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Mental Illness and Creativity in the Selected Poetry of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton

NICHOLAS HUARD

Introduction: The Fine Line Between Madness & Genius

One should never underestimate the potential of someone who suffers from mental illness, as many individuals with mental illness can create great art. Madness, after all, can be seen as a sign of genius. The goal of this paper is to show how mental illness and creativity are connected. Despite suffering bouts of madness, poets such as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton displayed genius through their poetry. "Skunk Hour" by Lowell and, Sexton's "45 Mercy Street" depicts madness while displaying a deep understanding of poetic form.

In "Mad as a Hatter: Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'," I look closely into the life of Lowell and his mental anguish as a poet. In and out of McLean Hospital during his adult life, Lowell still became a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in 1947. In this chapter, I examine some poems of Lowell that can be considered biographical, especially, "Skunk Hour," his poem from 1959. The speaker's crisis in that poem mirrors Lowell's psychological crisis. Lowell depicts this crisis eloquently through his word choice and the use of symbolism. "Skunk Hour" speaks not just to Lowell's condition, but also to anyone who suffers from mental illness or is on the verge of a mental breakdown.

In Chapter Two, I look closely at Sexton's life and her poem "45 Mercy Street." Sexton's childhood was not

a great one, due to having a complicated relationship with her parents. After having her first daughter, Sexton was diagnosed with postpartum depression, which would greatly impact her mental health and would be reflected in her poetry. In "45 Mercy Street" Sexton blurs the line between that of dreamlike state and that of reality. "45 Mercy Street" can be seen as a poem reflecting on Sexton's past and her current situation. Sexton's and Lowell's poems each in their unique way depict madness. Sexton's speaker's state of mind is a blur, while Lowell's speaker's is in a manic state of desperation.

While the lives of Sexton and Lowell were often tragic, their poetry has a life-giving and life-saving power that heals the heart and soul. Out of their madness and creative genius arose a beauty that outlived them and will outlive us all. In the closing of this paper, I make a note to explain that writing is known to be very therapeutic psychologically, like stabilizing one's mood with many other positive results.

Mad as a Hatter: Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour"

Robert Lowell's poetry falls under the category of "confessional poetry," and the canon of American Literature is not complete without his work. Lowell is a prime example of a life lived on that fine line between madness and a master poet. The reason for this claim is

that despite Lowell's achievements as a poet, Lowell had the diagnosis of manic depression. Psychiatrists today call this bipolar disorder. Lowell, over the course of his life, was in and out of McLean Hospital because of his mental illness. Lowell's deeply personal, groundbreaking poetry collection from 1959, *Life Studies*, helped to bring mental illness more into the public eye when mental illness was still a taboo subject. In the poems in *Life Studies*, Lowell pours out his very being, and one of his greatest poems, "Skunk Hour," will be examined in this chapter.

The Lowell household was governed by the persistent tension between his inept father and his mother who was overbearing" (Poetryfoundation.org 1). Lowell, as an adult, would attend Harvard University for a short time. In 1937, during his time as a student at Harvard, Lowell had a falling out with his father and decided to leave home. This act of revolt had significant consequences for his life, as well as his poetry. During this time of rebellion, Lowell decided he would go south to the state of Tennessee, the home of the poet Allen Tate. According to Jamison, the poets "Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom tutored [Lowell] in art and life" (Jamison 81). Lowell's intelligence was exemplified while at Kenyon as he graduated *summa cum laude*. Lowell, during this time, met the poet Randall Jarrell and writer Peter Taylor, who would be his two dear friends until he died in 1977. By the age of thirty, "[Lowell] had exchanged his Protestantism for Catholicism, anonymity for literary acclaim, and sanity for madness" (Jamison 80). In 1940, Lowell would marry the writer, Jean Stafford. In 1946, Lowell would compose his second poetry collection, *Lord Weary's Castle*, for which "he was awarded Pulitzer Prize for 1947" (Jamison 98).

