poem, written for her new boyfriend after she discovers he has been paid to date her,catalogues all the things she hates about him, reveals the betrayal she feels, and all-the-while discloses her desire to still be with him. In short, it is a confessional poem modeled as much after Plath's poetry as it is the Shakespearean sonnet she was assigned to imitate.

More than simply an interesting portrait of a Plath reader, Kat Stratford encapsulates and, because of the particular way she is constructed, contains all
that is threatening about a reading woman—particularly one who enjoys Plath’s writing—including the sense of empowerment and entitlement she takes from the text and her willingness to act from such positions. Such actions are often portrayed as misdirected ones that render her, in more than one way, a “bad reader.” Kat Stratford, then, in all of her evolutions, brings to the forefront a culture’s anxieties about Plath’s place and the place of her readers in literary culture. These anxieties, while fed by cultural assumptions, are inextricably rooted in the reception of Plath’s work—and they are far more complex and involved than even the dynamic character of Kat can portray. To begin to understand how Kat as a figure of the Plath reader emerges from these anxieties, I want to turn now to a close examination of the critical reception of Plath’s work.

From Confessional Poet to Priestess: The Mythology of Sylvia Plath (Or, What if Plath Had Been Ugly?)

In his 1972 review of Sylvia Plath’s Winter Trees, a review significantly entitled “The Cult of Plath,” Webster Schott describes Plath as the “high priestess of the confessional poem, master of the poem as intimate weapon, snake lady of misery in the literature of ultimate control” (3). If Schott’s casting of Plath as “snake lady” seems hyperbolic and Schott too consumed by his own cleverness to be taken seriously as a critic, consider this statement from a Time magazine review of Ariel in 1966: “Daddy was merely the first jet of flame from a literary dragon who in the last months of her life breathed a burning river of bale across the literary landscape” (118). Or this one from a
Newsweek review of Ariel the same year: “The general effect of the book is that of a symphony of death and dissolution, scored in language so full of blood and brain that it seems to burst and spatter the reader with the plasma of life” (110).

For those of us who have encountered one of Plath’s detractors firsthand, comments like these may be shocking, but they are not surprising. There is something about Sylvia Plath that seems to compel strong and dramatic reactions, frequently from her detractors but sometimes from her admirers. As a teacher I have seen my own students react in such a way as they resort, often simultaneously, to hyperbole—“Plath was a feminazi”—and extreme reductionism—“she was an over-privileged, white woman who had no reason to be depressed.” When students react in this way, I try to resist the temptation to correct their views of Plath’s personality and urge them instead to consider why they might be so invested in seeing her in a particular way. I think critical responses to Plath can be approached in a similar vein. For example, about the responses above, we might ask, what is it about Sylvia Plath that brings out such extreme metaphorizations of her life and work and why are critics so invested in representing her in a particular way?

On the one hand, one might argue that to refer to Plath as “snake lady” or the more fiercely reptilian “literary dragon” is merely to match metaphoric wits with the poet who in what is arguably her own most hyperbolic-poetic feat, “Daddy,” refers to her father-husband as the vampire she had to kill. And while one might question the appropriateness of such exaggerated
expressions within a literary review—after all, they hardly give the impression that the critic has thought as seriously about the work under review as about the personality of the poet—such remarks are not entirely without merit: with a cult following that rivals those of some Hollywood stars, and even includes the stars themselves, Plath certainly seems to be the “high priestess of the confessional poem” if not of contemporary literature.\(^5\) On the other hand, the intended cleverness of such characterizations of Plath quickly diminishes and becomes suspect beside the fact that they are used in service of a larger critical evaluation of Plath’s work—one whose impact on the success of the work under review can be significant.

Indeed, while the metaphors may appear to promote Plath as a poet of mythic proportions, in most cases the critics who resort to these extreme metaphorizations of Plath and her work are frequently out to debunk what they see as readers’ mythic distortions of her poetry. Even in those cases where the metaphors may allow for some measure of ambiguity, the critic’s final judgment of the work is most often unequivocally negative. Take, for example, Webster Schott’s review, quoted at the opening of this section, and the conclusion he reaches about the “high priestess” and her poetry:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Sylvia Plath was a sick woman who made art of her sickness. One or two of her poems will be read a long time but absent from her work are joy, glory, strong love, any sense of the interdependence of human relationships and the infinite alternatives of life. Some young people, having limited experience, need literature to help them feel bad, and they will celebrate Plath for a while.} & \quad (3)
\end{align*}
\]

While we might not expect our literary reviewers to be prophetic, we can, I think, expect them to demonstrate a minimal level of comprehension
regarding the work under review. To be sure, the ironic shortsightedness of Schott's judgments is not nearly as problematic as his obvious neglect of many of the poems that appear in Winter Trees, poems like "For a Fatherless Son," written about the comfort Plath takes in her son's smiles, or "Three Women" and "Child," both of which demonstrate the poet's acute recognition of the interdependence of mother and child." While my own judgment of Schott will undoubtedly sound harsh, I think it is a necessary harshness given the stakes involved in 1972 when the review appeared: namely, Plath's reputation as poet and the canonical status of her work.

In fact, following the release of Ariel in the U.S. in 1966 and throughout the next decade, literary critics reviewing Plath's work were almost singularly preoccupied with her status within the canon. The questions on the minds of most critics: was Plath's work deserving of the accolades it was receiving, and was Plath, as a poet, deserving of what one critic referred to as the artistic "martyrdom" her readers had bestowed upon her?

Dan Jaffe in his review of Ariel for the Saturday Review in 1966 formulates the issue this way: "All of us, I hope, mourn the despair and early immolation of so gifted a writer; but we need to ask whether the poems justify the accolades. I don't believe they do" (29). Two years later in his 1968 review of Ariel for the Sewanee Review, Robert Stilwell offers a somewhat less sensitive assessment of the poetry: "I should guess that Ariel will linger as a very specialized and rather subterranean book of poems, that A.M. theses will be written on it (doubtless several are already underway), and that it will not, finally, add a major dimension to the poetry of the 1960s" (44-45). And in 1972
in his essay “Sylvia Plath: A Partial Disagreement,” Irving Howe offers a strikingly similar prediction: “After the noise abates and judgment returns, Sylvia Plath will be regarded as an interesting minor poet whose personal story was deeply poignant. A few of her poems will find a place in anthologies—and when you consider the common fate of talent, that, after all, will not be a small acknowledgment” (91). But it is Paul West who in his 1972 review of Crossing the Water finally encapsulates the debate: “Had Sylvia Plath been ugly, and not died in so deliberate a manner, I wonder if she would have the standing she does” (48).

What I hope this collection of excerpts makes clear is that Webster Schott is more than simply a single critic with a strong dislike for Plath’s poetry and a rather idiosyncratic way of expressing it. Taken together, they suggest, in fact, that Schott’s review exemplifies the modus operandi of male critics at the time. Indeed, when one looks closely at how Plath’s work has been received by literary critics, the harsh voice of the male critic as the arbiter of the literary world clearly stands out. From even the most cursory review of the criticism, one quickly realizes that to many of the male critics writing at the time, especially to those schooled in either New Criticism or the modernist tradition of Eliot that sought to create a small, elite audience, Plath’s work threatened to disrupt the very reputableness of the literary project and had, therefore, to be contained at all cost.

While questions about the value of an author’s work are of course the concern of literary reviews, certainly the preoccupation among critics with the possibility that Plath may have sneaked in the backdoor of the literary canon
is suspicious at best. Such anxieties mark the history of confessional poetry’s reception and continue to shape how readers and critics regard those authors who, like Plath, have been and continue to be widely regarded as confessional poets. My examination in Chapter One of the larger history shows that while the anxieties and tensions that characterize the poetry’s reception are complex—involving a kind of triangulation of more specific anxieties about genre, the subject matter of poetry, and the perceived reader—they are often masked behind what appear to be purely aesthetic concerns. That it is predominately male critics making the charges against Plath suggests, moreover, that comments like Paul West’s and Webster Schott’s veil, however thinly, complex anxieties generated not simply by the aesthetic quality of the work under consideration but by the gender of the author, by the so-called “feminine” subject matter she often chose to write about, and by its appeal to women readers. In other words, critics like Webster Schott, Paul West, and Irving Howe would have us believe that as critics and literary vanguards they are merely doing their best to insure against the corrosion of aesthetic standards, even as their own discussions of the work being reviewed so clearly suggest otherwise.

Of particular interest to me in this discussion, then, is the way the anxieties present in the reception of Plath’s work are shaped by clear sexist, if not misogynist, biases that emerge most fully at the location of the reader. To demonstrate how they do so, I want to return to the seminal essay in the reception and critical history of Plath’s work, Irving Howe’s “Sylvia Plath: A Partial Disagreement” (1972), focusing in this chapter on the implicit link
between Howe's assessment of the poetry's aesthetic value and his perception of Plath's readers. Careful scrutiny of this link and the way it emerges out of the essay's rather nuanced argument provides a rich context in which to understand the construction of the Plath reader.

Regarding the aesthetics of Plath's work, Howe is unquestionably clear, describing *Ariel*'s aesthetic shortcomings as "a kind of badness that seems a constant temptation in confessional poetry, the temptation to reveal all while one eye measures the effect of the revelation" (90). Contributing to the "badness," Howe explains, is what he sees in a poem like "Lady Lazarus" as "a willed hysteric tone, the forcing of language to make up for an inability to develop the matter." For Howe, then, Plath is guilty of cutting literary corners. This is further evident in his discussion of "Cut," a poem in which Plath seems to mistake rhetorical posturing for poetic achievement, demonstrating in the process her "inability to do more with her theme than thrust it against our eyes, displaying her wound in all its red plushy woundedness" (90). As his comments about "Cut" demonstrate, Howe would have us think that the fault he finds with Plath results from the recurring problem she has with developing theme and subject matter. Yet his reading of another poem, "Daddy," suggests that there is in fact little Plath could have done poetically to redeem the poems. Describing "Daddy," Howe writes:

What we have here is a revenge fantasy feeding upon filial love-hatred, and thereby mostly of clinical interest. But seemingly aware that the merely clinical can't provide the materials for a satisfying poem, Sylvia Plath tries to enlarge upon the personal plight and give meaning to the personal outcry by fancying the girl as victim of a Nazi father. (90)
As those familiar with Howe's discussion of "Daddy" might guess, Howe's complaint here serves as preface to one of his larger concerns: Plath's adoption, some have argued appropriation, of the Jewish-Holocaust experience. More important to the purposes of this discussion is his characterization of the poem as being "mostly of clinical interest" and the tension that pervades Howe's reading of the larger corpus of Plath's poetry. When looked at as a piece, Howe's readings of individual poems become hard to reconcile with each other: he faults Plath for not developing the theme and subject matter of the poetry even as he suggests that the subject matter, insofar as it is "merely clinical," cannot be the basis of a "satisfying poem" (90). Such tensions lead one to wonder if there might not be a larger issue underlying Howe's complaints. Indeed, one cannot help but wonder, what is it about Plath's writing that really bothers Howe?

Perhaps Howe, too, is aware of the contradiction that defines his argument, which would at least explain the turn he takes at the end of the essay when he claims that "the most interesting poems in Ariel are not confessional at all" (91). Even at its least confessional, however, Plath's poetry is constrained by its limitations—specifically by what Howe, (mis)appropriating the words of Elizabeth Hardwick, describes as the "deeply rooted" and "little resisted" "elements of pathology" central to her work (90). For this reason, Howe concludes, Plath is best regarded as "an interesting minor poet." As my quotation of Howe quoting Hardwick makes clear, Howe simply cannot abide what he identifies as Plath's vision for her
poetry. This vision, to summarize Howe, is predicated on “the personal-confessional element” that seemingly dooms the poetry to being no more than “local act” (89). His choice of the phrase “local act” is critically important to the question I have been exploring here. For Howe, confessional writing by nature begins as “local act” and arrives at larger meaning through “sustained moral complication” and “the full design of social and historical setting” (89). Insofar as the lyric form does not allow for either, the confessional poem, it follows, can only fail to transform confession from local act to larger meaning. Certainly for a socially-minded critic like Howe, this relegation of poetry to the status of “local act” undermines the literary project. By his or her very nature, then, the confessional poet from Howe’s perspective cannot but fail to reflect society sufficiently and thereby transform it through his or her writing.

But to understand Howe’s relegation of Plath to a “local act” as a mere reflection of his preoccupations as a social critic would be to overlook a second tension that pervades the review: Howe’s own discussion of Plath makes clear that she is unquestionably more than a local act, if I may playfully use the term in another manner of speaking. Howe’s own words—“the noise” that surrounds this “darling of our culture”—suggest that Plath has reached more readers than Howe would care to admit (88). His discussion of these readers and his correlative casting of Plath as a cultural “darling” around whom “a glamour of fatality hangs” reveals, moreover, that Howe, while bothered by Plath’s confessional tendencies, is equally troubled by her ability to attract a large reading public. To be sure, the very project of Howe’s essay—“A Partial
Disagreement," he calls it—is to take issue not only with Plath but with those readers who have elevated her above the status she truly deserves as "an interesting minor poet." The question then becomes, who are these readers?

Howe himself suggests an answer to this question in the opening paragraph of the essay. The typical Plath reader, he explains, responds not to her poetry but to "her legend" and "the heroism of sickness" behind it. With his own brand of metaphoric flare, he further explains that "many young readers take in Sylvia Plath's vibrations of despair as if they were the soul's own oxygen" (88). The issues that emerge out of Howe's rhetoric here are myriad. Most interesting perhaps is the rhetoric of consumption so central to his characterization of Plath's reader, for just as Howe transforms Plath from serious poet into glamour girl and "authentic priestess," he also transforms her young readers from serious readers into cult followers: Plath, no longer perceived as a poet, puts out life-sustaining "vibrations" that are taken in, not read, by those who admire her. What Howe's rhetoric suggests, in other words, is that the very act of reading and the critical faculty involved in that act have been supplanted by a mystical process of consumption, for surely Plath's readers, in taking in her "vibrations" as oxygen have been intellectually crippled by the lack of real oxygen.

It is with this suggestion of mystical consumption that we begin to see the two parallel concerns that run throughout Howe's essay: his concern with Plath's exaggerated status as a poet and what he sees as the corruption of legitimate reading practices responsible for the exaggeration. The link between the two is crystallized when later in the essay he dismisses Plath's
admires, arguing in relation to the poem "Daddy," that "one must be infatuated with the Plath legend to ignore the poet's need for enlarging the magnitude of her act through illegitimate comparisons with the Jewish-Nazi holocaust" (90). Issues of Plath's Holocaust imagery aside, Howe's characterization of the reader here reveals, I would argue, a kind of rhetorical desperation on his part. Aware that his position as a dissenter leaves him vulnerable—indeed, in his own words, at the risk of "plunging into a harsh kulturkampf"—Howe establishes a defensive stance from the essay's outset (88). His weapon, as his description of the Plath reader makes clear, is problematic logic at best, suspect rhetorical savvy at the very least: those who find "Daddy" an aesthetically worthy poem, one not rendered undeserving of the merit bestowed upon it by its imagery, must be too preoccupied with the glamour of Plath as icon to be good readers of her poetry.

Given the importance Howe places on the poet's "need for enlarging the magnitude of her act" (remember, it is in this respect that Plath's poetry, indeed confessional poetry, fails), the implications of Howe's statement about the reader are in no way small. On close examination, in fact, what emerges from Howe's essay is the sense that Howe might be less inclined to disagree with a positive assessment of Plath's work if it were not for the way she has been celebrated as an "authentic priestess" and thus transformed into an icon by her readers. At the very least, it is clear that Howe, despite his own admission at the essay's opening that to do so would be unjust, allows his own "irritation with her devotees to spill over into [his] response to her work" (88).
I think, then, that we have found our answer to the question, "what really bothers Howe about Plath?" In tracing it as I have here, I have tried to show the intricacies of an argument about Plath that is driven first by a desire to contain Plath as poet—indeed, to put her back in her place as minor poet—and second by deep anxieties about who reads Plath and how and why they read her. The possibility that Plath could be both icon and serious poet never appears to enter Howe's mind, or if it does it is not a possibility he wishes to entertain. His understanding of confessional poetry, in fact, precludes the possibility insofar as he sees the confessional poem as an unfortunate emblem of a culture preoccupied with "self-exposure, self-assault, self-revelation," the very qualities a good poem shuns (89). For Howe, moreover, these are the same qualities that in readers' minds lend Plath her authenticity as priestess and icon. In this way, Howe's argument reflects the common critical assumption that pervades criticism about Plath's writing published between the mid-sixties and late eighties, and this includes both criticism written in her favor and against it: Sylvia Plath, the poet, had to be extricated from the romanticized, one might say Hollywoodized, icon she had been transformed into by an adoring readership, for only then could the merit of her poetry be determined. The most common strategy for debunking the myth was one Howe himself employs in his own critique: expose the Plath reader as an uncritical consumer who is as sick as the poet herself. What I want to demonstrate in the following section of this chapter is what happens to readers, particularly women readers, and to autobiography in the process of this demythologizing of Plath as confessional poet.
One really cannot underestimate the import of Howe's essay and the reviews that preceded it. In looking at their place in the larger critical history of confessional poetry, I have found that they mark a crucial juncture in the reception and critical history of Plath's work. To fully grasp the extent of their impact one need only look as far as the book jackets of the critical literature that followed. The synopsis appearing on the jacket of *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, a collection of essays edited by Gary Lane and published in 1979, for example, describes both the project of the book and the climate of the time: "These new essays broaden the perspective of Plath criticism by going beyond the images of Plath as cult figure to discuss Plath the poet. . . . The serious reader, whatever his or her initial opinion of Sylvia Plath, is sure to find that opinion challenged, changed, or deepened." Another example from the same year comes from the jacket of Jon Rosenblatt's *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, a "closely argued study" that, according to the jacket, "redirects the readers of Sylvia Plath's poetry away from the nonliterary concerns that have swamped Plath criticism and places [its] emphasis on the work itself." Pinpointing just what these "nonliterary concerns" might be, Mary Lynn Broe's 1980 *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* promises not to dwell on the "lurid details of [Plath's] life" in the hopes of getting past "the public's fascination with Plath's personality [that has] discouraged critical estimation of the poetry." And as recent as 1989 publishers were still
positioning their books against the common critical assumptions about Plath, as the jacket from Harold Bloom’s *Sylvia Plath* demonstrates: “Sylvia Plath is often labeled a confessional poet. The events of her turbulent life . . . often seem to overshadow her prose and poetry, making them read like simple autobiography.”

Clearly many of the same anxieties that gave shape to Howe’s work are ones that were and perhaps continue to be deeply embedded in literary culture, a fact evident even in the seemingly innocuous text of book jackets. Present in the excerpts above are anxieties about Plath’s cult following, her status as major versus minor poet, and the need to get back to the work and to “serious” reading practices. Also clearly present are assumptions about the limitations of the label “confessional poetry” and the suggestion that it has contributed to the misdirection of her readers and critics by eliciting a kind of subliterary reading practice. That the publishers of these books obviously felt compelled to position their particular authors against what they saw as the common critical paradigm at the time attests to how thoroughly problematic Plath had become as poet and how thoroughly ingrained certain ways of reading her had become.

Given the tenor of the critical conversation, a tenor exemplified by Howe’s essay, it is not surprising then to find that just as some critics were jockeying to suppress Plath’s status as a woman writer, other critics, many of them her peers, sought to defend her against the charges that she was an undeserving poet. Often, as the excerpts from the book jackets above suggest, this meant defending her against the charge that she was merely a
"confessional poet." Signaling what would eventually develop into a rather singular mode of criticism, Barbara Drake is one of the first to take up the issue directly, arguing in her 1967 review of *Ariel* that "the poems which make up *Ariel* are no more confessional, for example, than *Gulliver's Travels* or *Through the Looking Glass*" (43). One gets a sense from Drake's defensive tone that even as early as 1968 critics had become entirely frustrated by the application of the label "confessional poet" to Plath. Over the next few years, this frustration would develop into what can only be described as a full-fledged battle to defend Plath against the label and thereby repair the damage it was seen to have had caused to her reputation and status as poet.

It is with Judith Kroll's 1976 *Chapters in a Mythology* that the shift is most decisive. Kroll signals her position from the opening sentences of her book:

> Most readers of contemporary poetry in the English-speaking world are by now acquainted with the life and work of Sylvia Plath. But the particular renown she has posthumously won is not the success she intended and deserves. The reading of her work has been entangled in a fascination with her suicide and the broken marriage which preceded it, and such misreading is as widespread among her admirers as among her detractors. . . . To approach Plath as a poet rather than to use her as an image of a poet one must confront her work in its own terms, which is to say, as literature. In these terms, the fact, for example, that she killed herself is irrelevant to the consideration of the meaning of her work. (1)

Of course, in her insistence that readers get back to the work—to literary concerns, that is—Kroll anticipates many of the same sentiments that would get expressed later in the book jacket synopses I quoted above. Like the critics who would follow after her, Kroll also is quick to position her work against the "misreading[s]" that have characterized previous criticism,
including in this case those written by both camps of critics. These apparent extratextual “misreadings,” it is critical to note, are ones that rely on the facts of Plath’s life—on what the book jackets that follow refer to as “the events of her turbulent life,” “the lurid details of Plath’s life,” or simply “nonliterary concerns.” In other words, the misreadings she speaks of are readings that are insistently autobiographical. Lest this point be missed, she makes this connection, as well as her position regarding Plath’s status as confessional poet, clear in the paragraph that follows, which I quote from liberally in order to illuminate more fully the nexus of issues present in her critique of the label:

Among the current classifications in literary criticism, Plath is usually assigned the category ‘confessional’ poet. That view is usually facilitated by the obviously autobiographical element in her work and by the apparent accessibility of many of her best-known poems, in which the ‘confessional’ surface is sensational enough to divert the reader from seeing deeper meanings. One might even prefer to read many of her poems as one might view the bloodstains at the site of a murder, as residues of real events. . . . The thrill this provides might easily be lessened when the more impersonal dimensions of such poems are considered. But the very accessible confessional aspect of her work is so powerfully affecting that the thought that there might be something more, and quite different in nature, hardly arises. (1-2)

Clearly Kroll is troubled by the categorization of Plath as confessional poet, and perhaps rightly so given the backlash against her. As the second half of the above excerpt makes clear, central to Kroll’s concern is an assumption about reading practice. Specifically, she suggests that the confessional mode is as much a mode of reading as it is a mode of writing. This mode of reading, moreover, is one that responds to the surface of a poem, to what is immediately accessible. Because the surface of the confessional poem is by
nature sensational, the thrill this type of reading provides, Kroll suggests, cripples or at least distracts readers' critical faculties, rendering them unable to see the deeper meanings of Plath's poetry, which for Kroll lie in the complex mythic system articulated by the poet.