This Pulitzer Prize-winning collection blends

opposition to war and Puritan ideas and greed and materialism. This collection was the best of Lowell's early works. Despite his literary achievements, Lowell also had a side of madness to him that would plague the rest of his life. Jamison argues that Lowell's bipolar disorder and his poetic imagination together make his writing great: "Those who knew Lowell knew his contradictory sides: With his courage came fragility with his darkness a saving wit" (Jamison 21). Lowell was quite aware of his mental ailment, and he feared becoming severely ill. Lowell himself even claimed that his manic episodes fueled his creativity. According to Jamison, "Mania brought brutality, even violence, but it stood sharply in contrast to his more usual and often-noted gentleness" (21). Throughout his lifetime, Lowell would have psychotic breaks that would land him in McLean Hospital, in Belmont, MA. These stays at McLean Hospital for Lowell were not brief but lasted for months at a time. Jamison tells us that Lowell's poem, "Home After Three Months Away," from *Life Studies*, tells "of a father who returns home from the mental hospital and laments the time he has missed with his young daughter; grieves the time and hope that he has lost to madness; fears his darkening, uncertain future" (220). This madness would be displayed in his marital relationships.

Lowell was married three times in his life. As noted, the first of the three women to be married to Lowell was the novelist, Jean Stafford. The two of them were married for eight years, and those eight years of marriage were very rocky. According to Jamison, "Jean Stafford described Lowell as a man whose rages—more fierce than those he had experienced as a child and adolescent—terrified her" (82). This, undoubtedly, was also due to Lowell's drinking bouts. Like many with mental illness, Lowell chose to self-medicate with alcohol. Lowell writes

of alcoholism in his collection *For the Union Dead* (1964), specifically in his poem titled “The Drinker.” In this poem, he writes,

Stubbed before-breakfast cigarettes
burn bull’s-eyes on the bedside table;
a plastic tumbler of alka seltzer
champagnes in the bathroom. (5-8)

This stanza reflects Lowell’s drinking bouts, one of the reasons for a turbulent marriage with Stafford. Lowell also creates a picture for the reader of the speaker’s cigarettes that have been snubbed out before breakfast, and there are burn holes that look like “bull’s-eyes.” Here the speaker is taking alka seltzer to settle his stomach from a drinking episode. Lowell describes the “Alka seltzer” bubbling like champagne in the plastic tumbler in the bathroom, like champagne in a glass. This alcohol to Lowell is like medicine, as he used it to mask his symptoms, but at the same time, the alcohol makes him sick. In return, Lowell needs the Alka seltzer to settle his stomach.

After Lowell and Stafford divorced in 1948, Lowell “fell in love with the writer Elizabeth Hardwick and declared his determination to marry her” (Jamison 100). Despite Lowell’s manic episodes, Hardwick was “the ideal wife, friend, and critic to Lowell” (107). Despite Lowell’s unstable mental state, he still proved to be a loving and present father to his daughter Harriet. Then, in the year 1970, Lowell moved to England and “fell in love with Lady Caroline Blackwood” (225), and they were married from 1972 until Lowell died in 1977. Lowell’s collection, *The Dolphin*, was “dedicated to Blackwood” (331). Lowell’s last collection was *Day by Day* (1977). According to Jamison, “Lowell’s hopelessness at the return of his madness, his

broadening awareness of his mortality, and his newfound vulnerability to heartbreak all went into *Day by Day* (360). Lowell, in the preface to his *Selected Poems*, writes, “My verse autobiography sometimes fictionalizes plot and particular” (Lowell vii). Here Lowell makes the point that there is an inseparable relationship between his life and his art.

The poem that best depicts Lowell’s mental anguish, “Skunk Hour,” is also one of his most famous. This poem can have a tremendous impact on the reader, as it is a deeply gut-wrenching poem that illustrates a man in a moment of crisis. Poet Troy Jollimore writes, “‘Skunk Hour’ expresses the turmoil of Lowell’s personal life ... What feeds [Lowell’s] later work is precisely what energizes ‘Skunk Hour’: the perpetual, irresolvable tension between the wild and the civilized, between the artist’s need to reveal and the human being’s need to conceal” (Jollimore 5). Lowell as an “artist” of words brings mental illness to the surface when many feel the need to “conceal” it. “Skunk Hour” is the last poem to appear in *Life Studies* and was dedicated to poet Elizabeth Bishop. Lowell’s poem is his response to her poem, “The Armadillo,” which was dedicated to Lowell.

In stanza one of “Skunk Hour,” the speaker transports the reader to the state of Maine, where Nautilus Island is located. Lowell describes in this stanza a female hermit living on Nautilus Island “in her Spartan cottage” in winter (2). This female hermit takes care of sheep on the island and “her son’s a bishop” (4). There is also a third character mentioned in the first stanza, a farmer who is the “first selectman in our village” (5). This hermit is in her “dotage.” The use of the word dotage is quite interesting here. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online, “dotage” in its denotative, or literal

sense, is defined as “a state or period of senile decay marked by decline of mental poise and alertness.” While in the Oxford English Dictionary, “dotage” is defined as “the state of having impaired intellect or understanding in old age.” In other words, dotage at one time referred to the incapacity or instability of the mind. In this stanza, Lowell is identifying with the hermit. In stanza two, the poem slowly makes a shift from a very light tone to one of ugliness and decay. Lowell makes this clear in the last two lines of the stanza which reads, “the eyesores facing her shore, / and lets them fall” (11-12). Here, Lowell is drawing a parallel between the hermit in her dotage and the decaying house. Lowell, as the hermit, desires privacy, like in “Queen Victoria’s Century” (9).

In stanza three, Lowell makes a few references to the hermit, the summer millionaire, the lobstermen, the fairy decorator, and lastly, Lowell himself. One of the interesting things to note is the opening line of this stanza, which reads, “The season’s ill--” (13). Here Lowell is alluding to the changing of the seasons from summer to fall. But it is significant to note Lowell’s diction of the word “ill.” This is significant because the poem is describing the hermit who is mentally ill. In stanza four, Lowell introduces us to yet another character. This time the reader is introduced to the “fairy decorator” (19-20) who is preparing his shop for the autumn season coming. Here, the fairy decorator decorates fishnets, his cobbler’s bench, and his awl with orange to go along with the color of the season. Sadly, “there is no money in his work” (23), and he would “rather marry” (24). Throughout the poem, thus far, Lowell seems to be shining a light onto different individuals in different locations in the state of Maine, to show a contrast of characterizations and motives.

In the fifth stanza, the point of view of the speaker shifts from omniscient to first person. Lowell starts off this stanza with the three words, “One dark night” (25). This night is a “dark” moment of crisis. Then the first-person narrator gets in his “Tudor Ford” (26), a symbol of a pastime, and drives up the “hill’s skull” (26). When Lowell writes of “hill’s skull,” he is alluding to death. When Lowell writes, “I watched for love-cars” (27), he is referring to paranoia, as this is a sign of mental instability; he is watching lovers in their cars with their “lights turned down” and observing them lying together “hull to hull” (28). This first-person narrator is inappropriately snooping on the lovers. The speaker goes on to describe this hill, indicating that the graveyard slopes down on the town. Then the speaker relays his cautionary line to his reader with the haunting line, “My mind’s not right” (30). In this line, Lowell tells his reader that he is having to come to terms with his mental instability.

Then in stanza six, the speaker draws the reader’s attention to his sense of hearing when “A car radio bleats, / “Love, O careless Love...” (31-32). “Love, O careless Love” was a well-known blues song that was written by W.C. Handy and was performed by Bessie Smith in 1925, according to a poem guide from Poetryfoundation.org. According to this poem guide, the narrator of the song makes threats to kill his or her rebellious lover. Lowell, when he was manic, would become extremely violent. As the speaker of “Skunk Hour” hears the lyrics to this song, the song makes his “ill-spirit sob in each blood cell” (33), as if his “hand was at its throat” (34). Here the speaker is trying to strangle himself to commit suicide. Lowell then, in line 35, alludes to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* when he writes, “I myself am hell.” This line can be interpreted as an individual going through psychosis, where they

get delusional and don't know if they are real. Here, the speaker is getting delusional, thinking he is Satan due to the horrors he is going through in his mind. Satan in *Paradise Lost* says, "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (Milton 4.75). Then the closing line of stanza six leaves the reader confused as the speaker states, "nobody's here" (36), when before he made it seem as if he were spying on individuals. This line expresses the confusion of the speaker.

In stanza seven, the speaker lets the reader know the only things that are around are skunks. The skunks are searching "in the moonlight for a bite to eat / they march on their soles up Main Street" (38-39). The speaker makes a personal connection with nature, the skunks. The skunks with their "moonstruck eyes' red fire" (40) become illuminated by the light of the moon. The skunks walk on their soles up Main Street "under the chalk-dry and spar spire / of the Trinitarian Church" (41-42) with their "moonstruck eyes" (40). Lowell is using the skunks symbolically to stand for the stigma of mental illness. This conclusion has come about by associating skunks with their foul odor, and one who is mentally ill feels shame or stigmatized by being mentally ill.