The implications of Kroll's characterization of the confessional poem are clear: in allowing their reading practices to be governed by their preoccupations with Plath's autobiography—in other words, by insistently reading Plath's poetry autobiographically—readers, having failed as readers, transform the poetry into spectacle and themselves into mere spectators. While I do not wish to discount the significance of Kroll's work—its contributions to Plath scholarship at a time when the author sat precariously on the edge of the canon are considerable and its influence on subsequent criticism palpable—I do want to point out how clearly steeped her work is in the debate over Plath at the time. Indeed, in many ways Kroll is merely arguing the same points as Howe, but towards a positive assessment of the poetry.

In the previous chapter, I speak about the binds that have restrained critics throughout confessional poetry's early criticism because of their refusal to give up certain critical paradigms. In the case of confessional poetry in general, this paradigm was often defined by polarizing assumptions about prose and poetry. In the case of Plath in particular, the paradigms are multiple but often mutually constitutive. Indeed, as her opening statement about confessional poetry makes clear, Kroll's work is circumscribed by a critical paradigm that not only carefully and insistently distinguishes between
literature and autobiography and between reading for deeper meaning and reading autobiographically but also assumes that a recognition of Plath's mythic symbolism necessarily precludes the possibility of reading her poetry as autobiography, an assumption that can only be based on the most narrow definition of autobiography. While perhaps obviously troublesome from our vantage point today, this paradigm for reading Plath possessed enormous currency throughout the seventies and into the eighties. In her review of *The Collected Poems* for the *Nation* in 1982, several years after the appearance of Kroll's book-length study, Katha Pollitt relies on a paradigm clearly modeled after the one Kroll establishes. Responding to what she sees as the continued sensationalizing of Plath's work that has supplanted the practice of close reading, Pollitt argues that, while Plath's earlier poetry may be autobiographical, the poems that appear in *Ariel* are not confessional at all for they employ the mode "of fixed symbols, drama and myth" (71). Like Kroll before her, Pollitt, too, offers this mode as a corrective to previous reading practices that have earned Plath "the wrong kind of fame," practices based on "the notion that her poems could be read as if they were a suicide note that 'explained' her death"—in other words, as a record of her life, as testament, and quite simply as autobiography (68).

The most critical point to be made about the thread that runs between Kroll's and Pollitt's arguments is that while both critics claim to be arguing for the literary merits of Plath's poetry—that is, for it to receive the treatment it deserves as "serious" literature—they have done so at the cost of autobiography. In other words, I am suggesting that in their insistence that
Plath’s poetry not be read as autobiography Kroll and Pollitt and the host of critics writing in a similar vein not only fetishize the notions of “high art” and “serious literature,” but in doing so they deny Plath’s rights as a writer to make claims on and about her own experiences and memories and, just as important to my project here, her readers’ rights to respond to these claims by reading her texts autobiographically. Moreover, given the time in which both Kroll and Pollitt were writing, it is difficult not to see a bit of irony in their approach to Plath. At a time when women’s experiences were being reclaimed as legitimate material for literature and women’s confessional writing was coming into its own and earning a sense of legitimacy, critics, often writing from feminist agendas, deny this same expression of women’s experience in the genre of poetry. What this historical coincidence says about gender and genre is clear: women’s experience could be suitably represented in literature, as long as it was done so in genres less embedded in and wedded to the so-called high ideals of patriarchal, masculinist discourses like poetry.

The Priestess-Poet: Towards a Theory of Plath’s Confessional Poetics

By the 1970s, then, Plath criticism had transformed the label “confessional poetry.” Originally offered by M. L. Rosenthal as a description of what he saw as a particular mode of writing, through its application to Plath’s poetry the label comes to signify, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly, a particular mode of reading—one that ostensibly exchanges critical judgments of the poetry’s aesthetic merits in favor of what some critics have suggested is a kind of autobiographical spectatorship. To understand just how
such a transformation could occur, it is crucial to situate the transformation within literary history. At the time of the conversation, especially throughout the sixties and seventies, autobiography still remained largely on the margins of the literary canon, as I discuss in Chapter One. And while autobiographical readings of texts are widely practiced today within literary studies and may even be fashionable in some circles, they have not entirely shed the traces of autobiography’s marginalized past. This is especially true, I would argue, in the case of poetry, where autobiographical readings are still mostly considered taboo critical practices. In any case, the relationship between poetry and autobiography continues to be a vexed one today, the partial result, one might conclude, of the stigmatizing effects caused by critical evaluations of confessional poetry and the still pervasive assumption that poetry, while it may draw on “autobiographical material,” is by its very nature as poetry non-constitutive of autobiography.

One of the central aims of this project is to reclaim the autobiographical reading mode as a legitimate mode of reading poetry, specifically that poetry traditionally labeled confessional. In the case of Sylvia Plath in particular, I want to insist on the need to understand autobiographical reading practices, rather than deny them, precisely because they are persistent and, I would argue, most often practiced by women, particularly our female students, who continue to be situated on the margins of literary study. As anyone who has ever taught Plath’s writing in an undergraduate course knows, the imperative to read Plath autobiographically is always present. Even students who know little about Plath quickly discern that they are supposed to know something
about her life in order to understand her poetry. Often, they follow up on this perception by trying to correlate the facts of the poem with the facts of Plath’s life, a correlation not all that difficult to make, of course. In such cases, reading autobiographically simply means proving the text’s proximity to our understanding of reality, which is not, I should emphasize, the kind of reading I have in mind when I use the terms “reading autobiographically” — at least it is not the only kind of reading I have in mind. Just as often, the insistence on reading Plath’s poetry autobiographically involves an act of identification or, alternatively, disidentification with Plath, whereby readers feel called to authorize the poet’s own response to the drama depicted in the poem. The presence of either act raises the stakes of the discussion, finally, and is why it is important that we recover the autobiographical mode of reading Plath’s poetry. It is also why so many of us who teach Plath avoid the autobiographical mode of reading her work as if it were taboo, for what would it mean for our students to identify with Plath, and for us as teachers to authorize such identifications?

In the case of the fictional character Kat Stratford from the film 10 Things I Hate About You, confessing an affinity with Plath means being expelled from class for terrorizing her literature teacher. And as I argue in Chapter Four, in the case of the book industry’s efforts to market texts by and about Plath, reading Plath means being fetishized as a sick consumer of her troubled personality. However much such efforts reflect our assumptions about who reads Plath, I want to insist that neither of these understandings of Plath’s readers is satisfactory, for both fail to reflect the complex responses women
readers have to Plath’s writing. While it should go without saying—the critical history of confessional poetry suggests to me that it has not been said enough—readers respond to Plath in the ways they do for complex reasons. To claim that it has to do with readers’ fixation with the sensational facts of her suicide or her troubled pathology, as others have done, would be to reduce Plath, as well as her readers, to exactly what they are not: merely interesting “case study.”

To begin to understand the nexus of motives behind readers’—and importantly critics’—responses to Plath’s poetry, it is crucial that we think seriously about the central role autobiography plays in the poetry, as well as the central role the poetry plays as autobiography, instead of denying or minimizing the significance of the relationship. What I hope to do in the remainder of this chapter is to show that it is possible both to read Plath’s work autobiographically and consider it as literature and thereby escape the binds of the conventional paradigm limiting readings of her work. But before turning to the poetry, I think a few words about autobiography are in order.

As I explain in my introduction, any discussion of how a text operates as autobiography should begin with the question, what constitutes autobiography’s representation? The importance of the question is amplified, I think, in the case of poetry, a genre widely assumed to be non-constitutive of autobiography. In suggesting that the question needs to be asked at all, I assume of course that what constitutes autobiography is unstable in the first place. In this way, my own understanding of autobiography owes much to recent poststructuralist critiques of the autobiographical project. These
critiques have created space for a new understanding of autobiographical texts, one that assumes that autobiography as a distinct genre does not exist but rather that it is best and most usefully understood as an unstable, hybrid genre that, while a mode of self-narration, problematizes rather than assumes notions of experience, identity, and memory. This enabling definition of what constitutes autobiography implicitly calls for us as critics to re-evaluate our assumptions about the relationship between autobiography and other genres, including poetry.

A major hurdle in the process of reevaluation is the assumption I have already mentioned, namely that poetry, insofar as it relies on image, metaphor, and other imaginative vehicles of representation and privileges form, cannot help but transform autobiographical material into a heightened form of expression. This assumption, however, relies on a notion of experience that sees it as stable, at one point originally unmediated by language and able to be represented with literal accuracy. Of all the doors poststructuralism has opened, perhaps the most important one is its specific critique of truth and the referential basis of autobiography, both of which are now widely understood as indeterminate precisely because truth is not experientially bound or unmediated.

In approaching Plath’s poetry, the first step is to assume that the referential basis of an individual poem is also indeterminate. For this reason, in my own readings of her poetry I will try to avoid the temptation to apply the litmus test that has become the standard for judging whether her poetry is or is not autobiographical: namely, showing the correlation between the facts
of her life and the facts of her poetry. As I mentioned above, such correlations are mostly inconsequential in readers' responses to Plath's poetry, even as they often serve as the impetus of their autobiographical inquiries. Similarly, my aim is not to suggest that the only way of reading Plath’s poetry is as autobiography. The serious study of autobiographical texts in recent years has shown that determining what definitively counts as autobiography is at bottom an elusive task, one that tends to cause more problems than it solves. My aim rather is to consider how specific Plath poems operate as autobiography and thus to understand why her work as a whole is often read autobiographically. Towards this end, I want to consider the ways her poetry takes the autobiographical project as its subject, often exploring the relationships among experience, memory, identity, and the representation of self and others. Only when we understand how her poetry operates in this way, I would argue, can we begin to account for reader responses to her work, especially those responses that develop into acts of identification and disidentification between the reader and the author.

To begin my examination of Plath’s poetry, I want to look closely at the two poems most often at the center of the debate over Plath as confessional poet, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus.” In addition to being at the center of the debate, they are today the two most widely anthologized Plath poems and therefore the ones most closely associated with her persona as poet. That they have become so is hardly coincidence or even simply a reflection of the individual power of both poems. Without denying the achievement of the
poems, one must recognize how completely and inextricably bound their current circulation is to Plath’s death and the early reception of her work.

Most readers were introduced to both “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” when they were published as part of *Ariel*, which was posthumously edited and released by Plath’s husband Ted Hughes in England in 1965 and in the U.S. in 1966. The publication history of the poems, however, begins some two years prior to the publication of *Ariel*. In the fall of 1963—about nine months after Plath’s death in February—both poems appeared as part of two separate features on Plath: one in *Encounter*, which included eight other poems, most of which would eventually be included in *Ariel*, and a second in *The Review*. While the spread for *Encounter* featured only a selection of poems, without even a mention of Plath’s death, *The Review* feature, entitled “Sylvia Plath: The Last Poems,” also included an article from A. Alvarez that serves as both miniature biography and critical commentary and concludes with his infamous statement, “Poetry of this order is a murderous art” (19).

Immediately recognizable in both magazines is the sense that the poems were being offered as testaments to both Plath’s genius and her struggles. Not surprisingly, then, both poems, as well as the others from *Ariel* included in the features, would be understood to represent Plath at her most autobiographical. In the ensuing struggle over Plath’s reputation, it is not surprising to find, too, that the two poems were alternatively lauded as proof of her frightening genius—or what Alvarez characterizes as her ability to tap into her “violent unease” (21)—or dismissed as evidence of a disturbed pathology. Of course, the distance between violent unease and disturbed
pathology is not great, which would explain why the very qualities earlier critics had identified as the virtues of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," specifically their inclusion of autobiographical material and their treatment of illness, suicide, and personal rage, could serve as fuel for the scorching critiques of the poems that would follow the publication of *Ariel*.

Without question, the poem that has borne the brunt of these critiques is "Daddy." Even those critics who admire the aesthetic achievement of the poem find it difficult to make claims about how the poem accomplishes what it does without also betraying an ambivalence on their part as readers. The source of this ambivalence is Plath's adoption of Holocaust imagery and the accompanying violence and rage that pervade the poem. In fact, it has become nearly impossible for anyone to write about the poem without simultaneously taking a position in relation to its allusions to the Holocaust, whether it be on moral, ethical, or aesthetic grounds.

The dilemma posed by "Daddy" is whether Plath's use of the Holocaust is appropriate, warranted, and proportionate. In his own assessment of "Daddy," Leon Wieseltier puts the dilemma and his response to it this way: "Familiarity with the hellish subject must be earned, not presupposed. My own feeling is that Sylvia Plath did not earn it, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place" (20). Central to Wieseltier's perception of the incommensurability between Plath's experience and her allusions to the Holocaust is of course the concept of metaphor, for essentially what Plath does in the poem is metaphorically turn herself into a Holocaust survivor who has suffered at the hands of a Nazi
patriarch. While Plath may feel betrayed first by a father who died while she was a young girl and second by a husband who abandons her for another woman, the question remains, how can she presume to compare her own suffering to the persecution and annihilation of Jews during the Holocaust?

Rather than take up the question of Plath's presumption, I would like to ask in its place another question: how does the imagery or more specifically the analogy Plath makes between herself and the Holocaust victim operate in relation to the other metaphors in the poem? While the question may seem a commonsensical one, I do not think it has been asked enough about this particular poem. Moreover, when the question is asked in this way, the issue is no longer whether Plath's adoption of Holocaust imagery is incommensurate and thus an accurate indication of her disturbed pathology but whether the poem would convey the same larger meaning without it.

The answer, I would suggest, is that it would not, precisely because the imagery and comparison represent a critically important juncture in the poem, one central to it and, most importantly, to Plath's autobiographical project. I want to argue, in fact, that the allusions operate as part of a larger metaphoric structure through which Plath reveals the binds of autobiography, specifically the binds of representing one's self in relation to others, in this particular case, her father.

This bind is introduced to the reader as early as the poem's opening lines:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (1-5)

With the "you" of these lines identified in the title, Plath conveys her struggle to escape from her father's image or, more specifically, from her possessing memories of him. These memories are metaphorized in the opening lines as the black shoe that has circumscribed the daughter's existence and kept her there through deprivation and oppression. In two important ways, the image of the black shoe encapsulates her struggle, first because it introduces the central and revisited trope of the shoe/foot that links father and daughter, and second because it signifies the father's "blackness," the metaphoric, though no less defining, characteristic the poet associates with her father repeatedly throughout the poem. In the descriptions of her father that follow, Plath reveals that her memories of her father are inextricably bound to this imagery of blackness, a fact most clearly seen in the photograph she recreates for us:

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

Bit my pretty red heart in two. (51-56)

While Plath appears insistent on the literalness of this description, referencing a photograph and underscoring the limitations of her own metaphor ("A cleft in your chin instead of your foot"), she also invests the black imagery with additional metaphorical significance. His blackness becomes, in fact, one of the vehicles she uses to re-express the oppressiveness and deprivation suggested by the opening image of the black shoe, such as in the following lines:
"Panzer-man, panzer man, O You —// Not God but a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through" (45-47). It is important to note how the pervasiveness of the black imagery significantly contributes to the controlling image of the father throughout the poem. He is, she tells us early in the poem:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset. (8-13)

As these lines make powerfully clear, the father is everywhere, dominating both his daughter's memories and, as a result, the poem, a point that is reinforced by the thirty-one repetitions of "you" and "your" throughout "Daddy."

But even as the father dominates the poem, the poem nonetheless becomes the space in which Plath struggles to reassert and represent herself in the face of his image. The tone of desperation conveyed so clearly throughout the poem is perhaps an indication of the challenge of such a task. An even better indication is the measure she must go to as she struggles with the challenge. In many ways, in fact, the poem can be read as a narrative of the poet’s attempts to test out her own self-representations and thereby assert her own identity. She does so first through the persona of a child, second through her assumption of Jewish identity, and third through the metaphor of vampirism. This exchange of representations unfolds over the course of the poem, albeit not always in a clear linear fashion.
From the opening lines of the poem, the voice of the tantrum-prone child is evident in the resonance and rhythms of children's nursery rhymes that can be heard in the repetition and rhyme pattern of the first two lines, as well as in the simple diction that culminates in the preverbal "gobbledygoo" (42). Setting the pattern for the rest of the poem, Plath pushes the representation in the opening lines to its limits only to shy away from it by the second stanza. What she exchanges it for is the opposite of childhood innocence and nursery rhyme merriment; she exchanges it for the imagery of the Holocaust. The imagery enters the poem as she describes her attempts to recover her dead father "In the German tongue, in the Polish town / Scraped flat by the roller / Of wars, wars, wars" (16-18) and culminates in her presentation of herself as a Jew, a presentation that grows out of her inability to communicate with her father in his German language, an "obscene" language "Chuffing [her] off like a Jew" (30, 32):

I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew. (34-40)

As Jacqueline Rose points out in her work *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991), Plath's identification of herself as Jew in these lines—the same lines that have caused critics so many problems—is only "partial, hesitant, and speculative," a fact most clearly evident in her reliance on simile and metonymy over straightforward metaphor: unlike in metaphor, a trope that fully substitutes
one term for another, simile involves the presence of both terms, and similarly, metonymy involves the part standing for the whole; the result is that both simile and metonymy can only imply partiality (228). I would go one step further than Rose and argue that Plath not only self-consciously retreats from the identification but does so in a way that foregrounds its inadequacy. This retreat is most evident in the lines typically cited by critics as proof of how Plath’s treatment of the Holocaust trivializes survivors’ experiences: “With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck / And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack / I may be a bit of a Jew.” The combination in these lines of the obvious absurdity of the basis of Plath’s claim, the repetition of “my Taroc pack” that at first seems gratuitous and perplexing, and the revision she makes between the lines “I think I may well be a Jew” and “I may be a bit of a Jew,” all clearly signal a retreat from the metaphor. Just as she did with the persona of the child, then, Plath pushes the metaphor to its limit and accordingly casts it off. This exchange is not, however, the final one she makes. It, too, is cast off, this time for the metaphor of the vampire-slayer who drives the stake into her father’s “fat black heart,” killing the vampiric father, as well as the husband she has modeled after him (76).

The significance of these exchanges—from child, to Jew, to vampire-slayer—lies in the similarity between each of the metaphors and the poem’s opening image: the black shoe in which she has lived “like a foot.” What each does, specifically, is express the relationship between herself and her father. The portrait of the relationship that emerges from the metaphors collectively is one of dependency, domination, and deprivation. More difficult to discern,
however, are the origins of this portrait and Plath’s attitude toward it. For many critics, the poem is an expression of her anger that can be traced back to the guilt she experienced over her father’s premature death when she was a young girl and her resentment over having been abandoned, first by her father and later by her husband. The apparent absence of an adequate explanation in the poem leads many readers, alternatively, to contrive their own extratextual explanations, ones often rooted in speculation about domestic abuse.\(^\text{15}\) In contrast, I would like to suggest that the source of the emotion behind the metaphors is really beside the point and, moreover, a question the poem does not answer. The point, insofar as a poem has one, lies not in any one metaphor but in the succession of metaphors. That Plath casts each off almost as quickly as she adopts it suggests that the metaphors fail finally to represent the relationship in terms that satisfy her. In this way, the poem becomes a site where Plath investigates the issue of her identity vis-à-vis her father and, through this investigation, makes a powerful statement about the very nature of relational (self)representation.

This statement emerges most clearly out of the crisis that occurs in the present moment of the poem. This crisis is implicit in the opening lines of the poem, at the moment Plath casts off the black shoe. Indeed, in casting off the image of her father, Plath finds herself in the traumatic position of being homeless, without the shelter that has protected and sustained her, however meagerly, for her entire life. In other words, while she has escaped one stifling existence, she finds herself in an equally unenviable position. That position, moreover, is one familiar to her, for in addition to being stifling, her
existence for the past thirty years has been defined by the trauma of rootlessness. For Jacqueline Rose, this trauma resonates in Plath’s claim on the Jewish experience, specifically her claim of being in “the position of one without history or roots” (228). It also resonates throughout the poem on a more literal level, first when she seeks to find where her father “put [his] foot, [his] root” and again when she refers to her father in the final line as “you bastard,” an act that simultaneously imposes a separation between herself and her father (“Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through”) and constructs him as a mirror of herself as a fatherless child—an act therefore that paradoxically reinforces their connection at the same time that it attempts to delineate a separation.