In a letter dated December 3, 1957, to Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell wrote, "A skunk isn't much of a present for a Lady Poet, but I'm a skunk in the poem" (Travisano 239). This is clear evidence that Lowell made a connection with nature by having the skunk symbolize him in the poem. In the final stanza, the speaker stands on top of the back steps of his home where he "breathes the rich air—" (44) and observes a mother skunk with her group of kittens that "swills the garbage pail" (45). There the mother skunks "jabs her wedge-head in a cup/of sour cream (46), and "drops her ostrich tail" (47). The skunk is

not scared of the speaker, even though it is a wild animal. It just goes about its natural business looking for food. According to Troy Jollimore, this image can be read as a metaphor that "seems both mocking and derogatory" (5). Jollimore goes on to note that the poem brings "what is hidden to light" (5). Whatever possible secrets Lowell may have concealed, have finally come to the surface. Lowell's secrets are concealed in the "garbage pail" and the mother skunk brings those secrets to the surface, or the light when she dips her head in the cup of sour cream.

"Skunk Hour" depicts Lowell's mastery as a poet, while surfacing his madness. Surely, Lowell's mood was as the cliché goes: "Mad as a hatter." This cliché describes the man behind Lowell's poetry. Lowell started the wave of confessional poets in the mid-century who would write poetry as autobiography and other poets have been inspired by him (like Sexton). Lowell's "Skunk Hour" displays not just Lowell in a crisis state, but also anyone who experiences the horrors of mental illness. "Skunk Hour" can be used as a tool for those who study mood disorders, like Jamison, to get into the mind of the mentally ill and study how one who is manic can have a deep and powerful way with words. Lowell uses the skunks to symbolize the stigma of mental illness in the 1950s. There is still much work to be done on ending this stigma, even in the 21st century. All of us have something that we choose to conceal inside of us, but these secrets always find a way to come to light.

Dream vs. Reality: Anne Sexton's "45 Mercy Street"

One of Robert Lowell's pupils at Boston University's writing workshop was Anne Sexton. Gail Crowther, in *Three Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of the Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton*, paints a

picture of Sexton and her classmate, Sylvia Plath, sitting in Lowell's poetry writing class in 1959. These two unique individuals with various mental illnesses came together to sit and read, discuss, and write poems with Lowell along with their peers. Sexton, who will be discussed in this chapter, was among the leading confessional poets in modern American literature. As Sexton herself battled multiple mental health diagnoses such as postpartum depression and, like Lowell, bipolar disorder.

Sexton's family had a history of mental illness from an early age. Sexton was born Anne Gray Harvey on November 9, 1928, in Newton, Massachusetts. Anne Sexton's parents "were like characters out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel" (Middlebrook 4). Sexton's grandparents on both sides of the family had leading roles in society. Anne's grandfather from her father's side, Louis Harvey, was a meticulous man who tolerated few interruptions while he worked. According to his family, Harvey suffered a nervous breakdown after one specific exhausting period of endeavoring to set up a bank in Puerto Rico (4-5). This event later prompted Sexton's father to be concerned with his daughter's mental health. Louis's sister, Frances, had a bit of a troubled youth and made a suicide attempt in her twenties (Middlebrook 5). Then, in 1975, a year after Anne's suicide, which weighed heavy on Aunt Frances, she too would take her own life at the age of sixty-nine. Anne's middle sister would also take her own life in middle age, according to Middlebrook.

The Harvey household was a formal one. Performance and appearance were everything in the Harvey house. Later in her life, Sexton would recall, in one of her psychotherapy sittings: "When Mother and Daddy had people over, they kicked us upstairs until Daddy would come up and say, now turn on the charm—

oh, how I used to dread it" (7-8). Sexton's parents made the three girls perform for houseguests when they would come over, something Anne dreaded. Sexton's family members remembered Anne as theatrical and saw this as crucial to her personality (10). Anne loved performing for an audience, a pure actress. Anne was starved for attention that she hardly received at home. Anne's great-aunt, Anna, nicknamed "Nana," was the one who showed unconditional love to Anne during her childhood (15). Both Anne's mother and father were heavy drinkers. Anne's father would be admitted to Westwood Lodge, a private hospital, to get treatment for his alcoholism (14). Sexton would later tell one of her therapists that her mother would intimidate her "with a colonoscopy, and examine her bowel movements" (14). This claim is to be taken with a grain of salt, as Sexton was known to embellish her childhood wrongs in her therapy sessions. Such claims, however, point to the difficult relationship Sexton and her mother had.

Sexton's great-aunt was a significant figure in her life. "Nana" and Anne's tight bond would last till she was about thirteen. "Nana," one time during a concert at Boston Symphony, had significantly lost her hearing in her left ear (15). This sadly led to a slow decline in "Nana's" health. There were times when Anne would find "Nana" confused in her bedroom. Seeing this devastated Anne after the two of them shared a tight bond. Middlebrook notes that one night, Anne witnessed "Nana" being taken to a mental hospital where she would receive electroshock therapy (16). This was just another horrific incident in the Harvey family. Louis Harvey would have another breakdown when Anne was just fifteen and was hospitalized at Glenside, in Boston. Sexton once said, "My father was drinking every minute, "Nana" was going crazy,

my grandfather was crazy, Jane [my sister] was having a baby” (16). The Harvey family to Anne seemed to be falling apart before her very eyes. In 1944, Anne’s parents would place “Nana” in a small private nursing home that was nearby. Anne’s only sense of love and refuge was no longer at her fingertips. “Nana” would end up passing away in 1954 at the mature age of eighty-six. This loss would have a lasting impact on Anne for the rest of her life.

Sexton was in a relationship for five years was Jack McCarthy. Both Anne and Jack were intellectually minded individuals, as Jack wrote poetry and dreamed of being a novelist. Jack had no recollection of Anne being depressed while they were together, though there was one incident that disturbed Jack profoundly. Jack recollects one evening when he and Anne were about fifteen years old. At this time, Anne’s “Nana” had just been hospitalized for the first time, and Jack and Anne made a date to go sledding on a steep hill behind Harvey’s home. Jack’s arrival was delayed, but when he showed up Anne was not there. Then his eyes, by the light of the moon, caught sight of Anne at the bottom of the hill (19). There Anne’s body lay motionless in the snow. Jack then ran down to her and discovered that she was unconscious and bleeding from her head. Jack then took Anne back home in a panic, only to discover that the blood was mercuriochrome and that she had been pretending to be unconscious and acting out her death. Anne considered it a good prank on him. This prank indicates ideation of Sexton can be seen as dramatic or known to embellish things. Anne’s parents, perceiving her strong infatuation for men called her “boy-crazy.” In hopes of curing this, her parents sent her to the female boarding school, Rogers Hall, in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the year 1945. Anne’s

parents greatly approved of Jack and Anne’s relationship, hoping that Jack would marry Anne. Jack would later break off their relationship shortly after Anne was seventeen. In this time of heartbreak, Anne in her adolescence would compose her first poems.

During her senior year at Rogers Hall, Anne would begin to compose elaborate formal poetry. These poems would be published in the school’s literary magazine known as the Splinters. Anne’s mother, Mary Gary Harvey, was not necessarily an author. Mary Harvey’s contribution to literature was comprised of scripts for family skits and the occasional verses for family birthdays. In the Harvey household, the mother was talked of as being a writer. Anne during this time believed she might inherit the role of the writer in her family (20). In the year 1958, Anne’s poems would appear sporadically in the Christian Science Monitor. Anne’s father, Ralph acquired several copies to send to his business associates. However, he angered Anne by negatively comparing her poems to the wonderful letters her mother had written to him while he was away traveling. Ralph Harvey once said, “We ought to have kept those letters. None of you girls are as brilliant as your mother. You are creative but she is brilliant” (20). These statements from her father would cause Anne much pain into adulthood.

At one point, while Anne was still engaged in a relationship, she met and fell in love with Alfred Muller Sexton II, nicknamed Kayo. The two eventually eloped. Kayo was from a financially well-off family and hoped to go to medical school. Anne and Kayo met in the month of May in the year 1948, through a trading of letters. At the advice of her mother, Anne eloped with Kayo, as her menstrual period was distressingly late. Kayo and Anne would then drive to North Carolina where the legal age

to marry was eighteen years old, along with a premarital health certificate from Massachusetts. Anne and Kayo married in Sunbury, North Carolina, on August 16, 1948. This elopement made Kayo's family extremely angry. Kayo and Sexton's marriage was a turbulent one. Middlebrook remarks on this marriage saying, "During the years that her network of friends and colleagues had spread and strengthened, Kayo had grown increasingly distant and again prone to explosions of violent rage" (Middlebrook 370). Anne was also having multiple affairs during their marriage as well. Sexton and Kayo would eventually end in divorce.