In light of the presence of this trauma of rootlessness that defines both Plath’s represented past and the present moment of the poem, the narrative that unfolds over the course of the poem can be read as a chronicle of her attempts to repair the disjuncture and relocate herself in relation to her father. In fact, the initial act of casting off the father’s image in the opening lines is made possible precisely because the daughter recreates him through her memories and images. This recreation of the father takes two forms: the first, which I have already outlined, is the kind of mythopoetic representation of him as black shoe, Nazi, and vampire, all of which are relational metaphors whose significance emerges through Plath’s representation of herself as the appropriate counterpart to her father; the second is a more literalized representation, one most readers would recognize as being grounded in memory, experience, and confession and exemplified in the picture of her
father at the blackboard she recreates for us and in her revelation of her attempts at ages ten and twenty to “get back, back, back to [him]” (59). While Plath at first appears to fluctuate between these two representational modes, on closer examination it is clear that the mythopoetic and literalized representations of herself and her father are mutually constitutive. In this way, they operate together as yet another mode through which Plath investigates the representation of her own identity in relation to her father and her memories of him. That neither mode is privileged in the poem suggests that for Plath one is no less true than the other. At the very least, the fact that they serve each other—which is exemplified in the description of her father “with one gray toe/ Big as a Frisco seal”—suggests that Plath wants to problematize the assumption that the distance between the metaphoric and the experiential is greater than the distance between the literal and the experiential.

As my concluding point about the poem, I want to suggest that Plath’s struggle to sort through the relationships between identity and memory and between the literal and the metaphoric is the struggle of the poem. Indeed, what I have tried to illustrate is that “Daddy” reiterates the central problem posed by autobiographical texts: namely, how does one represent one’s self, as well as others, in relation to experience and our memory of it? Or put another way, how does one represent the relational self when memory is not experientially bound? The problem posed, then, is an epistemological one because inevitably the answer to the question rests on the always-present limits of our knowledge about our relational selves. In her compelling study
of memoir entitled *Bequests and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* (1996), Nancy K. Miller addresses this problem directly. Specifically, she contends that “Wanting to know [our parents’] story is central to the desire for self-knowledge that drives the autobiographical project” (107-108). She goes on to demonstrate how the writing of the biography of a parent becomes a way to break the spell of a parent’s story. But this kind of biographical project is a risky one because it often involves writing autobiographically—writing oneself back into the exact story one is trying to write a way out of. Implicit in Miller’s statement about memoir, then, is the idea that the act of writing (auto)biographically is one that binds its practitioner to its subject in ways that then preclude the possibility of objectivity and distance, even as objectivity and distance are what he or she seems most to need.

“Daddy,” I would argue, makes a similar point. Despite Plath’s attempts to cast and recast herself in relation to her father, the task of finally pinning it all down eludes her. It does so because the extent of her knowledge is always already limited. The best she can do is rely on the validation of the villagers who, she enviously explains, “always knew it was you” (79). Even more significant perhaps is the fact that she is doomed, it would seem, to the repetition of the task. This repetition is evident throughout the poem, including in the exchange of metaphors around which the poem is structured. But it is most forcefully expressed in the lines that encapsulate the temporal recursiveness of the poem that contributes to the often confusing slippage between past and present, a slippage exemplified in the lines, “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time——” (5-6). The richness of these
lines lies in the way they appear to contradict each other and yet reveal themselves as logical. Furthermore, the elliptical dash suggests that Plath feels that she is doomed to fail at the very task she needs most to succeed at, namely the simultaneous recovery and repudiation of her father that will make possible, paradoxically, her own recovery. That the question of whether she succeeds or fails is unanswerable—the result of the ambiguity of the final line “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through”—suggests that in the end the question may well be beside the point. More important to Plath, I want to argue, is the validation only her readers can provide. Like the villagers within the poem who witness her father and validate her image of him, as readers we are put in the position of serving as witnesses to Plath’s struggle. More than mere spectators, we occupy privileged positions as characters outside the story, and so we are asked to participate in the process of representation by judging finally whether her representation of the struggle rings true for her readers.

In arguing this final point about the importance of the reader in “Daddy,” I am taking issue with one of the most common assumptions about Plath’s poems: that they reveal the depth of Plath’s solipsism and absorbing obsession with her self. About this perceived solipsism, Irving Howe writes: “[Ariel contains] poems written out of an extreme condition, a state of being in which the speaker, for all practical purposes Sylvia Plath herself, has abandoned the sense of audience and cares nothing about—indeed, is hardly aware of—the presence of anyone but herself” (90). Sounding a similar note, Peter Davison argues that the poems were written “for nobody’s ears except
the writer's" (76). In both cases, the critics' insistence on Plath's aloofness towards her reader is meant to counter the claim that she writes confessional poetry, for confessional acts, even according to the most elementary definition, are acts that require the presence of a listener. In contrast, my own reading of "Daddy" is meant to suggest that Plath is acutely aware of her readers and the role they play in the autobiographical project. In this way, she seems to illustrate, indeed anticipate, one of the most important claims thus far made within the field of autobiography studies, namely Paul de Man's claim that "autobiography . . . is not a genre or mode, but a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (921). Plath's awareness of how this act of alignment can operate through her poetry is clearly evident in "Daddy." The extent to which she values and even privileges this alignment can be seen throughout the body of her poetry, including the poem I would like to discuss next as part of the closing to this essay, "Lady Lazarus."

A remarkable poem, well-deserving of a more extensive treatment than the one I will offer here, "Lady Lazarus" foregrounds the relationship between disclosure, spectacle, and the role of the audience in ways that help to illuminate the important role of the reader in Plath's poetry. Indeed, when reading "Lady Lazarus," one cannot help but hear the voice of a woman who is intensely aware of the presence of a listener and who flaunts her transgressions in our face. She is a woman, moreover, who is aware how, in
speaking her transgressions, she challenges our expectations of what poetry can represent and subverts the assumed limits of poetic discourse, just as Lazarus subverted the line between death and life. From the poem’s opening lines, she demands to be recognized as a brazen transgressor:

I have done it again.
One year and every ten
I manage it.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine,
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? — (1-12)

As these lines make clear, Plath has yet again pushed herself to the brink of death only to return “to the same place, the same face, the same brute

/Amused shout/ ‘A Miracle!’” (53-55). For Plath, her death and return are ordinary acts—no miracle, really—which she has managed twice before. Dying in this way has in fact become her calling; she does it “exceptionally well,” she does it “so it feels like hell,” “so it feels real” (45-47). But even as she discounts the remarkableness of her comeback, she also knows her audience will see it as a miracle and she revels in their perception of its spectacularity.

Following the disclosure of her comeback, Plath becomes the object of a physical disclosure, one witnessed by the audience. For their money and participation, this audience is given a glimpse of the body of the striptease artist who willingly performs for the “peanut-crunching crowd” who “shoves
in to see / Them unwrap [her] hand and foot” (26-28). The glimpse, however, is not an ordinary one, for they are in fact witnesses to the grotesque: a body marked by scars, dripping blood, eye pits, and sour breath. In short, they are witnesses to a spectacle of appalling disclosures, which of course is exactly how the speaker wants it. Like the best performance artist, she relishes the spotlight and eagerly displays her grotesqueness. Flaunting her flirtation with death, she demands the attention of her audience, calling out in the language of the side-show master, “Gentleman, ladies,” apparently assured of her audience’s compulsion to watch (30). Unable to resist their compulsion, by the poem’s close the audience will become witnesses not only to her verbal confession as it is uttered in the poem but also to the actual act she has confessed to, as she once again performs the miracle and “melts to a shriek” only to rise again from her own ashes (70).

As this brief glimpse of the poem perhaps suggests, Plath’s representation of herself throughout “Lady Lazarus” as confessant and spectacle could be read as an allegory for her own confessional poetics and its critical history: Plath reveals her poetry/body to an audience who is repulsed by the spectaclarity and grotesqueness of the display but also compelled to witness it. In reacting as they have, many of Plath’s readers, then, mirror the audience within the poem. The obviousness of this parallel makes one wonder if Plath had anticipated the kind of response poems like “Lady Lazarus” would in fact get upon their publication. I want to suggest that she did. Specifically, I want to suggest that Plath implicates her readers directly in “Lady Lazarus.” She does so most clearly in the opening of the poem when
she goads us to “Peel off the napkin.” At this point in the poem, Plath seems to want to give away her agency as the confessor. Indeed, when the physical disclosure begins, it is not Plath who reveals her own body, but rather an unidentified “them” that unwraps her “hand and foot” (28). The rest of the poem, however, makes clear that Plath does not relinquish her agency but assumes it throughout: “I do it exceptionally well. // I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real” (45-47). Through this apparent contradiction, Plath appears to be trying to account for both her own agency as the confessant and the critical role her readers must be willing to play in the confessional-poetic act. I want to emphasize that this role is not a small one; Plath suggests in fact that she offers the confession precisely because her readers demand it.

In his study of the confessional act, Michel Foucault foregrounds this dynamic as the central element of confession. The confessional act, he argues, is “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (61). “Lady Lazarus,” I want to suggest, makes a similar claim about the confessional act and by extension autobiographical writing. More precisely, the poem forces Plath’s readers to be aware of the essential role they, like the spectators featured in the poems, play in her poetry. In this way, Plath appears to anticipate contemporary theories of autobiographical writing that argue for what Janet Verner Gunn describes as “the relational space between the story and the reader” where the truth of autobiography is
to be found (143). At the very least, I want to argue that Plath, in constructing her readers as important witnesses in her poetry, calls for her readers to practice their own confessional poetics—that is, to read her poetry as her autobiography.

Herein, I would conclude, lies the value of the label “confessional poetics.” More than simply a way to signify the autobiographical elements of Plath’s poetry, confessional poetics can account both for the way Plath often takes the autobiographical project as the subject of her poems and for the way her readers approach her poetry as her autobiography. In addition, it can account for the often misunderstood relationship between the two. As my review of the reception of Plath’s poetry has shown, the assumption among critics is that Plath would not have wanted her poetic legacy to be understood as “confessional poetry” and for her audience to have consisted of a body of uncritical women readers. Contrary to this assumption, I have argued throughout this chapter that Plath constructed a confessional poetics that invites the exact kinds of autobiographical reading practices and readerly identifications that have been the subject of scholarly critiques. Rather than understand her efforts to do so as a sign of a self-indulgent or solipsistic personality, I propose that we might better understand her efforts as a sign of her savviness as an author, specifically the attention she paid to the literary market.

As biographer after biographer has shown, Plath was first and foremost an author more than capable of gauging the market and writing for it. Her authorial savviness is perhaps most evident in the drive that shaped
her early success as a fiction writer in the teen magazine market. I would suggest that it is also evident in her adoption of the confessional mode, a move she might well have made in response to what she saw as the "increasing market for mental hospital stuff" (114). Importantly, by the earlier sixties, Anne Sexton had established herself as a successful and marketable poet largely by writing so-called "mental hospital stuff" that her fans regarded as her autobiography, a point I discuss in the following chapter. In fact, letters written to Sexton by her readers implore Sexton to keep writing poetry so that they can keep reading and buying her books. Plath would certainly have been aware of Sexton's success in the late fifties and early sixties, and would have likely paid particular attention to her success with women readers on the poetry market. Indeed, before Plath had even begun her work on the poems that would be included in Ariel, Sexton was far ahead of Plath in terms of achievement and recognition: not only had she managed to have her poems published in The New Yorker—an important success coveted by Plath—her first two volumes of poetry To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960) and All My Pretty Ones (1962) were, Plath perceived, much more enthusiastically received than her own first volume, The Colossus, especially in America. In their separate biographies of Plath, both Paul Alexander and Anne Stevenson suggest that Plath, given the rivalries she felt with women poets, especially those more successful than she, was in all likeliness also in envy of Sexton's success (Stevenson 244, Alexander 289). Stevenson goes one step further, speculating that Plath was likely prompted to "use private
material for her own work” after reading Sexton’s *All My Pretty Ones* and measuring the volume’s success (244).

While it is difficult to draw conclusions about one author’s influence on another, in this case I think one might reasonably conclude that Plath, always driven to publish and achieve success on the market, regarded confessional poetry as an opportunity to carve out a readership for herself and thus make her mark as a poet. In denying this readership and Plath’s appeal to a mass audience of women, critics, I would argue, have denied Plath’s legacy as a poet. By refiguring the label “confessional poetry” in the way I have here, I hoped to show that accounting for autobiography and Plath’s readership need not necessitate discounting her work as poetry. Such an understanding should enable us, finally, to escape the critical paradigms that bind discussions of Plath’s poetry and to value appropriately what we all seem to agree is most remarkable about Plath’s body of writing: namely, its stunning and powerful effects on those who read it.
Notes to Chapter Two

1 One might say that the figure of the Plath reader is a kind of fictional composite of the "historical" readers who have made headlines over the years through their actions. Further explanation of the readers I discuss here follows: Plath's gravestone has been vandalized four times; each time the vandal(s), who are presumed to be Plath fans, have chiseled off the name "Hughes" from the stone so that it reads simply "Sylvia Plath." After each instance, Ted Hughes had the stone removed for repair, often leaving Plath's grave site unmarked for a period of time. College students Julia Parnaby and Rachel Wingfield wrote to the editor of the Guardian describing their experiences as they tried to find Plath's unmarked grave and excoriating Hughes for "failing to replace the headstone and thereby leaving Plath's grave unidentifiable," thus denying and devaluing "her place in the tradition of women's literature." The letter appeared in the April 7, 1989 issue of the paper and was followed by a flurry of responses, many in support of the young women's letter, as well as one from Hughes entitled "The place where Sylvia Plath should rest in peace" (Guardian, 20 April 1989). In his letter Hughes explains the delay in replacing the stone and accuses Parnaby and Wingfield of "living in some kind of Fantasia." Robin Morgan is author of the now notorious poem, "Arraignment," in Monster: Poems (1972); see note 3 below for more discussion of the poem.

2 In his essay "Sylvia Plath: A Partial Disagreement," Irving Howe refers to Plath ironically as the "authentic priestess" (88), while Webster Schott, in his review, "The Cult of Plath," calls her "the high priestess of the confessional poem" (3).

1 "Arraignment" opens with the following lines:

How can
I accuse
Ted Hughes
of what the entire British and American
literary and critical establishment
has been at great lengths to deny,
without ever saying it in so many words: of course:
the murder of Sylvia Plath
?

Morgan goes on to threaten to "disarm him of that weapon with which he tortured us /
. . . and blow out his brains" (82, 82).

4 I would argue that Kat exemplifies the figure of the threatening woman reader, which is most evident in the scenes that show her in Mr. Morgan's English class. In one instance, in fact, professing her interests as a reader, specifically her interest in feminist writers like Plath, gets her sent to the principal's office.

5 Meg Ryan is perhaps the most visible Plath "fanatic" in Hollywood, talking publicly about her negotiations with Plath's estate to produce and perhaps star in a film based on Plath's life and about her collection of first editions of Plath's work and other memorabilia.

7 Take "For a Fatherless Son," for example. In what is arguably one of the most poignant lines of poetry written from a mother to her son, Plath describes her sadness over the loss her son will feel once he is old enough to realize the "absence" of his
father and concludes the poem with the following lines: "One day you may touch what's wrong / The small skulls, the smashed blue hills, the godawful hush. / Till then your smiles are found money" (12-14). In Winter Trees (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).


This is to not to say that women critics did not often chime in to offer their own objections to Plath’s work. Certainly, they did, but my review of the early criticism and reception found that they were seldom as harsh or as dramatic in their evaluations as male critics tended to be.

* The uncontextualized quotation of Hardwick in Howe’s essay is rather disturbing when Hardwick’s words are placed back in their original context. In her work on Plath entitled “On Sylvia Plath,” she writes, “In Sylvia Plath’s work and in her life the elements of pathology are deeply rooted and so little resisted that one is disinclined to hope for general principles, sure origins, applications, or lessons” (100). Howe’s quotation of only those words I have re-quoted in my discussion leads the reader to think Hardwick would agree with Howe’s reading, when in fact her reading of Plath’s poetry is much more positive than Howe’s own.

10 Celeste Schenck, I presume, would disagree with me. In her essay “All of a Piece: Women’s Poetry and Autobiography” (1988), in fact, she reads the history of poetry’s relationship to autobiography much more generously than I do, citing poets from Sappho to Dickinson as cases where the poetic corpus has been read as the poet’s autobiography. While I grant that a number of critics, including James Olney, have explored the relationship between poetry and autobiography, I do not think the same kind of exploration has occurred in the case of confessional poetry. This paradox is partially explained by the label itself: perceived as an obstacle to the serious study of the poetry, the confessional elements, and by extension the autobiographical elements of such poetry have been seen as limitations that are best denied or minimized for the sake of the poetry. In any case, I do obviously agree with Schenck’s larger claim that poetry and autobiography can be read “coextensively.” I think, moreover, that my work might be read as an extension of her own argument insofar as it also seeks to complicate generic boundaries and legitimize autobiographical readings of poetry. That my work also departs from hers in several important ways—most notably, in the way it focuses on confessional poetry and a specific historical and literary moment of its development—demonstrates, finally, just how problematic claims about the tradition of women’s literature can be.

11 By “non-constitutive,” I mean to suggest the way poetry and autobiography are perceived to be two separate modes of writing that cannot be combined into a unified whole without the one subsuming the other. Another way of thinking about it is through the image of oil and water, two elements that form distinct barriers between them when combined.

12 While it may seem as if I am using the term “autobiographical reading” to stand in for the term “biographical reading,” I am not using them as synonymous terms. In fact, I think the two modes of reading are distinct, and I mean to maintain the distinction between both throughout my work on confessional poetry. An autobiographical reading of a text is one that understands the text as the author’s
autobiography—and is therefore read according to the conventions of autobiography—whereas a biographical reading of a text is one that seeks to apply biographical details from an author's life to the text in the hopes of illuminating some aspect of its meaning.


14 Paul de Man and Laura Marcus have been most influential among the early critics. See de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement" (1979) and Marcus's Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice(1994).

15 Of course, this desire for narrative completion is a central component of autobiographical reading practices and goes hand-in-hand with narrative withholding on the part of the autobiographer.

16 This notion of spectacularity and the compulsion to watch it can be seen, of course, in Judith Kroll's Chapters in a Mythology, specifically in her critique of readers who ostensibly view Plath's poetry as "bloodstains at the site of a murder." My claim about allegory here, however, is meant to point, not to Kroll's work, but to the work of those critics who have criticized Plath for taking unfair advantage of her readers' compulsion to watch. Again, see Webster Schott's "The Cult of Plath" (1972), Dan Jaffe's "An All-American Muse" (1966), and Irving Howe's "Sylvia Plath: A Partial Disagreement" (1972).

17 In her journals, Plath wrote, "Must get out 'Snake Pit.' There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, re-create it" (from journal entry dated June 13, 1959). While much of her entry for the 13th is published in The Journals, this quotation comes from a passage excerpted from the published entry and sealed with Plath's papers. Hughes opened the archives right before his death in 1998. The unabridged journals are now being prepared for publication by Karen Kukil, a curator at Smith College, where Plath's papers are held. My quotation of the unpublished journal entry comes from The New Yorker, which featured several pages of the unsealed journals in its March 27, 2000 issue.
CHAPTER 3

"THE FREAK SHOW": ANNE SEXTON'S CONFESSIONAL POETICS AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN READERS

In a letter to Louis Ames, dated June 4, 1965, Anne Sexton offers an apology to her friend for the delay of her reply, a reply to what seems to have been an inquiry by Ames into the circumstances of Sylvia Plath's death. In the letter Sexton writes, "I meant to answer right off. But, somehow life/writing/my self got inbetween the answer. Can you forgive me? Please try" (sic) (261). To those familiar with Sexton's correspondence, the reply must resonant as quintessential Sexton, capturing her particular epistolary style's careless disregard of spelling and grammatical correctness and its "pouring out" of what the author appropriately refers to in another letter as "Some Anne" (91). That this same letter also expresses her relationship to Plath, chronicling for Ames the details of Plath's suicide as Sexton knew them at the time, would seem to mark it as a fitting segue from the previous chapter on Plath to this one. But in fact these obvious characteristics are only a small part of what interests me about the entire letter and about this one passage in particular. Indeed, what I find most striking about the passage is the phrase, "life/writing/my self." Apparently offered as the literal reason for the delay of Sexton's reply, the tossed-off phrase resonates with the word
that serves as the foundation for this project: autobiography or self-life-writing. It is in this way that the passage seems most fitting as an introduction to this chapter, capturing as it does what many of Sexton’s critics have characterized as the imposition of autobiography on her poetry, especially the ways it seems to have wedged its way “inbetween” what Sexton ostensibly should have written if she had wished to be taken seriously and to endure as a poet and the writing she felt compelled to produce. Recognizing the centrality of this tension to critical understandings of her work, in this chapter I set out to explore the relationship between Sexton’s poetry and autobiography, particularly the autobiographical reading practices of the women who consume her work. Specifically, I ask, how has Sexton been regarded as a confessional poet? how are these perceptions tied to perceptions of autobiography, autobiographical reading practices, and women readers? 

How do these perceptions change when they are looked at from various perspectives, including the perspectives of the critic, the reader, and Sexton herself, and what might be the significance of such changes? By exploring these questions, among others, I seek to answer the larger questions that underlie them: What does constitute autobiography in Sexton’s poetry and in confessional poetry more generally? And what are the potential implications of our attempts as readers and critics to understand it, account for it, and respond to it?

In the preceding chapter, I offer a close reading of a selection of Plath’s poetry that demonstrates what an autobiographical reading of her poetry might look like. My reading is meant to correct the common assumptions
that have pervaded and defined Plath criticism: namely, that autobiographical reading practices are uncalled for by the genre of poetry and that they more accurately indicate a mystical process of consumption rather than a critical and legitimate approach to the poem at hand. An investigation of the critical history and reception of Sexton’s work exposes this same assumption, and once again the assumption is clearly bound to a nexus of larger issues and anxieties about the label “confessional poetry,” about Sexton’s perceived readers, and about the definition of art and aesthetics. At the same time, a study of Sexton, her work, and its reception reveals more than just a reiteration of the same issues seen in the reception of Plath’s work; indeed, it expands the conversation about the reception of confessional poetry by providing a different group of critics, a different poetic oeuvre, and, perhaps most importantly, a rich set of documents that do not exist in the case of Plath, including a collection of letters written between Sexton and her readers. Housed in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, the letters have been the subject of only one critical study, Janet Luedtke’s “‘Something Special for Someone’: Anne Sexton’s Fan Letters From Women,” which provides both a thorough overview of the letters’ contents and a compelling analysis of their importance to Sexton’s developing poetics. My own examination of the letters suggests that they can also help to illuminate the conversation about Sexton’s work and confessional poetry by providing new insight into the relationship between her work and the reading practice that has defined it.
If the tenor of the early reception of Sylvia Plath’s poetry surprises today’s reader with its penchant for directness and sometimes overt misogyny, then the tenor of the early reception of Anne Sexton’s poetry will likely shock. To say it plainly, a number of critics found Sexton’s work distasteful, and while some of them still admired her poetic skill, those who did not held little back when expressing their distaste. Reviewing Sexton’s *Live or Die* in 1966, Charles Gullans concludes, for example, that “these are not poems, unless we conceive of a poem as the simple delineation of anguish, or literal confession. These are not poems at all and I feel that I have, without right or desire, been made a third party to her conversations with her psychiatrist. It is painful, embarrassing, and irritating” (497). Lest his readers doubt his assessment, Gullans goes on to locate the source of the “painful, embarrassing, and irritating” effects, explaining that “the immediacy and terror of her problem are painful; the personal character of the confessional detail is embarrassing; and the tone of hysterical melodrama which pervades most of the writing is finally irritating.” Such effects lead Gullans to a conclusion about *Live or Die* that, while cradled in language suggestive of indecisiveness, is quite certain in its final evaluation: “Either this is the poetry of a monstrous self-indulgence, in which case it is despicable; or it is documentation of neurosis, in which case to pretend to speak of it as literature is simply silly” (497). While raising his own concerns about Sexton’s poetry in *Live or Die*, Hayden Carruth, in contrast to Gullans, apparently prefers to give
the poet the benefit of the doubt on grounds that the poems show a "woman almost in control of her material" and "will serve as 'starters' for further work, giving the poet ideas, images, snatches of language that may be strengthened and consolidated in more fully objectified, imagined poems" (698). His teacherly efforts to foreground the potential of the poetry notwithstanding, Carruth nonetheless concedes that the literary quality of the poems is "impossible to judge" and that the poems do in fact "raise the never-solved problem of what literature really is, where you draw the line between art and documentary" (698).

Together Gullans' and Carruth's reviews represent two different approaches to Sexton's work, one doggedly critical and the other sympathetically or constructively critical. But what is most remarkable about the two approaches is that they underwrite more or less the same final assessment of the poetry: for Carruth, Sexton's poems inadvertently fall short of an aesthetic standard, and for Gullans, they willfully transgress the boundaries of that standard. The difference, in other words, is a question of how much responsibility each attributes to Sexton as author, a difference most noticeable perhaps in the tone of each review. In contrast to Carruth's teacherly tone, Gullans, feeling that Sexton's own agency and her imposing pathology have erased his readerly "rights," appears to have lost patience with Sexton, a fact further underscored by the definitiveness of his conclusions. "These are not poems," he insists. It is in the difference between Gullans' definitiveness and Carruth's tentativeness that the significance of Gullans' conclusions lies. When Gullans' review is placed beside Carruth's, in
fact, I think a clearer picture of what is at stake in the critical conversation emerges. Specifically, the tone of Gullans' review, especially in light of his final conclusions, suggests that he is less concerned with the merits of this particular volume of poetry than he is with putting Sexton back in her place as minor poet and, one might say, "hysterical" woman. This is especially evident in the fact that Gullans fails to provide a single close reading of a poem or even a single reference to a poem that would support his assessment of *Live or Die*, which he notably does do in his assessment of the other poets whose work he reviews in the same article. That Gullans apparently did not feel the need to offer evidence in support of his conclusions both speaks to his frustration and shows just how ingrained the terms of the debate over confessional poetry and over Sexton's poetry in particular had become. As he says in his opening statement about the work, "The materials of Anne Sexton's third book are already familiar to us" (497). Certainly a provocative statement, it is also evocative, calling at once on both a tradition of criticism about Sexton's poetry and about confessional poetry more generally and on a presumed consensus between Gullans and his readers. That Gullans' review does all of these things marks it, I think, as one of the most interesting reviews ever written about Sexton's poetry, if not about confessional poetry. That it also happens to be about the same volume of poetry that would win Sexton the Pulitzer Prize for 1966 makes it all the more rich for an investigation like the one that occupies this chapter. Indeed, perhaps more than any other moment in the reception of Sexton's work, the review by Gullans captures the tension that has long defined critical conversations about Sexton's work, a tension between Sexton's
success as a publishing writer and her reputation as a poet within the literary establishment.

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One point that emerges out of Charles Gullans' review is that Anne Sexton's reputation as a poet always seems to precede her. This was certainly the case in my own preparations for writing this chapter. Often presented as Sylvia Plath's understudy, Sexton seemed to me at the start of my research to occupy a space somewhere in Plath's shadow—a minor literary figure next to Plath's colossal presence. However, even the most cursory review of both poets' careers reveals that Sexton not only enjoyed far more success in her lifetime than Plath did in hers but that she also arrived at that success far more quickly. What is most remarkable about Sexton's career, in fact, is her rather sudden rise to literary stardom. While her career is perhaps well-rehearsed by now, it seems to me that several moments in it are worth reiterating here.

At the age of twenty-eight and with only a high school education, Sexton began writing poetry in 1956 at the request of her therapist, Martin Orne, who suggested she occupy her free time by educating herself (Middlebrook, "'Tapped'" 196). As Sexton has retold it, she turned to writing poetry specifically after catching I. A. Richards on an educational television program instructing on the sonnet: "I thought to myself, 'I could do that, maybe; I could try.' So I sat down and wrote a sonnet. The next day I wrote another one, and so forth" (Kelves 84-85). In a short two years' time, Sexton managed to carve a remarkable space for herself in the poetry world of Boston, first by enrolling in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult
Education, which was taught by John Holmes and which developed into bi-weekly informal workshops that lasted until Holmes’ death in 1962, next by attending the Antioch College Writer’s Conference where she worked with W. D. Snodgrass, and then by gaining a spot in Robert Lowell’s writing seminar at Boston University, which included such young and up-and-coming talents as George Starbuck and Sylvia Plath. But even with such an auspicious start and a remarkable work ethic that kept her at her typewriter throughout the day, it is still startling how quickly Sexton was able to find a publisher for her first volume of poetry. Following the appearance of a few of her poems in magazines like The Antioch Review, The Hudson Review, and The New Yorker between 1958 and 1959, Houghton Mifflin released Sexton’s first volume of poetry, To Bedlam and Part Way Back in 1960—only four years after she tried out her first sonnet. Complete with jacket commentary by Robert Lowell to grab readers’ and critics’ attention, To Bedlam arrived on the literary scene to mostly favorable reviews, many of which welcomed Sexton’s first book as a “form of courage,” even as they sometimes questioned and debated her poetic mastery over the material, a reasonable response to a first book, one would think (Hartman 118). Published in 1962, her second book, All My Pretty Ones, received a similar, if not more encouraging, welcome, as well as the additional distinction of a nomination for the National Book Award. Once again critics recognized the “courageous” risks of Sexton’s poetry (Swenson 122); some also regarded All My Pretty Ones as a stylistic improvement over To Bedlam. Richard Tillinghast, for example, notes that “It is encouraging to notice how much less often Mrs. Sexton indulges herself [by stating what only
has strong emotional meaning for herself] in her second book than in her first” (512). For Tillinghast and for a number of other critics as well, however, the concession of such weaknesses did not detract from the overall impact of Sexton’s art. Arguing that “the publication of Anne Sexton’s poetry has been one of the most important literary events in America,” Tillinghast expresses the general feeling among Sexton’s critics at the time: namely, that Sexton’s work, while not without limitations, certainly marked an important shift in American poetry towards confessionalism and in this way at least warranted the serious attention of literary critics (510-511).

As we have already seen in Charles Gullans’ harsh review of Live or Die, the general feeling towards Sexton’s work would change over the next several years, beginning I would argue with Live or Die, which is perhaps Sexton’s most remarkable publication for the way it both marks the pinnacle of her career, earning her the Pulitzer Prize, and signals its disintegration. The subject of a number of positive reviews, including one that calls it a “brilliantly unified book” (Legler 125), Live or Die was also the subject of a number of very harsh and highly visible reviews, the most dramatic of which is Gullans’. Of course, harsh reviews were hardly new to Sexton, as we will see later in this chapter; what was new was the decreasing presence of positive reviews that in the past had served to counterbalance the more harshly negative ones. The effects of this imbalance in critical judgments are clear: Sexton gradually fell out of favor with the literary establishment, a fact most evident perhaps in the relative lack of attention, negative or positive, paid to her next five volumes of poetry, Love Poems in 1969, Transformations in 1971, The Book of Folly
in 1972, *The Death Notebooks* in 1974, and *The Awful Rowing Towards God*, posthumously published in 1975. Those critics who did take the time to review these later works generally agreed that each volume revealed—each one even more than the one before it—that Sexton's skills as a poet, particularly her attention to her craft, were deteriorating. Perhaps not all that surprising, this recognition often led to a reassessment of Sexton's earlier work, which was alternatively held up as either a measure of how far Sexton's skills had plummeted over time or as overt evidence of what Arthur Oberg calls "the same problems that have marked her books" from the beginning (152). That evaluations of Sexton's later works would give way to reevaluations of her earlier works suggests, I think, that far more was at stake in the conversation than the value of Sexton's last publications. Indeed, such comparisons by design were meant in many cases to question Sexton's reputation and her status within the literary establishment. This is perhaps most clear in the second comparison that dominates reviews of Sexton's later work, specifically those volumes of poetry published after 1966, the year Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* appeared in the U.S.. Reading through the body of reviews written about Sexton's work from around this time, one is struck by how often Sexton's work is not simply compared to Plath's poetry but measured by it, such as in Sandra Gilbert's 1974 review of *The Death Notebooks*, in which she describes Sexton's poem, "The Death Baby," as being "in cadence, style, theme, like watered-down Plath" (165). That reviews about Plath's work during this same time seldom compare her own work to Sexton's suggests that the hierarchy of Plath as major poet and Sexton as minor poet was one
established earlier rather than later in the critical reception of both poets' work. In any case, it is clear that by 1981—the year that would see the release of both Plath’s *Collected Poems*, which received the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for 1982, and Sexton’s *The Complete Poems*, which went virtually unrecognized—Sexton’s poetry was greeted with little critical attention and her early success as a poet had become overshadowed by Plath’s own posthumous success. This is certainly the consensus among Sexton scholars, including Linda Wagner-Martin who feels that the public’s long-building anticipation for Plath’s *Collected Poems* wrongfully detracted from the achievement of Sexton’s own collection.¹

But it is also true that Sexton’s fall from poetry’s pedestal cannot be entirely explained by the apparent deterioration of her poetic skills, nor by the appearance of Plath’s posthumous publications. Just as important I would argue are the nagging doubts that pervade the critical reception of Sexton’s work from its first appearance. In studying the reception of Sexton’s career, what becomes clear is that the reiteration from review to review of her poetry’s presumed minor limitations and shortcomings cause as much damage to Sexton’s reputation as the harshest critiques. Indeed, what emerges out of the narrative of reception is a portrait of critics gradually losing patience with Sexton, which is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the frustration that defines Charles Gullans’ review of *Live or Die*. While harsh in his treatment of Sexton, the sentiment Gullans expresses reflects the larger sentiment that seems to define the reception of *Live or Die*, as critics became far less forgiving of Sexton’s flaws by her third book than they tended to be.
during the early part of her career. Which raises the question, why the change? What happened—either in Sexton’s poetry, in the critics’ minds, or in the larger literary world—that produced the critical backlash against Sexton and her work?

On the one hand, one could easily dismiss the shift in attitude as merely reflecting a desire among critics to see Sexton play the part of the good student who dutifully improves on her “mistakes.” In this scenario, the issue is simply the quality of Sexton’s craft as it is measured against the aesthetic standards of the times. Without discounting the possibility that Sexton’s work could be—indeed unquestionably is—aesthetically uneven, I think it is vitally important not to allow the consensus critics have seemed to reach about her later work to overshadow the other factors operating in the backlash.

Considering the period in Sexton’s career between the publication of To Bedlam and the appearance of Live or Die can help to illuminate some of these possible factors.

This period between 1962 and 1966 stands as a pivotal moment in Sexton’s career, not necessarily for what she produced during this time—in fact, most of the four years she devoted to writing and revising the manuscript of Live or Die—but for the way her presence and popularity as a poet continued to grow in the absence of new publications. This growth is perhaps most evident in the expansion of her audience during this time, which gained important momentum in 1964 with the release of Selected Poems in England, a collection that draws on Sexton’s first two volumes of poetry and that marked her at the time as a major literary figure in the U.S.
favorably by critics, the volume is most notable for the number of copies sold. The book, then, not only signals Sexton as a literary force in the U.S. and abroad but also as a vital commercial force. That the work's commercial success would be followed by a critical backlash seems hardly coincidental. Moreover, what emerges out of a close review of the critical history that follows is the fact that the very qualities critics were willing to forgive earlier in Sexton's career become less and less tolerable just as her audience grew more and more, suggesting of course that the critical conversation about her work was being shaped in part at least by literary culture's anxieties over her popularity with readers. Such anxieties may very well be what underwrite Charles Gullans' concern with his own readerly "rights," rights which one might guess had become subsumed by the rights, indeed demands, of Sexton's more popular readers who, as I show in what follows, become a liability for Sexton even as they enable her commercial success. In any case, I would argue that critics' anxieties about readership have provided the foundation for the reception of Sexton's work, a foundation that for all intents and purposes is initially set by James Dickey.

Dickey's strong dislike of Sexton's poetry is almost legendary in some literary circles. As probably most writers would, Sexton took his dislike of her work very personally, often writing about it in letters to friends and colleagues. In one such letter, which was written to her literary agent Cindy Degener in 1974, Sexton describes her professional relationship with Dickey in a way that should always be allowed to speak for itself. Referring to a group of poems she had hoped to see published in a popular magazine, she advises
Degener not to send them to *Esquire* because, she writes, "my arch enemy James Dickey would vomit on the manuscript if he were in any way forced to publish it" (*Letters* 416). Without knowing the history between Sexton and Dickey, one might be tempted to dismiss Sexton's characterization of their relationship as overly dramatic or, to borrow Charles Gullans' words from above, as another instance of "hysterical melodrama," when in fact Sexton had good reason to expect such a response from Dickey. Indeed, on at least two occasions Dickey had "vomited" on Sexton's work, perhaps not literally speaking but certainly figuratively speaking, especially insofar as his statements about Sexton often suggest that he was utterly unable to contain his dismay. In his 1963 review of *All My Pretty Ones* for the *New York Times*, for example, he delivered the following pronouncement about the poet: "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience, as though this made the writing more real, and it would also be difficult to find a more helplessly mechanical approach to reporting these matters than the one she employs" (50).

In this statement, Dickey seems to suggest that Sexton's shortcomings as a poet are the result of a lack of poetic skill; she simply does not possess formal mastery over her material. In this way, Dickey's assessment of *All My Pretty Ones* echoes his earlier assessment of Sexton's first book, *To Bedlam*, which he describes as a collection that "lack[s] concentration, and above all the profound, individual linguistic suggestibility and accuracy that poems must have to be good" (*Babel* 134). His concern with Sexton's poor poetic skill is further evident in his review of *All My Pretty Ones* when, later in the review,
he complains that Sexton’s poetry is “as contrived and mannered as any
romantic poet’s harking after galleons and sunsets and forbidden pleasures” (50). Clearly Dickey has a very specific complaint about the aesthetic quality
of Sexton’s poetry, perhaps even a legitimate one. The complaint becomes
suspicious, however, at the point at which Dickey identifies just what it is
about Sexton’s poetry that seems “contrived and mannered”: namely, its
“habitual gravitation to the domestic and the ‘anti-poetic.’”

As I discuss in the first chapter of this dissertation, Dickey was one
among a host of critics who looked unfavorably on the direction of post-
World War II poetry. While his general dissatisfaction is implied throughout
the New York Times review of All My Pretty Ones, it is reflected most clearly in
his opening statement, in which he decries, “What poetry needs nowadays is a
new sense of consequence, a feeling that what is said in poetry matters” (50).
That he later points to what he calls Sexton’s gravitation toward the
“domestic” and “‘anti-poetic’” certainly sheds light on Dickey’s idea of what
matters. This idea is further illuminated by his final assessment of Sexton’s
poetry: “Miss Sexton’s work, “ he writes, “seems to me very little more than
a kind of terribly serious and determinedly outspoken soap-opera, and as
such will undoubtedly have an appeal in some quarters” (50). The dismissal of
the poetry as “soap-opera” certainly smacks of a kind of sexism. The sexist
overtones become even stronger when one considers the larger context of his
final assessment of Sexton’s work. For example, like Charles Gullans, Dickey
considers All My Pretty Ones along side two other volumes of poetry, both of
them by men. While his discussions of each individual poet clearly show that
Dickey is a critic who is hard to please, his discussions also clearly show that Sexton receives the brunt, not only of Dickey's criticism, but of his impatience with contemporary poetry. This imbalance leads one to wonder if Dickey's complaints have been shaped as much by a misogynist bias as by a rigid aesthetic standard. In pointing to such a possibility, my intention is not to dwell on Dickey's shortcomings as a critic but to foreground the important relationship between his perceptions of the subject matter of Sexton's poetry and his perceptions of its readership. The question Dickey's review raises in fact is this: just who occupies the "quarters" Dickey speaks of in his review of All My Pretty Ones?

Taken together, Dickey's characterization of Sexton's poetry as "domestic," "anti-poetic," and "outspoken soap-opera" leads to a rather certain answer to this question. Indeed, while Dickey never explicitly defines Sexton's readership, he does identify it implicitly as a readership of women—women who apparently consume Sexton's words along with their daily doses of soap-opera. The possibility that Sexton's poetry might appeal to this quarter of readers—indeed, might "matter" to women—is not enough apparently to warrant a serious consideration of how or why it might be appealing to them, and not as "outspoken soap-opera" but as poetry. With the veiled bias of Dickey's review exposed, it would perhaps be appropriate to offer a critique of Dickey's shortcomings as a critic, to refute his reading with a counter-reading that redeems the domestic of Sexton's poetry as poetic; such refutations have in fact been the foundation of feminist critics' efforts to recover Sexton's reputation and work. But for my purposes here I wish
instead to continue to focus on the construction of readership that emerges out of Dickey’s assessment of *All My Pretty Ones* and, I would argue, gives shape to, even preoccupies, the larger critical conversation about Sexton’s work.

A return to Charles Gullans’ review of *Live or Die* shows the extent of this preoccupation. Like Dickey, Gullans is concerned as much with the quality of Sexton’s readers as he is with the poetry itself, albeit in a much more explicit manner. Whereas Dickey’s negative characterization of Sexton’s readers is only implied, Gullans’ negative characterization is explicit, serving in fact as the foundation for his critique. Describing the feelings of pity the poems ostensibly provoke in the reader, he implies that readers have allowed this feeling to stand in for critical reading practice and further argues that “to mistake such feeling for literary response implies a confusion among readers and critics of cause and effect” (497). Sexton’s poems, he further concludes, “are not poems, they are documents of modern psychiatry and their publication is a result of the confusion of critical standards in the general mind” (498). For Gullans, then, Sexton’s readers are confused readers who mistake “suffering and sensitivity” as prerequisites for poetry. However, even as he locates the confusion at the point of the reader, he also suggests that the problem has been compounded by a lack of readerly agency. That is, for Gullans Sexton’s poetry is imposed on readers in a way that appears to deny the reader her rights. Remember, one of Gullans’ major complaints is that he has been made “third party” to the poet’s conversation with her psychiatrist “without right.” Unlike the general reader, one presumes, Gullans
is able to escape Sexton's subversion of his readerly agency through his own critical agency, through his capacity for resisting the “confusion” that Sexton’s poetry tends to produce in its readers. In this way, Gullans’ concern with readerly agency seems to be an extension of some of the more innocuous comments that have been made about literary judgment throughout the reception of Sexton’s work, comments like the one made by Hayden Carruth in his rather reserved review of *Live or Die* where he claims that the literary quality of the poems is finally “impossible to judge” (698). In any case, I would argue that Carruth, in explaining the question of the value of Sexton’s work in this way, encapsulates the dilemma posed by the poetry: how does one respond to a body of work that so clearly resists conventional paradigms of reading, that exceeds available discourse, and that seems to subvert any kind of judgment? For Dickey and Carruth, the answer to the dilemma lies in a critique of readership, whereby subject matter and audience are entangled in such a way that to discount one is to discount the other. In this way, the critical reception of Sexton’s work closely resembles the reception of Plath’s work, indeed the reception of confessional poetry more generally. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, to find that the same troubling approach critics took when answering the question of Plath’s literary value reappears in the critical history of Sexton’s work, an approach designed to recuperate Sexton’s reputation and based, paradoxically, on the continued elision of women readers.

“Another Cult-Figure of Neurotic Breakdown”:
Talking Sexton Back From the Edge

147
That critics like James Dickey would assume that women readers would find Sexton's poetry appealing is hardly surprising. Sexton herself saw women as her primary audience and often wrote with this audience in mind. And certainly Dickey was not alone in acknowledging it in his reviews. Many of Sexton's more generous critics identified women as her audience and their reviews often reflect it. Charles Simmons, for example, describes Sexton's voice as "flat-feminine" (47), while M. L Rosenthal contends that Sexton "comes through in her own feminine way" (48). While neither Simmons nor Rosenthal use the "feminine" quality of Sexton's work as direct evidence of its inferiority, certainly the ambivalence that underlies such descriptions is suggestive in that it not only points to the subject matter and style of her poetry but also aims to locate its appeal to readers. The critical difference between the review by Dickey and those by Rosenthal and Simmons, however, is that Dickey, as I think my discussion above shows, does not stop at an assessment of Sexton's poetry but rather extends it to her readers. The result is a construction of Sexton's audience as a confused and uncritical body of women readers. While this construction emerges out of Dickey's work—and would take further shape in the larger arena of criticism about confessional poetry in general—its significance lies most apparently in the way it evolves in later criticism into a discussion about Sexton as cult figure.

As early as 1965, Ian Hamilton predicts that Sexton was on her way to receiving this dubious status, despite what he sees as the promise of her poetry: "there is a real danger that she is to be translated into yet another
cult-figure of neurotic breakdown, valued not for what she has written but for what her suffering seems to symptomatize” (127). The fears Hamilton raises could certainly be understood as a response to Dickey’s own construction of Sexton’s readership and the effect such a construction could potentially have on Sexton’s literary reputation; but, in fact, Hamilton’s fears only partially grow out of his concern for Sexton’s present reputation. Just as important to Hamilton is the possibility that her readers will encourage “exactly the kind of facile exhibitionism which is even now a constant worry” in the young and apparently naive Sexton’s work (127). This fear that Sexton’s readers could do harm to Sexton not simply by damaging her image but by actually influencing her poetry is an interesting one, not only for the way it elides Sexton’s agency but for the way it attributes a kind of super-agency to her readers while at the same time denying the value of these same readers. Perhaps this kind of paradoxical agency is what the word “cult” is intended to encapsulate.

In any case, the question of whether or not Hamilton’s fears and predictions are well-founded is answered by a number of critics in the years following. In his review of Transformations in 1971, for example, Louis Coxe confirms that Sexton had in fact achieved the status of cult figure, a status he sees as an unfortunate symptom of the time:

So much art, in the large sense, is today Cult that true excellence not only rarely appears; it is, in the realm of Cult, a positive hindrance. What most “readers” want is recognition-signals, “life-styles,” beards beads and foulmouth. It has always been so when the audience or public is large and hence conformist. A poet like Anne Sexton becomes a Cult figure so rapidly and completely that the gurus at Houghton Mifflin have coupled her, in this book, with Kurt Vonnegut Junior, in a marriage ‘a la mode surely made in heaven, from the PR man’s point of view, but the sort of thing that the poet has to fight, poem by poem. (29)
Not surprising perhaps, Coxe's statement about Sexton's status is clearly informed by his own paternal desire to protect Sexton as a poet; one feels in fact that his words are meant as much to caution Sexton against the course her publisher's have her on as anything else. But what is the real danger, one wonders, in being coupled with Vonnegut, or in trying to attract a large audience? What is at stake in such a gesture that it becomes a force the poet must "fight?" The answer to both questions lies, of course, in Coxe's characterization of the cult audience as "conformist" and as ""readers,"" the scare quotes around "readers" duly noted. While it is perhaps tempting to read Coxe's description of cult readers as an innocuous gesture to the Beats (""life-styles,"" beards beads and foulmouth") and therefore to discount its significance in the reception of Sexton's work, I think it would be a mistake to do so. Indeed, like Dickey before him, what Coxe does is to make Sexton's audience not only the subject of his critique but the point of tension in the debate over Sexton's literary value. He suggests, moreover, that the very processes of book selling and buying—and any attention an author might pay to such processes and the readers that give shape to them—jeopardizes the legitimacy of the poetic pursuit. After all, popularity among unsophisticated readers, one might say "consumers," is at bottom what cult discourse has tended to signify within literary circles. Recall, for example, Marjorie Perloff's discussion of Plath as cult poet, which is triggered significantly by a sales display Perloff comes across in the window of the Savile Book Shop in Georgetown. Similarly, Coxe's paternalism and his cautious warning to
Sexton is clearly meant to suggest that Sexton, or at least her publisher on her behalf, may have been paying too much attention to the book-buying habits of her readers. Moreover, the implication of Coxe’s suggestion is clear: when a poet is attentive to sales, she can hardly be attentive to her art.

Attempting to make a similar point, Patricia Meyer Spacks takes Coxe’s suggestion one step further, arguing in her 1976 review of *45 Mercy Street* that Sexton’s poetry “became increasingly popular as it manifested increasing slovenliness” (188). Of course, the significant difference between Coxe’s and Spacks’s comments lies in where each locates the cause of Sexton’s popularity: for Coxe, Sexton is turned into cult figure through the marketing of her work, while for Spacks, Sexton is directly responsible for her popularity, at least she is insofar as she writes badly, albeit perhaps inadvertently so. Despite this difference, Spacks’s review paints Sexton as a “victim of an era in which it has become easy to dramatize self-indulgence, stylish to invent unexpected imagery regardless of its relevance, fashionable to be a woman and as a woman to display one’s misery” (188). If there is a tension in Spacks’s review as to whether Sexton is a victim or opportunist, it is perhaps because at this point Spacks is entering into the debate about Sexton’s value, not simply as a poet but as a woman who, in the eyes of her readers and many of her critics, helped to usher in feminism. With the question of Sexton’s value under debate, the issue of her widely-assumed aesthetic flaws had to be addressed, one way or another.

The imperative to address this issue of her poetic weaknesses was made even greater by the push from Sexton’s literary estate to establish
Sexton as a major poet through the posthumous publication of her unpublished and uncollected works. Like most so-called “juvenilia” or uncollected work, Sexton’s *Words for Dr. Y: Uncollected Poems*, which appeared in 1978, was widely regarded as inferior to her previously published poetry. For poets with more established, one might say more stable, reputations within literary culture, such publications are often heralded as illuminating texts that are understandably inferior. But for Sexton, whose literary reputation was precarious at best by this point, the publication of *Words for Dr. Y* was mostly unwelcome and regarded as a hindrance for the way it could potentially reify both the apparent aesthetic flaws of her already published works and the establishment’s perceptions of her readership, confirming once and for all Sexton’s status as “cult poet.” Susan Wood’s review of the volume expresses this concern unequivocally:

> Who will buy this book? I think, from hearing them speak at poetry readings and in poetry workshops, it is primarily young girls and women who admire Sexton for all the wrong reasons, making her a martyr to art and feminism; who seem, out of their own needs, to identify with her pathological self-loathing and to romanticize it into heroism. It has very little to do with poetry and it does neither poetry nor Anne Sexton a service. (3)

If my review of the criticism thus far has left any doubt about the construction of Sexton’s readership as a body of uncritical, misguided women, Wood’s review must certainly answer it. What her review does in fact is bring together and make explicit the connections among the many anxieties that were often only implicit in the critical history up to this time: a worrying over the public’s book-buying habits, a concern for the young women readers who presumably read if not incorrectly then certainly for the “wrong reasons,” and
a preoccupation with the effect both would have on the ways Sexton’s poetry would be valued within the literary establishment. That all of these anxieties are present in a review that seeks to recuperate or at least preserve Sexton’s reputation shows perhaps just how ingrained the very terms of the debate, especially the rhetoric of the cult, had become.

For Diana Hume George, whose criticism importantly kept attention on Sexton’s work throughout the eighties, this kind of readerly misunderstanding and misguidedness lay at the heart of the label “confessional poetry.” As George argues in her introduction to *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, the “‘confessional school’” was a “misnamed and misapprehended movement in modern American poetry,” and Anne Sexton was unfortunately regarded as “among the mode’s most accomplished practitioners” (xvi-xvii). While George is hardly the first or only critic to point out the limitations of the label or even its perilous application to Sexton’s poetry, what is striking about George’s argument is the way she places the reader at the center of the label’s limitations, arguing that it “had become a trap that prevented readers and critics from interpreting the range of [Sexton’s] poetic achievement” (xvii). In this way, her work is reminiscent of Judith Kroll’s discussion of the label’s application to Plath’s work, where the label “confessional poetry” comes to signify a reading practice based on a kind of uncritical spectatorship. In such a scenario, the writing Sexton produced becomes almost incidental to how her readers responded to her work once it was labeled and understood to be “confessional.” As George states it, “poetic typecasting did not prevent Sexton from writing poems that reached beyond
the personal boundaries that ostensibly formed the confessional territory; it
merely kept readers from noticing that she had done so" (xvii).

In her review of Diane Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton: A Biography* in 1991,
Katha Pollitt uses the occasion to assert a similar view about readers'
misguidedness. In this case, it is not the label "confessional poetry" in and of
itself that distracts readers' attention but the poetry's resemblance to
autobiography, a resemblance Middlebrook importantly exposes as false:

To Sexton's many fans—and with nearly half a million copies of
her books sold in the United States alone, she has a huge
audience among people who read little other poetry—her
appeal, like that of Sylvia Plath, lies partly in her life and early
death, with its inescapable feminist drama, and partly in its
apparent candor of her self-presentation. Ms. Middlebrook
carefully shows how simplistic this picture is. (1)

To underscore her point about the virtues of Middlebrook's biography—and,
it would seem, to insult further the half a million readers who have bought
Sexton's poetry for its autobiographical appeal—Pollitt argues that Sexton was
a "formalist" whose poems were "relentlessly pushed through 20 and 30
drafts and shaped by criticism in workshops with Robert Lowell and John
Holmes—sessions attended by Plath, George Starbuck and Maxine Kumin."

For Pollitt, moreover, the very fact that Sexton had participated in such
workshops demonstrates the fallibility, if not culpability, of Sexton's fans.
After all, she notes, "Had Sexton merely been versifying her autobiography,
she wouldn't have lasted two minutes in that crowd."

Like Plath's, then, the reception and critical history of Sexton's work
emerges out of and develops around a web of anxieties about Sexton's
readership and the reading practices that ostensibly defined it, anxieties that
are often encapsulated by the label "confessional poetry." In the case of Plath, I have argued that the impact of these anxieties can be seen in the way Plath's work has often been relegated to the margins of the literary canon and, just as important, the way the Plath reader continues to be cast as a sick, misguided consumer of her work. In the case of Sexton, the impact can also be seen in the way Sexton's work, even more so than Plath's, has often and perhaps still sits perilously on the edge of the canon. One might argue, in fact, that Sexton's writing bears the impact of these anxieties, especially insofar as it often takes up the issue of her audience as its subject matter. Indeed, unlike Plath who died before most of her work was received by the public and the literary establishment, Sexton experienced—and importantly could respond to—the anxieties first hand. The particular ways she did respond to them serve as testament to just how powerfully the presence of such anxieties impacted Sexton's work.

The Sexton "Freak"

As my previous review of the reception of Sexton's work has shown, the general consensus among Sexton's critics is that her later work shows a decline in her poetic skills. Even those critics who have championed Sexton as a major poet have found themselves grappling with the question of the quality of her later work. Diana Hume George, for example, describes The Awful Rowing Towards God as a collection written "at white heat over a period of less than three weeks," and, she concedes, "it shows" (xx). There are of course a number of possible explanations for the decline, many of which have
been explored in depth by critics, explanations from Sexton's declining mental health over the last years of her life, to the turbulence brought on by her divorce from her husband Kayo in 1973, to her desire to sell books. Offering one of the more provocative explanations, in her essay "Something Special to Someone: Anne Sexton's Fan Letters from Women," Janet Luedtke speculates that the decline "came about because she lost sight of the intimate, one-on-one relationships with individual women in her audience" that had been at the heart of her early poetry (183). This can be seen, she argues, in the three distinct phases of Sexton's career: the first phase, during which Sexton targeted what she saw as a sympathetic but anonymous audience; the second, during which she wrote more directly to a distinctly female audience; and the third, during which she abandoned the idea of an intimate, sympathetic female readership and cast in its place what in Sexton's mind must have been "a mass of greedy consumers yearning to see her bleed" (184). Importantly, Luedtke's assessment of the three phases of Sexton's career grows out of her reading of Sexton's fan mail and is tied directly to the larger goal of the essay, which is generally to show the dialogue between Sexton and her women readers. Of particular interest to Luedtke is the way Sexton's poetry was regarded by her readers as a kind of "collective articulation," whereby Sexton expressed not only her own feelings and experiences but also those of a larger community of women who shared them (179). While not without its problems—most notably the way it is invested in the notion of collective experience and a seemingly coherent community of women—Luedtke's essay offers an illuminating explanation for the decline in Sexton's poetry, especially
insofar as it underscores the important role women readers have played in Sexton’s career. It is also a provocative essay, raising a number of larger questions about Sexton’s relationship to her readers, including the question I would like to ask here: namely, how did Sexton regard her readers, especially given how often they were cited in her work’s reception as evidence of her poetry’s inferiority?

There is ample evidence to suggest that Sexton’s attitude towards her readers did, as Luedtke suggests, evolve over time. At the start of her career, the issue of audience was almost a non-issue to Sexton; she seemed reluctant even to think of her readership, for, as she notes in a letter to her mother, “it is rarity to find anyone willing to read poems—or poetry of my voice,” and when she did think about her audience, it was usually to discount its importance: “Reaching people is mighty important, I know, but reaching the best of me is most important right now” (Letters 32). Comments like these are perhaps indicative of the larger insecurities that must certainly characterize the early careers of many writers. As Sexton’s career began to pick up and her work was accepted for publication, these insecurities developed, not surprisingly, into apprehensions about how well her work would be received by the literary establishment. Reflecting on the acceptance of a number of early poems and their imminent publication, she expresses these apprehensions in a letter to fellow poet Carolyn Kizer, in which she writes, “I’m the most about to be published poet around I think. Tho Hudson is due soon, I hope. Then people (poets) will know my work and now that I think on it, I am afraid. The stuff I write is so controversial. NO ONE WILL LIKE
"IT" (sic) (68). Of course, Sexton's prediction could not have been further off-base. Her work was warmly welcomed by most of her peers and enthusiastically embraced by the general public. Indeed, as soon as her work began to appear in magazines, Sexton found herself at the center of a fan club that would only increase with each publication. And to call it a fan club is in no way an exaggeration. Many of Sexton's readers wrote what they themselves describe as "fan letters," very often for the first time in their lives. Moreover, their letters frequently refer to other Sexton readers whom they introduced to Sexton's poetry or who exposed them to her poetry. It is not uncommon for the letter writers to refer as well to how they often gathered with friends to read Sexton's work together. But their letters were more than simply expressions of their adulation for Sexton; they were also very demanding in their requests for knowledge about Sexton and her work. Some included lists of questions that the writer hoped Sexton would respond to or an invitation for an interview; others included drafts of poems and openly solicited Sexton's feedback; others requested counsel and advise about mental health treatments or life crises. Over the years, Sexton received close to 1,000 letters from her fans, many of which she responded to if not with a letter then with a postcard that may often have included only her signature and a hand-drawn daisy. That Sexton continued to respond to her fans in this way over a period of more than fifteen years, often striking up lasting correspondences in the process, suggests an intense dedication to her readers. At the same time, an undeniable tension exists between Sexton's private actions towards her
readers, as evidenced in her responses to their letters, and her publicly articulated attitude towards them.

One of the most productive sites for investigating the question of Sexton’s perceptions of her readers is her writing itself, which over the course of Sexton’s career increasingly takes up as its subject matter her own writing and the responses she imagined receiving—or did in fact receive—from her readers. Perhaps the earliest poem to do so is “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further.” Widely regarded as Sexton’s statement of her own poetic theory, “For John” responds to a letter she received from her mentor John Holmes in which Holmes, reviewing the manuscript for To Bedlam and Part Way Back, advises Sexton to rethink her material and her decision to seek a publisher for the poems:

I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. . . . I am uneasy . . . that what looks like a brilliant beginning might turn out to be so self-centered and so narrowed a diary that it would be clinical only. Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experience seems to me very selfish—all a forcing others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them. . . . It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It’s all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? . . . Don’t publish it in a book. You’ll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. (qtd. in Middlebrook, “I Tapped”’ 98)

Since Holmes’s letter and Sexton’s response to it have been widely examined by critics, I will not reiterate the myriad issues it raises here. One point does seem worth noting, however: namely, the fact that Holmes simply could not imagine that the very qualities of the book most disturbing to him—its subject
matter and the way Sexton appears to experience a personal release through the treatment of it—would appeal to some readers and make for good poetry. His apparent failure to do so gave occasion for Sexton to explore her own assumptions, both about what poetry is and can be and about its appeal to readers, albeit mostly imagined readers at this point. This exploration is the basis of the poem, "For John."

Describing her own poetics, specifically the way her poetry investigates "that narrow diary of my mind . . . the commonplaces of the asylum" (5, 6), Sexton writes,

At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
[............................]
Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
There ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope. (21-29, 33-37)

The line, "Not that it was beautiful," appears twice in the poem, first in the opening line and again in the excerpted lines above. As a statement of what might be called Sexton's philosophy of the "anti-poetic," it suggests that Sexton may well have anticipated and decided in advance to disregard those critiques of her poetry that, like the one by James Dickey, would dismiss it for its so-called "habitual gravitation to the domestic and 'anti-poetic'" (50). But, as the poem makes clear, the point for Sexton is not whether her poems and
the subjects they explore are beautiful but that the exploration of her own experiences within her poetry might potentially connect her with her readers—readers who may experience the exact kind of release Holmes claimed her poetry did not provide. In this way, Sexton’s speculation about what her poems could potentially mean to her readers shows the poet not only redefining conventional poetics but also rebuffing Holmes’s perceptions of poetry’s readers. Indeed, Sexton’s assertion that “there ought to be something special / for someone” in her poetry directly lays claim to an audience, albeit certainly not one Holmes was imagining himself when he wrote his letter. And as Janet Luedtke notes, the volume of fan mail Sexton received throughout her career, much of which declares the exact kind of affinity between author and reader that Sexton predicted in “For John,” strongly suggests that Sexton correctly intuited the value of her poetry for many readers.

The question of Sexton’s intuition aside, there can be no doubt that women readers placed enormous value on Sexton’s work. Of the 869 items listed as fan mail in Sexton’s archived papers, 587 were sent by women.” While not at all homogeneous in their content, many of these letters suggest that the value of Sexton’s poetry lies in its ability to effect its readers profoundly. For one reader, the effect of reading Sexton’s poetry is “almost physical” (S.M. 1974); for another, the effect is entirely physical: “After reading half of the first line, I immediately dropped the magazine” (E.P. Feb. 24, 1974). Others come away from Sexton’s poetry with a sense of satisfaction. A self-identified housewife writes, “all the meticulous ways you incorporate
truth into your art satisfy," while another reader expresses her satisfaction more simply, describing her response to the poems as "yes yes yes I said yes" (E.D. July 2, 1963; S.A. May 17, 1961). Still for other readers, the effect of reading Sexton's poetry is speechlessness: "I read them aloud to a group of friends. Everyone was so moved, that it was awhile before we could speak coherently" (S.H. Nov. 9, 1969). But by far, the most common effect of the poetry upon readers is a sense of release, a feeling that Sexton expresses exactly what the reader needed herself to say and in the process writes both author and reader "out of a private terror" (M.M. Oct. 7, 1974).

Despite such frank testimonials by her fans, Sexton seemed to lose sight over the years of the significance her work held for many of her readers. Indeed, the defensiveness that characterizes her early claim to an audience seems over time to have been supplanted by her own distrust of her readers' responses. That their responses do in fact become a point of tension for Sexton is perhaps not all that surprising. After all, if the value of her poetry went hand-in-hand with the value her readers found in it, which is the belief she held at the beginning of her career, then certainly the disparagement of her readers by critics must have impacted the value she placed not only on her readers but on the work they consumed.

Sexton's struggle to come to terms with this tension over her readership is evident in her essay, "The Letting Down of the Hair," which she originally intended to include as part of a prose section in her sixth volume of poetry The Book of Folly. Described by Sexton as "an allegory for [her] devotion to poetry," the poem reads more like an allegory for, if not parody
of, the way readers have responded to her poetry (qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 359). The essay describes a Rapunzel-like Sexton completing the arduous task of washing her hair. To dry it, she hangs it out the window and lets it fall to the ground, an act that develops into a kind of a public spectacle as people begin making pilgrimages to the site. Importantly, not only do the spectators gather to see the letting down of her hair; they demand it, calling out "LADY! LADY! LET DOWN YOUR HAIR" and making her into a "tourist attraction." That Sexton identifies the spectators as her readers becomes clear when she notes how the "college crowd" have "adopted" her and how many of them write to her out of a devotion to her hair. Apparently in an effort to reinforce the allegorical connection between spectator and reader, Sexton also offers parodies of a number of specific letters she received from fans over the years; the parodies consist more or less of excerpts from the letters, in which she substitutes the word "hair" for the word "poetry." The substitution, while perhaps intended to trivialize the importance of Sexton's poetry, works, I would argue, only to trivialize the reader. The reader becomes, in this instance, someone with an unhealthy obsession, one importantly that renders her comical, even absurd.

Even without this essay, *The Book of Folly* betrays a clear ambivalence, if not overt frustration, regarding the reader. As one of her fans describes it in a letter to Sexton,

In "The Book of Folly"... I felt your tiredness of the public, of women like me who have your books, who are 40, who phone you in December, who take your picture, who pay two dollars to see your stigmata, who ask you questions, who tape record you, who send you their unsolicited abortions (we, who have
the pain of birth without producing a living child). (E.L.D. March 25, 1974)

While this reader does not specify what exactly led her to such a conclusion about *The Book of Folly*, she very well could have been responding to any number of poems, or even more simply to the overall tone of the volume. In particular, Part II of the volume, entitled “The Jesus Papers,” resonates with the feeling of “tiredness” described by this reader. Throughout the nine poems that make up “The Jesus Papers,” Sexton portrays the figure of Jesus as a spectacle of devotion, one more reminiscent of Hollywood celebrity than religious solemnity. In the poem “Jesus Dies,” for example, the opening image is of Jesus on the cross, with a crowd at His feet:

> From up here in the crow’s nest
> I see a small crowd gather.
> Why do you gather, my townsmen?
> There is no news here.
> I am not a trapeze artist.
> I am busy with My dying. (1-6)

By the poem’s end, moreover, as the dying Jesus sends His spectators away, Sexton appears to renounce the very principle that years earlier she claimed was the basis of her poetry:

> My townsmen,
> go home now.
> [........................]
> Go now,
> this is a personal matter,
> a private affair and God knows
> none of your business. (37-40)

That Sexton portrays Jesus in the act of reclaiming the personal as private is certainly ironic given the way Christian belief constructs His death, not as a private matter, but as an intensely public one which absolved the sins of the
very people He sends away. Contrary to what one would expect, Sexton suggests that Jesus' following has no claim to His experience, no business in it at all. Which leads one to question Sexton's investment in revising the act of Jesus' death in the poem: what about Jesus as a public spectacle of suffering, for example, interested Sexton enough to make Him the subject of her poetry? Is His sacrifice somehow analogous to the sacrifice the poet makes to her readers as she "pass[es] out bits of [her] heart like hors d'oeuvres" ("The Ambition Bird" 32)?

While the question of whether or not Sexton saw herself as the Jesus-figure of "The Jesus Papers" is difficult to answer based on this one poem, it is clear that the interrogation of the crowd present in the line, "Why do you gather, my townsmen?", was a pressing issue for Sexton as a poet, perhaps even one of the most pressing issues of her later poetry. By 1974, in fact, the question pervades several of her poems and is reiterated most notably in "Hurry Up Please It's Time," a long poem that brings together the voices of several characters and poetic styles. At the center of the poem is the figure of Ms. Dog, Sexton's mocking alter ego, who, as a performer, is "out fighting the dollars / rolling in a field of bucks" (63-64). Calling herself Ms. Dog allows Sexton both to explore palindromes (God-Dog, in this case), which always amused her, and to mock once again the idea of devotion. In the poem "Hurry Up Please It's Time," for example, Ms. Dog mocks Sexton herself, at least the side of Sexton who desires to please her readers.

Who's that at the podium
in black and white,
blurting into the mike?
Ms. Dog.

165
Is she spilling her guts? 
You bet. 
Otherwise they cough . . .
The day is slipping away, why am I
out here, what do they want?
I am sorrowful in November . . .
(no they don’t want that,
they want bee stings). (79-90)

In these lines, Sexton portrays the poet as a kind of machine run by a
demanding public; if she spills her guts, she does so in order to keep her
readers’ attention. Yet, even as she performs to fulfill their demands, she fails
to understand what it is they want. Indeed, she doubts that what she has to
offer is what they want at all. And what do they want? Apparently, not her
pain and suffering at all, but “bee stings” that will produce their own pain and
suffering. The poet, then, seems doomed to fail at meeting the demands of
her readers, for she has only her own sorrow to offer. At the same time as
she recognizes this, she also recognizes that any kind of distance between
herself and her audience is difficult to maintain. As the lines above make clear,
why she is there is still very much tied to what they want. But unlike at the
start of her career, where this kind of dependency translated into being
“something special for someone,” here the dependency seems primarily
driven by material conditions. To be sure, Ms. Dog’s view of her presence at
the podium is a cynical one: she is there because her role is “fighting the
dollars.” Her view of the audience suggests, in fact, that the power of its
demands lies in the money that underwrite them. Metaphorically speaking,
then, her readers are the dollars driving Ms. Dog’s fight.
While perhaps an ungenerous way of reading the change in Sexton’s attitude towards her readers, the possibility that by this time Sexton had reduced her readership to its dollar-value is worth entertaining, not because it somehow diminishes our ideas of Sexton as a poet but because it may help us to understand better the impact her own perceptions of her readers had on her work. Furthermore, “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” is not the only occasion Sexton took to explore her view of readers as consumers. In an essay written for American Poetry Review, entitled “The Freak Show,” she puts into prose some of the same observations Ms. Dog shares.

Written after a reading she gave to a packed house in Cleveland, Ohio in 1973, the essay challenges the assumption that poets can somehow manage to escape writing for an audience. Sexton insists, to the contrary, that public readings exist, not as opportunities for the writer to share her work with her readers, but rather for the poet to make a living. Why else, she implies, would the poet tolerate being made into a “freak show,” which in Sexton’s mind is exactly how most audience members regard her? They come, she insists, “to see what you look like, what you have on, what your voice sounds like,” and they “secretly hope your voice will tremble (that gives an extra kick) . . . that you vomit on stage or go blind, hysterically blind or actually blind” (33). Most frustrating to Sexton is the way her own lecture bureau promotes this construction of her as a freak—“the actor, the clown, the oddball” (33). She describes, for example, learning about how her lecture bureau “speaks proudly of [her] presentation to their clients thusly: ‘It’s a great show! Really a pow! She cries every time right on stage!’” (34). Written apparently to take
issue with this construction of herself as a poet—as well as to push other poets to their own consideration of why they make themselves into freaks when they "are really some sort of priest or prophet or hermit" (36)—the essay also poses questions to the audience members it indicts: "I ask you audiences to look deeply into yourselves before you go to the poetry reading and say, 'What is it I want of this person, this human being, who is going to reveal his deepest thoughts?'" (36).

This kind of public interrogation of her readers is certainly reminiscent of the question Jesus poses to the crowd in "Jesus Dies" and Ms. Dog asks of her audience in "Hurry Up Please It's Time." It suggests, moreover, that by the end of her career Sexton had completely rejected the mutually-sustaining, and perhaps idealistic, relationship she had imagined having with her readers at her career's start. At the very least, it is clear that the history of Sexton's relationship with her readers reveals a growing impatience and frustration on Sexton's part with their perceived shortcomings as readers, just as the history of Sexton criticism reveals a growing impatience and frustration with Sexton's perceived shortcomings as a poet. Rather than see the change in Sexton's attitude towards her readers as a loss of faith in them, which is how many readers regarded essays like "The Freak Show," I think we might more productively understand it as Sexton's internalization of the negative construction of her readership that emerges out of the criticism written about her poetry and about confessional poetry more generally. In other words, I am suggesting that by the end of her career, Sexton had cast herself and her readers in the same roles her early critics had cast them in: Sexton as...
embarrassing exhibitionist and her readers as uncritical, unsophisticated spectators—or, as one of her fans put it, as “Sexton freak[s]” themselves (M.K. 1974).

One would think that the volume of fan mail Sexton received from her readers would have buoyed her under the weight of the criticism. But it is entirely possible that the letters Sexton received may have only crystallized her fears about her readership insofar as they often portray the act of reading Sexton’s poetry as a mystical act of consumption. One reader, for example, insists, “I experience [the poems] rather than read them” (N.R. May 3, 1973). Others directly adopt metaphors of consumption: “I have fed on your writing and more” (S.R. Dec. 10, 1973); “Ever since yesterday when I first read—no—not ‘read’—‘devoured’—your Transformations . . . I read what you had written and could not extricate myself from that spell” (D.H. Dec. 26, 1971). Similarly, some readers express confusion or puzzlement over Sexton’s poetry. One woman writes, for example, “I am fascinated by your poetry, but as many times as I have read it, I am still confused about how the details of your experience fit into your art,” while another frustratingly declares, “I am astonished. At what, I don’t know” (C.G. 3 Nov. 1973; E.P. 24 Feb. 1974).

It is important to note that in stating their confusion, these readers are not arguing against the achievement of Sexton’s poetry. To the contrary, the value of Sexton’s poetry for these readers lies precisely in the way it leaves one spell-bound, fascinated, and even confused, for in producing such states-of-mind, the poetry can then be consumed into one’s self and, as one reader puts it, “fuse[d]” with the reader’s own experience (N.R. May 3, 1973). In this
way, Sexton's readers were able to identify with her and even feel that she had expressed their experiences and feelings, had in fact written their autobiographies. As one reader expresses it, "you have said the words for me" (J.F. Aug. 10, 1971).

If Sexton were looking for signs that her readers' interest in her writing developed out of an unhealthy and uncritical identification with her life, as her critics sometimes suggested, then certainly she could turn to the letters she received for such evidence. But to make such a case against her readers, Sexton would also have had to overlook the larger significance of the rhetoric of consumption used by her readers. When one looks at the body of letters written to Sexton, it becomes clear that Sexton's readers, in describing the effects of her poetry, were grappling to describe their own reading practices, practices clearly at odds with conventional ways of reading. That they should redefine the very practice of reading in the process shows, I would argue, just how astute and capable they were as readers of Sexton's poetry. Indeed, unlike many of confessional poetry's critics who approached Sexton's work with established (and mostly inadequate) conventions and paradigms of reading, Sexton's fans recognized that her poetry called for new modes of reading, modes importantly that could account for Sexton's use of the autobiographical and their own impulses and desires to read her poetry as what one reader calls her "fierce and intimate autobiography" (A.M. undated). In examining the letters, what one finds in fact are sophisticated definitions of autobiography, definitions, if I may say so, that are far more complex than the ones present in Sexton criticism of the time.
In most of the letters, these definitions are implied in the reader’s adoption, if not adaptation, of the discourse typically used to describe autobiography. For example, words like “experience,” “truth,” “selves” pervade readers’ descriptions of Sexton’s poetry. At the same time, however, readers seldom deploy the words in ways that assume that their definitions are self-evident or stable. To the contrary, one might argue that Sexton’s readers practiced a kind of early poststructuralist criticism that recognizes and makes problematic the very terms by which we understand autobiography. At the very least, many struggled to put this recognition into words, including one reader who, determined to make the available words work for her, writes, “I suppose what I find in your writing is an awakening to a sense of selves-truth” (C.H. May 30, 1963). Such grappling with the discourse of autobiography is also evident in readers’ discussion of “Anne Sexton” as a multiply-constituted and discursively produced “I.” One reader insists, for example, “Your poems are more real than you,” and another politely requests, “I’d really like to hear more from you, and also you the other person you are” (E.D. Feb 20, 1963; J.B. March 3, 1972). Still others locate the autobiographical in Sexton’s blurring of generic boundaries. “Your poems are letters, of course,” writes one woman. (E.D. Feb. 20, 1963). Or alternatively, they locate it in the way she experiments with the expression of experience: “Your interest lies (I think) not in the experience itself, but in the process by which the personae of the poem goes through the experience” (sic) (C.S. April 8, 1969).
At the same time that they describe Sexton’s autobiographical imperative, many of these same readers point to the poetry’s technique as poetry. One woman, for example, praises Sexton for her subtlety, explaining, “Only in the third reading was I able to observe your technique. This shows your real artistry . . . the rightness of your form. It can hardly be seen because it is so well chosen to let the intensity come through” (C.H. May 30, 1963). Another provides a close reading of Sexton’s use of rhyme in order to demonstrate that while she might in fact identify with Sexton as a woman, her reaction “is to the beauty and completeness” of the poetry (S.A. May 17, 1961).

Such instances of analysis and critical reading are not uncommon in the volume of fan mail; many of the letters sent to Sexton read like miniature critical essays that explicate a poem or poems in order to convey to Sexton the effectiveness of her poetry.

Taken together, then, the many letters written to Sexton by women readers suggest that the act of reading Sexton’s poetry typically involves both visceral reactions, whereby readers might in fact find their critical capacities crippled by the power of the text, and a return to the poetry in order to explain the way it produced such an effect. Indeed, even the most cursory examination of the letters reveals that Sexton’s readers were re--readers who returned to her poems over and over. That Sexton mistook their acts of reading for uncritical consumption and attempted to reconstruct their reading practices through published statements about her audience is perhaps understandable, especially given the anti-cult rhetoric that dominated criticism about confessional poetry at the time. Understandable or not, it is clear that
Sexton’s attempts to redefine her readership stem, in part at least, from a recognition that she was becoming more and more identifiable as a “cult-poet.”

To resist such an identification, she tried to distance herself, not only from her fans, but significantly from Sylvia Plath as well. Having written about her relationship with Plath in at least two published works, Sexton was often asked by readers to talk about the similarities between hers and Plath’s poetry. Occasionally, such inquiries were the subjects of the letters she received from her fans, including several that were written by students who hoped Sexton could advise them on a paper or thesis they were writing on Plath and Sexton jointly. Responding to one such student, Sexton refused to answer the enclosed questions regarding the similarities between the two poets’ work, insisting, “Over the years I have felt that I must CUT my work from Sylvia’s because it is too often mixed up and after all, I, quite selfishly, wish to be myself and my own poet and not confused with the Plath cult anymore than I have been” (April 11, 1974). To another student, she wrote more frankly, “I somehow find it abhorrent for a comparative paper on the works and life of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. I have over the years become quite exhausted by being her alive representative” (sic) (March 6, 1974). It is important to note that Sexton’s refusal does not stem from aesthetic grounds—that is, from a belief that her work is too aesthetically different from Plath’s to warrant a comparison. Rather, her objection is to the effects such comparisons will have on the way her work is valued, particularly the
way Plath’s reputation as a “cult-poet” would likely rub off on her own poetry.

Such self-protective gestures are the result, one might guess, of the backlash attached to the label “cult-poet” that dominated much of the early criticism written about confessional poetry and about hers and Plath’s work in particular. In her biography of Sexton, Diane Middlebrook suggests that, in the final years of her life, Sexton was often preoccupied with the task of defining “what place in literature her work might be destined to occupy” (382). Given her strong desire to do so—and the fact that she had managed to keep herself alive through much of literary culture’s struggle to define the value of her work—it is not at all surprising that she should engage the debate directly, and in the forum she knew best, her own writing. Nor is it surprising that she should reject an affiliation with Plath and the identification of herself by others as a “cult-poet.” After all, she could see first hand the struggle being waged over Plath’s place within the literary establishment, a struggle made even more difficult by the absence of Plath’s own voice. But what is surprising, I have tried to suggest, is that, in her own struggle to define the value of her work for literary posterity, Sexton passed over those readers who perhaps knew best where its value lie and how to articulate it.
Notes to Chapter Three

1 In a letter to W.D. Snodgrass from 1959, Sexton writes, “I think I owe you a letter... it has been too long since I have poured out some Anne and offered it up to you” (91).

2 In fact, Diane Middlebrook suggests that George Starbuck, then junior editor at Houghton Mifflin and Sexton’s lover at the time, lobbied heavily on behalf of Sexton’s book.

3 Wagner-Martin writes, for example, that the publication of The Complete Poems “came during the same year as that Sylvia Plath’s long-awaited Collected Poems was issued, and the longer wait, the greater anticipation, brought the Plath volume into much greater prominence. When in the spring of 1982 Plath’s collection won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, that award seemed the final quietus to the efforts by the Sexton estate to garner for Sexton what could just as rightfully have been hers.” (“Introduction” to Critical Essays 12).

4 Oxford’s first printing of Selected Poems sold very quickly. As Middlebrook notes in her biography of Sexton, a thousand copies of the book were sold within eight or nine months, a remarkable feat for a volume of poetry (243).

5 In fact, it has been the subject of an essay by Carrie Martin recently published by The James Dickey Newsletter. Entitled “‘There are more important things than judgment involved’: James Dickey’s Criticism of Anne Sexton and the Search for Self,” the essay essentially sets out to “justify his damnation of Sexton’s poetry” by explaining it as the natural result of Dickey’s basic “tenets” for good poetry and thereby denying any possible gender-biased motivations (17).

6 For a more detailed break-down of the fan mail collection, including data on how many letters were sent in each year of Sexton’s career, see Janet Luedtke’s essay, “‘Something Special for Someone’: Anne Sexton’s Fan Letters From Women.”

7 I have chosen to identify the letters throughout by the initials of the author and the date. All of the excerpts included in this chapter are from letters written by women.

8 It is perhaps in this suggestion that I most disagree with Janet Luedtke’s reading of the three stages of Sexton’s career. Whereas Luedtke sees the descent of Sexton’s career as the result of her having “forgotten” her audience, I see the final years of her career as one marked by deep anxieties over the reader. It is not at all that Sexton forgets her reader but that she obsessively thinks about them and their shortcomings.
CHAPTER 4

THE WOMAN POET AS PUBLIC SPECTACLE:
PLATH AND SEXTON AS IMAGES AND ICONS

As my discussion of the reception of Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry

demonstrates, assumptions about their readers have led to strong critical
evaluations of their work. Often at the center of these evaluations, whether
explicitly stated or merely implied, are assumptions about Plath’s and Sexton’s
emotional and mental healths and the importance of both women’s suicides to
their popularity, assumptions that at times become so wedded to the question
of aesthetics that the poets’ perceived or known illnesses are actually said to
preclude the possibility of artistic achievement. Of course, this apparent
imbrication of female mental illness and aesthetics is what makes possible the
dismissal of their poetry as merely “case study” (Jaffe 29). At the same time, it
has also contributed to the cult-phenomena associated with both poets and
explains, albeit only partially, why so many young women identify with Plath
and Sexton as the two poets present themselves in their writing. In an
unexpected way, in other words, the conclusion that Plath’s and Sexton’s
poetry imbricates mental illness and aesthetics appears to be the one point
upon which these two disparate camps of readers might agree.
It is not surprising, then, to find that the various visual images of both women circulating today can be seen as responses to the alignment of art and illness that for many readers is central to their poetry. Concerned with these images, this chapter examines the construction of Plath’s and Sexton’s authorial identities through the marketing of their work. Of particular interest to me is the way these constructed identities reflect the assumptions critics have made not only about the poets but also about their readers. As a way of approaching this issue, I would like to consider the larger issue of Plath’s and Sexton’s visibility within literary and popular culture. Such a consideration will serve as an introduction to a more focused examination of a number of images of both poets, including several from book covers circulating within the book industry today and a small selection of photographs from other promotional materials. Informing my analysis of the images throughout this chapter are the following questions: What authorial identity for Plath and Sexton do they project? For example, do they work to reclaim the image of Plath and Sexton as transgressive women that has so often been used and distorted in critical evaluations of their work? Or, on the other hand, do they merely perpetuate and reify a stereotype of both poets as so-called “sick,” “hysterical” women? In both cases, do they also suggest that Plath’s and Sexton’s work, images, and authorial identities are too overdetermined by the facts of their illnesses and suicides ever to be understood apart from these facts, and if so, do they merely show the limitations of how Plath and Sexton can be represented by others?
Admittedly, all of these questions assume the importance of the act of representation as if it were isolated from the act of consumption, which it is not, of course. To better understand how each image functions, then, I also want to consider the role of the reader or consumer. What kind of reader/consumer do the images solicit? Or alternatively, what kind of reader/consumer do they construct? If the images act to interpellate a certain kind of reader—and they clearly do—where then can there be resistance? This last question becomes an extremely important one when considered alongside the important role autobiography plays in both Plath’s and Sexton’s work. As Philippe Lejeune has shown in his discussion of the autobiographical pact, that which is on the “fringe of the printed text”—the title, the author’s name, and in this particular case the images from the cover art—controls the whole reading of the text (29). In other words, the impact of the visual images examined here upon reading practices should not be underestimated. Ours is a visual culture, and the extent to which the image itself now pervades the book industry, as this chapter demonstrates, indicates as much as anything else just how potent the image can be. Perhaps the most important question to be asked, then, is this: in what ways do the images of Plath and Sexton circulating within the media and literary culture today invest in certain authorial identities for both poets and, in doing so, present and possibly even determine our readings of both authors’ writing?

Before such theoretical questions can be answered, it is essential to recognize the marketing impulse at the bottom of all of the visual representations discussed throughout this chapter. The trump card of
marketing strategies, images attract and persuade in ways that exceed written
text. The images I will be looking at in this chapter are no exception, and so
first and foremost they must be recognized as devices intended to attract a
potential reader, specifically someone willing to spend money for knowledge
about Plath’s and Sexton’s work and, perhaps just as often, for some access
into their lives or personalities. On a most basic level, then, they represent
what Leonard Leff calls in his study of Hemingway’s fame “the traffic in
photographs” that propelled Hemingway into the role of Hollywood star
(xvii). Demonstrating the extent of such trafficking today within literary
studies, visual representations of Plath and Sexton have become commodities
in and of themselves: for a few hundred dollars, for example, one can
virtually visit the online visual library at The Corbis-Bettmann Archives,
purchase, and download any one of a number of images of Plath and Sexton
owned and licensed by Corbis-Bettmann.2 When similar, if not these same,
images get used as cover art on books, they also become advertising devices:
o longer products themselves but a means for selling the true product, the
book. In both cases, the images’ circulation is predicated on an assumption
about the consumer’s desire, if not for the persons of Plath and Sexton
directly, then for some promised knowledge about their writing and even
their lives. In a twisted kind of way perhaps, the images act like tabloid
headlines. In saying so, I do not mean to accuse the book industry of
promoting tabloid trash under the guise of literature or literary
criticism—though in fact the early reception of confessional poetry would
suggest that the thought has crossed some critics’ minds before. Rather, I
merely want to underscore Sexton’s and especially Plath’s status within literary and popular culture. To be sure, the sale of Plath’s and Sexton’s images online is a plain attempt to tap into the interest of their most devoted readers, either through their purchasing of the image or through their purchasing of books that use the images for promotion. As such, they suggest that Plath and Sexton have surpassed the status of poet and have become literary versions of Hollywood “stars:” cultural commodities whose value lies as much in their image as it does in what they produce.

These questions about the marketing of celebrity images aside, the growing prevalence of Plath’s and Sexton’s images, combined with the access the public now has to them, suggests that such images are important cultural texts and that it is time to take them seriously and to begin to address their significance, not only within academic and literary culture but also within popular culture. One of the aims of this chapter is to suggest possibilities for doing so. The task is not always an easy one, however. Complicating any conclusions one might reach about the construction of Plath’s and Sexton’s authorial identities are the difficult facts of licensing and copyright. In the case of Plath especially, such issues are always compounded by Ted Hughes’s previous control over her literary estate and are therefore never easy ones to settle. For this reason and with only minor exceptions, I have tried to refrain from assigning responsibility for particular images to any one person or group of people and have chosen instead to refer to the covers as belonging to the books themselves.
Sylvia Plath: The Face of a "Case Study"

Sylvia Plath is without question a notable, one might even say notorious, woman, a fact nowhere more clear perhaps than in Elizabeth Wurtzel's latest work, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (1998), where Plath figures largely as both the quintessential difficult woman and popular icon. To many of us familiar with her work and life, her notability and notoriety lie nearly as much in her appearance as they do in her work. She was, to say it simply, intriguingly beautiful, especially in the way her looks seemed to encapsulate the traditional image of womanhood in mid-century America. Perhaps it is this quality of her physical presence that gives Plath's image some of its cultural currency and explains, in part at least, the circulation and even prevalence of it within the media today.

Wherever we locate the appeal of her image, its currency today cannot be denied. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a serious poetry reader today who does not know what Sylvia Plath looks like. Nearly ever major national bookstore stocks the various editions of her poetry and *The Bell Jar*, as well as the numerous biographies and critical studies that have been written about her work and life; many, if not most, of these publications feature a photograph of Plath, if not on the cover then somewhere within the pages of the book. The bookstore Barnes and Noble even markets a postcard of Plath that reproduces what up until now has been the most commonly circulated image of the author: Plath lounging on a couch next to husband Ted Hughes, who is notably cut out of most reproductions, including the Barnes and Noble postcard. Add to this the recent publicity Plath has received since the
publication of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* in February of 1998 and Hughes's decision to open Plath's sealed archives just before his death in October of the same year—not to mention the talk within the movie industry of Meg Ryan's plans to produce and perhaps even star in a film version of the poet's life—and Plath, already perceived by many as "the Marilyn Monroe of the literati," becomes a full-fledged cultural icon."

However one feels about the prospect of watching Ryan bring Plath to life on the big screen, the plans for the film certainly suggest that Plath, far from being the "cult-poet" with whom the public was supposed to quickly lose interest, as one early critic predicted, increasingly draws our attention. Indeed, her reputation as an author and celebrity has grown so much recently that it has become difficult for even the most attentive and devoted fan to keep up with the new editions of her work that appear to arrive daily on bookstore shelves: in the past four years alone, new editions of *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams, The Journals, The Colossus, Ariel*, and the 25th anniversary edition of *The Bell Jar* have been released. This resurgence in the publication of Plath's primary texts comes on the heels, if somewhat late, of the publication earlier this decade of a number of critical works and biographies, many of them routinely stocked in bookstores alongside the primary works. Even more interesting is that most of these publications feature in some way a photographic image of Plath on their covers. This is in direct contrast to earlier publications which, especially in the case of the primary works, seldom if ever featured Plath's image. One can hardly ignore the implications of this shift. Within literary culture, the cover has typically
been reserved as a space for images that illustrate a book's content or for occasionally benign portraits of the author. In contrast, books marketed to a more mass audience, such as those anticipated to be national bestsellers and those made into films, feature ever-more sophisticated covers, ones that suggest that their publishers are obviously aware that the books are competing for a marketing niche rather than being purchased for their intrinsic value, which of course is precisely what the sale of classical literature relies on. Of concern to me here, then, is not simply the resurgence of interest in Plath's work and personality but also the shift in marketing strategy that has accompanied it, a shift that clearly assumes her "cross-over" appeal as an author whose readership spans the literary and the popular.

The first image I would like to discuss appears on the dustjacket from the volume of *Modern Critical Views* devoted to Plath; its existence within the series makes this particular image an interesting one with which to begin (Fig. 4.1). As most of the books in the series do, this essay collection features a drawn-illustration of Plath on its dustjacket. This image stands out from the series, however, in one rather striking way: where we might expect to see an image of the author in her study or in some other properly literary pose—a representation so many other books in the series offer—we find instead an image of Plath as Lady Lazarus. Draped in black and crowned with a red glow, Plath stands in the foreground in imitation of the figure in the background. Like Lazarus, she stands as if she were emerging from the ash, a fact highlighted by the inclusion of the penultimate lines of her poem "Lady Lazarus": "Out of ash I rise with my red hair...". More than simply a
response to Plath’s tendency throughout her poetry to mythologize the self, the image is a provocative one for the way it wedges Plath’s authorial identity to the image she creates in the poem. But even as it does so it also maintains a distinction between the two: while sharing an unmistakable resemblance to Lazarus, Plath is also unmistakably herself in the illustration, with her hallmark crown of braided hair. The illustrator, Vilma Ortiz, as well as the series editor Harold Bloom, both seem to be aware of this distinction. As Bloom himself explains on the inside flap of the back cover, the illustration is intended to represent “the poet Sylvia Plath against the background of her own deathly vision of ‘Lady Lazarus.’” That Bloom chose to emphasize the “deathly vision” of Plath’s poetry in his characterization of the illustration is perhaps inconsistent with the particular lines included on the cover, lines that depict the act of rebirth central to the poem. But the inconsistency seems minor next to the visual representation of Plath herself, who, complete with a fixed, emotionless gaze and shroud, appears to have risen from the ash, not as herself necessarily but as a figure who embodies death itself. In this way, Bloom’s characterization of the “deathly vision” of the poem could just as aptly describe his and Ortiz’s own vision of Plath. Such ironic duplicity is in part at least what makes the image such an appealing one and allows it to serve as a fitting backdrop for the other images I would like to consider, including what I would argue to be some of the most provocative and troubling images to have circulated within the book industry to date.

Published in 1991, Jacqueline Rose’s *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* presents an image of Plath best described as spectral (Fig. 4.2). In line with the central
project of Rose's book, the image of Plath on the cover serves as a kind of preface to the claim Rose makes about Plath: namely, that she is an "effigy that haunts our culture" (2). Nearly on the margins of the cover itself, the photographic image of Plath—washed-out, yellowed, and grainy—has clearly been manipulated in order to maximize the spectral effect. Obscured further by the imposition of the rest of the cover image over the left-side of her face, Plath is as concealed as she is revealed. Obscuring our view of Plath in this way, it would seem, allows those responsible for the cover art to illustrate and comment upon one of the central concerns of Rose's book, specifically, the public's fantasy to know Plath that sustains itself despite the clear limits of what can finally be known about her life.

Just as the cover of Rose's book speaks to her scholarly argument, the latest cover design from Linda Wagner-Martin's Sylvia Plath: A Biography also wants to align the image of Plath with the project of the book (Fig. 4.3). ^{9} Here, Plath's image is reproduced twice: first in the bottom-left hand corner with some minor but not inconsequential addition of color; and second in an inverted and enlarged image that spans the cover. That the ghostly and residual image of Plath appears as mere figment next to the more literal image of Plath suggests that Martin's study is one that ostensibly wants to move us from the figment to a more illuminated Plath, which of course is what most readers would expect from a biography—at the very least, it is what the publisher promises on the back cover. ^{10}

The possibility that a book's cover art could serve as commentary about the biographical or autobiographical project is even more forcefully
suggested in the next image I want to consider, which comes from the edition of The Journals released by Anchor Books in May of 1998 (Fig. 4.4). A reversal of the image on the cover of The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, which displays only the darker half of Plath's face, the Journals cover features the lighted side of Plath's face, the one that was properly exposed when the original photograph was taken. For those of us familiar with the controversy surrounding the publication of Plath's journals, the image must certainly remind us about what is missing in between the covers: just as the image reveals only half of Plath's face, the journals can only ever represent half the story, the other and some would argue more important part having been destroyed by Ted Hughes when he destroyed the journal in which Plath was writing around the time of her death. In any case, the fact that Plath is not fully present on the cover correlates with the sentiments Hughes expresses in the foreword to the book: “This is her autobiography, far from complete, but complex and accurate, where she strove to see herself honestly and fought her way through the unmaking and remaking of herself. And the Sylvia Plath we can divine here is the closest we can now get to the real person in her daily life” (xiii). Given Hughes's statement, the choice to represent Plath as only half-present on the cover of this, her autobiography, underscores finally that The Journals, while not the entire truth, are the truth as far as Plath's readers will ever know it. Like the covers from Rose's and Martin's books, the cover from The Journals, then, appears to be designed to work in tandem with the project of the book itself, serving in this case specifically as a critique, even parody, of the parceling out of one's life that is so central to the autobiographical project.
Based on this brief review of these four images, one might conclude, finally, that the images examined thus far represent nothing more than good cover art: images that combine proportionate measures of flashiness and rhetorical savviness in order to appeal to the dual audiences Plath tends to attract. On closer inspection, however, I think we find that the images cannot be entirely contained by the text. Take, for example, the cover to Rose’s text (Fig. 4.2). Even as the cover art seems to want to foreground the constructedness of Plath’s authorial identity and to critique its emergence out of a cultural preoccupation with the poet, the image of Plath present on the cover is dangerously blinded to its own construction and reveals as much about the difficulties, indeed perils, of representing Plath and her appeal to readers as it does about Rose’s argument. To begin to demonstrate just where these perils might lie, I would like to turn next to the cover from Ronald Hayman’s *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, published in 1991 (Fig. 4.5).

Once again, Plath’s face is partially obscured by shadow and darkness, a result of the limitations of the original photograph. In this case, however, the manipulation of the image differs strikingly from the others. The cover to Hayman’s book, in fact, is the first one of this series of bookcovers to prominently present the full image of Plath’s face. Insofar as it does make visible the expression on her face, it foregrounds the clear construction of Plath’s authorial identity that I think is present, however subtly, in all of the images. This construction is unmistakably built on the facts of Plath’s mental illness and suicide. In making such a claim, of course, one risks relegating Plath to the status of minor poet whose work is interesting only as “case
study,“ to return to the words Dan Jaffe uses in his evaluation of her poetry. However, the similarities among these covers, specifically the way they all appear to be oblivious to the troubling ways the alterations of the original image work not simply to illustrate the book’s project but also to underscore Plath’s illness and death, suggest that Plath is presented here precisely as a case study, rather than as a successful poet whose work is deserving of the serious treatment that typically constitutes a book-length study.

Scholarship dealing with illness and its representation certainly substantiates such a reading of these images. In his work Disease and Representation, for example, Sander Gilman traces the evolution of the importance of the face in the clinical study of madness. In tracing the evolution, Gilman looks closely at what he calls the “typologies of appearance” that emerge out of the various efforts since the Middle Ages to capture mental illness through visual representations, including sketch and photography. Such typologies, he explains, grow out of a belief that the external appearance of a person, particularly the face, can be read as a sign of illness and, as such, can be used to aid (or, as some cases reveal, hinder) diagnosis. The illustrations included in Gilman’s work are intended to show that the face of madness is a transhistorically-constructed one that has been read according to its look of vacancy, abstraction, and “death-like fixed gloom” (30). The image of Plath we have seen thus far could well serve as an illustration of this look, a fact underscored by the resemblance between the illustrations in Gilman’s book, which were drawn specifically to capture the visages of ill men and women, and a sketch of Plath by Seymour Leichman.
that was featured alongside Helen Vendler's 1971 review of Crossing the Water for The New York Times Book Review (Fig. 4.6).

From Gilman’s analysis and the existence of this rather disturbing illustration, it seems safe to conclude, as cultural critic Elizabeth Wurtzel does in Bitch, that Plath is identified within our culture as an "icon[] of insanity," despite the serious and substantial attention her work has received within literary studies (221). In any case, it is clear to me that these images invest principally in what the book industry has assumed to be the foundation of readers’ interest in Plath’s work: a fascination, indeed obsession, with her death and illness. In other words, they identify Plath both by her pathology and, on a second level, by the way readers have presumably read and responded to the pathologized Plath. As a scholar of Plath’s work and admittedly as a former “Plath reader” myself, I find such an identification troubling, not only because of what it suggests about cultural attitudes towards women, writing, and illness, but because of how it constrains our reading of Plath’s work and our understanding of why readers, especially young women readers, respond to her work in the ways they do. In widening the issue of Plath’s authorial identity to include readers and reading practices, it may seem as though I have taken an unearned leap in my argument about these images. But if the images are understood as extensions of the construction of Plath’s authorial identity that begins with the reception of her work—as they must be, I would argue—then they become an extremely useful site for an investigation of the relationship between readership and authorship. I contend, moreover, that this relationship is
made manifest in the trend over the past several years to feature this particular image of Plath on the covers of books, a trend that clearly constitutes a marketing strategy on the part of publishers to target one particular facet of the reading audience: a mass audience of young women who presumably buy the books simply because they are about Plath, regardless of their content or scholarly sophistication. Whether this audience exists in reality or merely in our culture's imagination seems to matter little to the industry. In the end, it matters little to the argument of this dissertation, either, because its aim is not to argue for or against the existence of the stereotypical Plath reader. Rather, it is to foreground perceptions of the role young women readers have played in the consumption of Plath's writing and thus in the book industry's decisions to market her work.

That those within the book industry regard this role as a large one is most evident in the final cover image I would like to consider (Fig. 4.7). Released in October 1998 by Quality Paperback Books after being out-of-print in the U.S. for several years, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams is a collection of Plath's prose writing, including her short stories, essays and journal excerpts. The kind of obscure writing mostly of interest to Plath scholars, one would think, the book reappeared in 1998 not only as a mass market text but as a featured book of the month, complete with its own half-page spread in the club's brochure. That Plath's most obscure and neglected writing should make its way into a mass culture, if middlebrow, book club even as it remained unavailable in bookstores would perhaps be surprising if it were not for the way Quality Paperback Books decided to market the book. A startling
revision of the same photograph of Plath featured on the other covers, the image of Plath on the *Johnny Panic* cover propels itself and Plath into popular culture with its Warholian use of bold color and its in-your-face attitude. I waffle on what to make of this cover. On the one hand, I like it for the way it transforms Plath from an icon of insanity to a paragon of contemporary popular culture and in the process suggests that Plath's appeal to readers cannot be entirely explained by her death. On the other hand, I recognize how completely overdetermined the cover image is by the original image of Plath, and how despite the heavy illustration and color, the resonance of illness and suicide so prevalent on the other covers cannot be entirely disguised.

In this way, it seems complicit with the other covers, which, in compressing the author's identity into a single, pathologically-charged portrait, work to reify an image of Plath that fails to capture the extent and complexity of her appeal to the women readers who are simultaneously circumscribed by this construction of Plath. Which leads back to my discussion in Chapter Two of Kat Stratford from *10 Things I Hate About You* and the film's construction of her as a Plath reader. That a single scene of a girl reading could reveal so much about Kat's character shows how powerfully affecting the construction of Plath's authorial identity has been. That it could also constrain our reading of a fictional character like Kat—let alone the historical readers upon whom she is apparently based—suggests to me that it is time to think carefully about how we construct Plath's authorial
identity and about what we potentially deny in the process of constructing her in the ways we do.

To begin to understand just what, in fact, might be denied in the particular construction that emerges from the images considered here, I want to offer two images in closing the first part of this chapter. The first image should look familiar: it is the original photograph of Plath as it was snapped in 1957 while she was at Cambridge; it shows Plath in her study, with shelves of books in the background (Fig. 4.8). Importantly, this particular photograph of Plath is owned and licensed by Corbis-Bettmann, who, in making the image conveniently accessible to the public and to publishers and by eliminating the hassles of procuring rights, has undoubtedly contributed to its wide circulation today. Without discounting the significance of this fact, I think we must also recognize that much of the impact of the image on the covers examined here comes from the alterations made to the original photograph. For example, it is telling that in all of the cover images that begin with this photo, the books, a classic trope of authorship, are cropped out and essentially denied.

The second image is a snapshot taken at the same time in the same location as the first one (Fig. 4.9). The difference between the two images of Plath is immediate and unmistakable. Indeed, while not as clear in focus as the first image, in the second Plath is smiling, her face bright, the look of gloom gone. To put it plainly, she looks happy. As a scholar interested in the direction future scholarship on Plath’s work will take, I wonder what would happen—what ways of reading her work and understanding her readers might emerge—if Plath were more often represented in this way. For one,
the specter of speculation over the value of Plath's writing that has dominated previous criticism might finally give way to more confident discussions of the intricacies, nuances, and complexities of her writing.

Anne Sexton: Refusing the "Hospital Johnny"

If Sylvia Plath is "the Marilyn Monroe of the literati," then Anne Sexton is most likely the Jayne Mansfield, not because she was a less accomplished poet than Plath but because she is simply not as recognizable as a cultural icon and darling of the media, despite the resemblance between her own life and death and Plath's. Even within literary studies, one is less likely to encounter literature written by and about Anne Sexton and even less likely to find an image of her in bookstores, at least until very recently. In fact, when I began this project in 1998, I found that most books about Sexton opted for some kind of artistic illustration on the cover, rather than a photograph of the author, such as the one that appears on the most recent edition of Transformations. In 1998, I discovered only three exceptions to this trend: Diane Wood Middlebrook's Anne Sexton: A Biography (1991), which not only includes the customary photo album within the pages but also features a photograph of Sexton on the cover, and the hardback and first paperback editions of Linda Gray Sexton's memoir of her mother, Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton (1994), all of which I will discuss here.

About the relative absence of Sexton's image, several questions are worth asking: is the circulation of Sexton's image within popular culture, or
the lack thereof, merely a reflection of her perceived status as a poet more at the margins of the canon than at the center? Or have other factors contributed to the seeming disinterest of the public? Or, more cynically, does her image simply not sell? And if so, what is it about her image, to say it crassly, that depreciates its market value? The answers to these questions are hardly as simple as the questions may suggest. On the one hand, the fact that images of Sexton circulate less frequently than those of Plath could simply reflect the decline in the critical attention she has received over the past decade, a decline underscored by the sheer difference in the volume of scholarship written about Plath and about Sexton: since 1990, at least twelve book-length critical studies on Plath's work have been published, while not a single one focusing solely on Sexton has been published since 1989. Similarly, since 1987, four different biographies of Plath have been written and published, while Middlebrook's contribution remains the only biography of Sexton. As important as these figures are, such differences in the amount of critical attention Sexton and Plath have received can only partially account for the differences in the circulation of both poets' images. These differences, in all likelihood, have as much do with the biographical facts of both poets' lives as they do with the question of Plath's and Sexton's canonicity. To account fully for the differences, moreover, one would need to consider the impact the management of each woman's literary estates has had on their reputations as poets and on the circulation of their images, as well as the ways Plath's work has been promoted through the success of Ted Hughes—a fact the publication of Birthday Letters has brought clearly into focus. Other factors have also
contributed to the differences, including the nature of both women's illnesses and the timing of their deaths. Though it makes everyone uncomfortable to admit it, the fact that Sexton committed suicide after Plath in some readers' minds will always relegate Sexton to the status of cheap imitator. Similarly, it is well-worth remembering that Sexton, in contrast to Plath who on the verge of breakout success took her life at the age of thirty, died at the age of forty-five after a substantial career as a successful poet but hardly at the height of it.

Whatever the reasons, it is clear that Sexton has generally been a much less visible poet than Plath within literary culture and especially within mass culture. The publication in the past ten years of Middlebrook's biography and Linda Gray Sexton's memoir may well mark a shift, however. In fact, while scholarship about her work may be on the decline, the public's interest in Sexton's life is on the increase, a fact made evident by the success of both Middlebrook's and Sexton's biographical works, the first of which topped The New York Times bestseller list. One might even say that Sexton is coming into fashion again, propelled in part at least by Middlebrook's provocative biography, which in its representation of Sexton as the "most bewitching and exasperating of women" sets the stage for a re-evaluation of Sexton as a woman and writer who speaks, it would seem, to contemporary culture (cover jacket). While Middlebrook's representation is not without its problems—problems over which she has publicly been taken to task—it does confront head on the issue of Sexton's flamboyancy, not to mention her potential to offend people. At the same time, it in no way serves as an apology for Sexton. To the contrary, Middlebrook's representation of Sexton
seems intent on authorizing the poet’s character flaws and shortcomings both as a person and as a poet, as if in an effort to reclaim Sexton as a woman to whom women today might relate.

This characterization of Sexton is perhaps nowhere more clear than on the cover to the book itself (Fig. 4.10). To those unfamiliar with Sexton’s personality, the image presented must be stunning. It features a black and white photograph of Sexton gesturing with a cigarette in hand and wearing a striking black and white dress that provocatively exposes her long, doubly-crossed legs and thin, bare shoulders. Beside her, though nearly cut out of the cover photo, sit an ashtray and drink, both objects that by the time the photo had been taken in 1974 had become staples in her performances and part of the Sexton trademark, a fact the photo not only assumes but promotes.

This element of promotion is made even more evident by the image Middlebrook includes as a frontispiece in the biography. For the frontispiece, Middlebrook reproduces a poster used to promote a reading Sexton gave at Harvard University in March 1974. The poster features the same image of Sexton present on the cover. But where the cover only assumes a connection between the image of Sexton and her identity as a writer, the poster makes it explicit insofar as it uses the image clearly for the purposes of promoting a reading. In so many ways, in fact, it sells and promises to deliver not just poetry but a performance of Anne Sexton that her fans and readers would by this time have come to expect. In short, the image is utterly Sexton, as her most performative and flamboyant self.
In her own portrait of Sexton, which serves as the foreword to Sexton's *The Complete Poems*, Maxine Kumin describes this same aspect of her friend's professional persona: "Her presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect. A Sexton audience might hiss its displeasure or deliver a standing ovation. It did not doze off during a reading" (xxi). Kumin's provocative description is especially interesting for the way it underscores exactly what the image from Middlebrook's cover seeks to convey: Sexton, the consummate performer, constructed an identity for herself as an author that was predicated on the idea of the public woman as spectacle.

That this particular image of Sexton was selected for the cover of her biography is hardly coincidental. As Middlebrook pointed out during a presentation at the 1999 MLA Convention in Chicago, she tried her best to represent Sexton through an image that would have pleased the poet, who, during her life, took great interest in the promotion of her work, even down to the details of the photographs that were used. The particular image Middlebrook selected is in fact one Sexton herself commissioned and hoped would be printed on the dustjacket of *The Death Notebooks*. While not used on the book, the photograph was utilized, as we have seen, to publicize her reading at the Sanders Theater in 1974, a publicity campaign Sexton organized herself. As Linda Sexton explains in her editorial commentary in *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, Sexton took charge of her own advertising campaign for the Harvard reading after seeing the poorly constructed mimeographed flyer the
Harvard Literary Club had assembled (406). Her campaign included radio announcements, advertisements in local newspapers, and a full-page photo layout—featuring a photograph she selected—that was included in the Harvard Crimson and the Boston Phoenix. Apparently not content to let her book editor forget that he could have used the same photo for The Death Notebooks, Sexton sent it along to Richard McAdoo at Houghton Mifflin, noting in her letter,

I thought you might interested in my “advertisement for myself” done by a brilliant ad agency . . . I know it’s the picture you hate, but I cannot help but feel it is “more interesting —more provocative” than the one you all picked . . . I thought you would be interested to peek at it and perhaps pass it on for whatever appeal it might have.” (Letters 408)

While perhaps intended to downplay the image and its importance to her, Sexton’s aside, “for whatever appeal it might have,” nearly undercuts the authorial savviness she demonstrates in sending the image to McAdoo. One suspects, in fact, that what Sexton wants to say is that she hopes he passes the image on, not “for whatever appeal it might have,” but because it represents the appeal she wants to have.

In representing Sexton on the cover of her biography through this particular photograph, Middlebrook’s cover clearly attempts to honor Sexton’s desire to control her own image and demonstrates, in the process, the possibilities of representation, even in the case of Anne Sexton whose life and work have often become overshadowed by the reality of her death. Like the biography itself, the cover image seems intent on arguing that it is possible to understand Sexton as a poet-performer whose work transcends
the facts of her illness and suicide. Given its investment in an image of Sexton that distances itself from her illness and death—the assumed foundation of her appeal to general readers, at least for many critics—one might question, then, whether the cover of Middlebrook’s book can be all that effective as a marketing device today. After all, who would be interested in this image of Sexton? Arguing against such narrow understandings of Plath’s and Sexton’s appeal, I would insist that the strategy behind the book’s image is one that strives to generate new interest in Sexton’s work and is quite effective in doing so insofar as it offers the unexpected and suggests that Anne Sexton: A Biography is worth reading precisely because it does offer new insights into the subject’s life. Of course, the fact that the book earned a spot on The New York Times bestseller list makes my claim about its use of effective image less an arguable point than a statement of the obvious.

The next two covers I would like to examine offer a similar image of Sexton, even as they show themselves to be less successful at resolving the tension that comes with representing her within a market driven by a mass culture that brings with it its own set of assumptions about Sexton. Published in 1994, Linda Gray Sexton’s Searching for Mercy Street is a very different project from Middlebrook’s biography. As the subtitle makes clear, the memoir is as much about the author’s reconciliation with her dead mother as it is a biography of the poet. The covers to both the hardcover and paperback editions of the book signal this difference by featuring images of mother and daughter together.

199
On the front of the hardcover edition, a photograph of Linda is superimposed on an image of Sexton that serves as the backdrop to the cover itself (Fig. 4.11). The significance of these two images lies not in their juxtaposition but rather in the way the image of Sexton hovers in the background: Sexton, looming large, appears to be looking over Linda, who notably is looking directly out at the reader. Indeed, the image of Sexton is slightly reminiscent of the images of Plath examined earlier: she is elusive and opaque, faded out to the point of near-obscurity, even apparition-like. That she remains an undefined and disembodied blur gives the impression that she has emerged from no place in particular but instead was conjured up by Linda’s imagination. In fact, the little we see of her suggests that she is important to the cover only insofar as she appears to be watching Linda, who, while she may sit on the margins of the cover, is clearly presented as the focal point of the viewer’s attention. In that it does foreground Linda and configures Sexton as her elusive mother, it softens the image of Sexton and partially disguises her facial expression, an expression which might otherwise have betrayed the look of vacancy that so troubles the images of Plath examined earlier.

In contrast to the image from the cover of the hardback edition of the memoir, the cover from the paperback edition features what might be called a less fabricated photograph of Sexton and Linda together (Fig. 4.12). The photograph, in fact, is one also reproduced in the family album contained within the pages of the book itself. As the caption to the inside photo explains, the image is of “Mother and me, dressed up for a neighbor’s wedding, c.
As it appears on the cover, the photograph has been enhanced through the addition of color. Specifically, Linda has been colored in, an alteration that, like the crispness of her image on the previous cover, works to set her apart from her mother who remains in black and white. This distinction between mother and daughter is further reinforced by the apparent discrepancy between Sexton's appearance and the role the picture casts her in: Sexton's posture in the photograph and the expression on her face in particular—strangely seductive and even vampish in the context of the suburban scene that serves as her backdrop—call to mind the time she had spent as a professional model. In this way, Sexton is both identifiable as Linda's mother and as a woman who defies conventional notions of what a mother should be like. That Linda's memoir happens to be about Sexton's transgressions as a mother only makes the cover all the more resonant, of course. As if to underscore these transgressions, the cover includes an excerpt from a New York Times book review that describes the book as "a candid, often painful depiction of a daughter's struggle to come to terms with her powerful and emotionally troubled mother." The fact that Sexton was "emotionally troubled" is hardly a revelation, but the inclusion of this particular description of Sexton on the front cover is nonetheless significant, especially if considered in the context of the other review excerpts included on the back cover. It is, in fact, the only one of the five excerpts that announces the memoir is primarily about Sexton's emotional troubles. By calling attention to this particular facet of the book, the words and the image combine to create a portrait of Sexton as a transgressive, or at the very least
unconventional, woman. In other words, the book sells itself not primarily as Linda Gray Sexton’s “journey back” to her mother but as a book that promises to deliver a discussion of Sexton as a transgressive and therefore notable woman writer.

Rather than take issue with this particular depiction of Sexton—if one even could—I would like to consider instead how the three covers examined here promote a particular image of Sexton meant to what amounts to, if one looks at the circulation of Middlebrook’s biography and Sexton’s memoir, a mass audience of readers, albeit one that is constructed very differently from Plath’s audience. Indeed, whereas the covers featuring Plath’s image make appeals to an audience who presumably responds to her sickness, the three covers featuring Sexton’s image seem to make appeals to the kind of contemporary talk-show audience that thrives on revelation and the desire to tell- and know-all. In this way, one could argue that the covers are as much reflections of the culture of the 90s—a time defined by the prevalence and popularity of the talk show and tabloid—as they are of Anne Sexton herself. And without question, both books promise and deliver exactly the kind of information that seems to feed 90s culture: all three, for example, frankly and unapologetically treat Sexton’s sexual abuse of Linda, as well as her manic-depression and suicide. But at the same time, it is crucial to recognize that none of the books is intent on destroying Sexton’s reputation, which is what one usually expects from books that make such revelations. Their intent is just the opposite insofar as both books strive to move the reader towards a fuller understanding of Sexton as a person and a poet and to build, in the
process, a basis of new readers who may not have thought much about Sexton before or, if they had, thought of her narrowly as an early feminist fixture of the fifties and sixties.

The question of whether these books have succeeded in building up Sexton’s readership has been answered perhaps by the rerelease of three volumes of Sexton’s poetry: The Complete Poems (Fig. 4.13) and Love Poems (Fig. 4.14) in 1999, and Selected Poems (Fig. 4.15) in 2000, all as Mariner Books editions. Designed with the same principle in mind, all three feature images of Sexton based on existing photographs. The only apparent alteration made to each black and white photograph is the overlay of a single pastel color: the cover to The Complete Poems feature a blue hue, Love Poems a pink hue, and Selected Poems a green hue. Notably, all three images are body shots, similar in fashion to the one featured on Middlebrook’s biography, and all three portray Sexton as a dynamic person. Yet they are also quite different from one another. The cover to The Complete Poems portrays a contemplative Sexton; the cover to Love Poems emphasizes a sultry Sexton; and the cover to Selected Poems shows a down-to-earth Sexton, swimming in her backyard pool, her most enjoyed pastime. Looked at as a collection, the three covers are remarkable for the way they display some of the many sides of Sexton’s personality. But perhaps what is most remarkable about them is how they, both individually and collectively, reject any construction of Sexton’s authorial identity that would be based on her troubled life and suicide. Indeed, the editors in charge of the three Mariner Books editions of Sexton’s poetry could have opted to use the images of Sexton available from the Corbis-Bettmann
archives—images that feature, I would argue, a less attractive Sexton than seen here—just as those responsible for the publications by and about Plath did. While one can only speculate about what motivated their selections, it is likely no coincidence that two of the volumes, *Love Poems* and *Selected Poems*, are introduced by Diane Middlebrook. Given her commitment to promoting a certain image of Sexton, I suspect that she exerted at least some control over the selection of the images that were used. That she has tried to attend to Sexton's own desires suggests that she, at least, recognizes the significance of such images, particularly the impact they can potentially have on the public's perceptions of an author and her work. Middlebook's recognition of this may well have grown out of her work on Sexton, who, after years of being labeled everything from "confessional" to "cult" to "feminist," learned firsthand the importance of visual and authorial construction.

As her efforts to promote her Sanders Theater reading demonstrate, Sexton thoroughly understood the notion of authorial identity and the impact images can have upon it. Her attempts to exert control over both reflect both an authorial savviness and a heightened self-consciousness, not only about her appearance, but also about others' perceptions of her. As I argued in Chapter Three, Sexton registered her readers' responses to her and her work and reacted to them in ways that suggest that she hoped to construct a readership according to her own ideals, which unfortunately for her readers became increasingly shaped by the anxieties that pervaded literary criticism at the time. Internalizing these anxieties, she attempted to distance herself from Plath and the so-called "cult" of the Plath reader. Her strategy included the
rejection of any gesture that over-identified herself with her illness and always-loomimg suicide.

One such gesture came in the form of an invitation from editors at _Newsweek_, who requested a photo opportunity with Sexton. In a letter responding to a fan, Sexton describes the call she received from the magazine, "saying they were doing an article on American Poetry and would like to send someone out to take a picture of me preferably standing in front of a hospital or sitting in a hospital waiting room" (April 10, 1963). Sexton notes in her letter that, while she appreciates publicity, such typecasting was simply more than she "could bear," and insists rightly: "I am a good poet whether I have on my hospital johnny or not."

That Sexton should react this way—and so strongly—to _Newsweek_’s request illustrates as much as anything just how constraining and potentially damaging images can be. Such diligent protecting of her own image seems to have paid off for Sexton, establishing a clear authorial identity for herself by which scholars today can measure their own constructions. Having died before her poetry made her name, Plath, on the other hand, could exert no such control over her own image or authorial identity. Left in the hands of an industry with a narrow understanding of the value of her work and its appeal to readers, her authorial identity has become wedded to her illness and death in ways she, like Sexton, would surely never have approved of. Perhaps my observation of this point suggests that I think there is a lesson to be learned here, that perhaps authors should try to exert more control over their images, or that authors should, as Louis Coxe put it in his 1971 review of Sexton’
Transformations, fight against the label “cult writer,” or any other label with the potential to pigeonhole an author and her work. But in fact my goal in this chapter is not to raise the consciousness of authors about the risks of labels. Rather, I am concerned with what an examination of Plath’s and Sexton’s images might teach us as literary scholars.

As different as they are, the present constructions of Plath’s and Sexton’s images show, for example, how authorial identity can become defined and even constrained by the critical discourse about a poet’s work that emerges out of its reception. As such, they offer literary scholars an important opportunity to consider how our own discourse—including the ways we talk and write about texts, their readers, and the value of both—can powerfully impact a culture’s understanding and appreciation of an author, her work, and her readers. Indeed, the trajectory of my dissertation—from its interrogation of the early reception of Plath’s and Sexton’s work and its construction of both poets’ readership, to its concluding focus on the current marketing of their work and images—demonstrates just what has been and continues to be at stake in our conversations about Plath and Sexton: namely, the value the literary establishment and our culture at large places on both poets and the women who read their work. While such speculations about Plath’s and Sexton’s statuses may seem unfounded given their success as poets to date, the history of their work’s reception shows that both women’s reputations have been intricately intertwined with perceptions of their readership. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to demonstrate that the two remain today tightly intertwined. For this reason, I think it is critically
important that we seek to understand Plath’s and Sexton’s appeal to women readers, rather than seek to deny or contain it as literary critics and the book industry alike have done in the past. I have suggested, moreover, that our understanding of the nature of this appeal should not be grounded in the question of whether Plath’s and Sexton’s readers are “sick” or “healthy” and therefore “bad” or “good” readers. Rather, I have sought to provide an alternative understanding of this appeal, one committed to the recovery of the critical agency of Plath’s and Sexton’s women readers and the complexity and sophistication of their autobiographical reading practices. I offer the word “alternative” here with the hope that my own readers will recognize in my approach to understanding the appeal Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry holds for women that the value of both women’s work lies not in any one place but in its multivalence—for example, the way it can be read as both poetry and autobiography—and its ability to capture the imagination of generations of readers.
Figure 4.1: Cover of Sylvia Plath: Modern Critical Views, designed by Vilma Ortiz.
Figure 4.2: Cover of *Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, designed by Senate Design Ltd.
Figure 4.3: Cover of *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, designed by Andy Carpenter.
Figure 4.4: Cover of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, designed by Mario Pulice.
Figure 4.5: Cover of *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, designed by Steven Brower.
Figure 4.6: Drawing of Sylvia Plath, by Seymour Leichman.
Figure: 4.7: Cover of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, designed by Sherry Sumerlin.
Figure 4.8: Photograph of Sylvia Plath from 1957, owned by the Corbis-Bettmann Archives (photographer unknown).
Figure 4.9: Photograph of Sylvia Plath from 1957, featured in Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame: The Life of Sylvia Plath* (photographer unknown)
Figure 4.10: Cover of *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, designed by Michaela Sullivan.
Figure 4.11: Cover to the hardback edition of *Searching for Mercy Street*, designed by Steve Snider.
"Powerful and affecting . . . a candid, often painful depiction of a daughter's struggles to come to terms with her powerful and emotionally troubled mother." — Michael Kimmelman, New York Times.

Figure 4.12: Cover to first paperback edition of Searching for Mercy Street, designed by Steve Snider.
Figure 4.13: Cover of The Complete Poems, designed by Steven Cooley.
Figure 4.14: Cover of Love Poems, designed by Steven Cooley.
Figure 4.15: Cover of *Selected Poems*, designed by Steven Cooley.
Notes to Chapter Four

1 Other theorists have also discussed the importance of these kinds of extra-textual components of the book, including Gerard Genette, who terms them “paratexts” in order to convey the way they function at the threshold of the book, between it and the reader. It is also worth noting that Genette, while he argues for the importance of paratexts, also dismisses the book jacket as transitory, something made to be forgotten after it has made its initial impression. I obviously disagree for reasons I articulate later on in the chapter. For more on his position, see his work Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation.

2 Corbis-Bettmann owns one photograph of Plath, a fact which, as you will see in the latter part of my discussion, complicates any conclusions we might reach about Plath’s visual representation on book covers, especially given the commercial intention of Corbis-Bettmann’s ownership of it in the first place. They own four photographs of Sexton, all of them taken towards the end of her life. According to the representative I spoke to at Corbis-Bettmann, the cost of the image depends on the purchaser’s intended use of it, but that typically the images can be downloaded for between $150-3000 each.

1 One could argue certainly that the images from the Corbis-Bettmann Archives are primarily intended for commercial use by companies, especially book publishers, rather than for personal acquisition. I would guess, however, that the images are often downloaded by Plath’s and Sexton’s devoted fans, despite the hefty licensing fees.

4 My understanding of “star” is informed primarily by Joshua Gamson’s work in Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America (1994), where he discusses the phenomenon of celebrity. Gamson argues, rather convincingly, that celebrity has little to do with talent and quality but is produced through one’s capacity to command attention, to be known.

5 One of the many challenges involved in writing about cover art is settling the question of authorship. Most of the covers looked at here have multiple authors who are responsible for the different facets of the production, from the photograph to the illustration to the overall design. Add to this the nearly indeterminable question of who ultimately held artistic control in the process, and it is nearly impossible to speak about anything but the book itself, as if it existed apart from those who produced it, unfortunately. In the case of the covers that utilize the Corbis-Bettmann-owned images, the question of responsibility is made even more complicated by the question of how Corbis-Bettmann came to own the photograph. Did Ted Hughes, for example, give the firm rights to the photograph of Plath, or did someone else, say the photographer herself? I tried to get answers to these questions from representatives at the Corbis-Bettmann Archives but was unsuccessful.

7 In the past three years, Plath’s image has been featured in a number of popular magazines and prominent newspapers, often in connection to news-stories about Ted Hughes’s publication of Birthday Letters, his death, or his decision to unseal Plath’s remaining unpublished journals. Most recently, The New Yorker featured three photographs of Plath alongside excerpts from the newly available journals in its March 27, 2000 issue.
The quotation is from Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, though she is hardly the only critic to have made the analogy. See also Peter Davison's review of *Ariel* for the *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1966), in which he refers to Plath as "the James Dean of modern poetry."

A good indication of how covers are designed to respond to publishers' perceptions of audience is the fact that many literary works undergo substantial cover reconstruction after they have been made into movies. Two recent examples: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which now features an image of Thandi Newton as Beloved instead of an original illustration of Beloved, and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, which now includes an image of Winona Ryder's face instead of a photograph of Kaysen as a teenager (and in a fashion very reminiscent of the images of Plath I discuss later on).

Originally published in 1987 by Simon and Schuster with a different cover design, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* was re-released by St. Martin's Griffin with the cover design discussed here. While the St. Martin's edition does not include a date of the re-release, it appears to have arrived at book stores for the first time in 1999.

The back cover reads, "The first to draw on unpublished journals and letters recently made available, this biography provides a detailed, objective, and illuminating portrait of this talented and tortured woman whose writings continue to move us today."

Of course, most of the twelve book-length studies on Plath have received very little attention themselves. Some of the more notable ones include Steven Gould Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (1990), Susan R. Van Dyne's *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (1993), and Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991).


Many critics have taken issue with Middlebrook's use of Sexton's recorded therapy sessions in the writing of her biography. As Middlebrook explains in the foreword to her biography, Sexton's therapy sessions between 1956-1964 were audiotaped to aid the therapeutic process, specifically Sexton's ability to remember what was said. As part of this process, Sexton would play back the tapes between sessions and then take notes on them. These notebooks are now part of Sexton's papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas and can be accessed with permission from the literary estate, which Middlebrook did get. Middlebrook took her research one step further and also asked for permission to listen to and transcribe the tapes themselves. Part of the transcription is included as an appendix to the biography. For further discussion on the controversy, see Middlebrook's own article about it, "The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions" in *Spinning Straw Into Gold* (1996), and James Keenan's "Sexton's Last Tapes: Breaking the Seal of the Therapist's Code" in *Commonweal*.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


231


233


238


240


243


244