Anne would eventually become a mother to her first daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, in 1953 and another daughter named Joyce Ladd Sexton in 1955. After the birth of her daughter Linda Gray, Anne was diagnosed with post-partum depression and during this time she also had her first breakdown when she was hospitalized at a neuropsychiatric hospital. This, like Lowell, would not be the only hospitalization in her life: depression would follow for the rest of her life. During her time in treatment for her post-partum depression and her breakdown, Anne would be inspired to write as a means of psychotherapy.

In 1957, Anne would join writing groups in Boston where she would come to be friends with other poets such as Maxine Kumin, George Starbuck, and Sylvia Plath. According to Poetryfoundation.org, Anne's therapist during this time was impressed with her work and prompted her to continue writing. Anne also told Berg that she saw on television the poet and literary critic I. A. Richards describing the poetic form of a sonnet and decided she would replicate it. In 1960, Anne would have published her first collection of poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. This was Sexton's first collection of poetry

that focused on her psychological hardships. Anne's poetry focused on many other themes such as "religious seeking, transformation and dismantling of myth, the means of gender, inheritance, and legacy, the search for fathers, mother-daughter relationships, sexual anxiety, and issues of female identity" (George 1). During her short writing career, she wrote eight other collections of poetry. Two other collections were printed posthumously, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* and *45 Mercy Street*.

Anne would attempt to take her own life ten times, in her lifetime. The first of these attempts was in 1956, on the day before her twenty-eighth birthday. Anne would feel lonely and depressed when Kayo was not around. This suicide attempt was done while Kayo was away from home on a business trip in the Midwest. Some months later, Anne would be encouraged to put the pen to the page to write poems, as a way of psychotherapy. After much writing of poetry, Anne's poetry collection *Live or Die*, from 1966, would win the Pulitzer Prize. Despite this huge literary achievement, Anne still wrestled with her mental health. Horribly enough, on October 4, 1974, Anne at the young age of forty-five would commit suicide.

The legacy of Anne Sexton's poetry still captivates readers who suffer from mental illness and poetry fans alike. Anne's poetry even speaks to songwriters like Peter Gabriel, who was once part of the band Genesis. Gabriel composed a song titled *Mercy Street* in honor of Sexton's play *Mercy Street* which was written in 1969. Gabriel, like Sexton, is also a profound thinker who could relate to Sexton's depression and her search for meaning through art. In his song *Mercy Street*, Gabriel sings of darkness, a symbol of Sexton's deep depression. According to the website Songfacts.com, the end of his song *Mercy Street* is said to be very intense. The reason for this

intensity is that Gabriel uses a high-pitched screech to mimic Sexton's death. Sexton's poem "45 Mercy Street," published posthumously in 1976, is a poem that plays on the unclear distinction between reality and a dreamlike state, as well as how the speaker wishes to be purged of her mental anguish.

In the opening stanza of "45 Mercy Street" Sexton writes, "In my dream,/ drilling into the marrow / of my entire bone" (Sexton 1-3). It is important to note that bone marrow produces stem cells, along with other substances, which in return make blood cells. It is also where DNA can be found. This is relevant for two reasons. One way is that Sexton's mental health is hereditary and the other is that this dream could be a hallucination she is experiencing as part of her psychosis. The speaker then goes on to tell the reader that she is "walking up and down Beacon Hill" (5) and is looking for a street named Mercy Street. But sadly, the street sign is not in sight. Sexton here is making the reader decipher what is a dream and what is reality. Sexton here is seeking the family home of the past that is now lost to her with time and due to her mental status she is unable to place where the house is.

The female speaker in stanza two then decides to go on a quest to search for Mercy Street, but this time she is specifically looking for house number 45. Sexton uses the refrain of "Not there" (10-11) twice. When the speaker says, "Not there," she is telling the reader that this dream is clouding her reasoning from seeing reality clearly, as she can't tell reality from that of a dream. This refrain is taken from line eight of the first stanza. In this stanza the speaker describes the house she remembers and "the stained-glass window / of the foyer" (14-15), its "three flights" and its "parquet floors," and she can recall the furniture in the house. The

speaker even clearly recalls some of the occupants of the house: the speaker's mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and servants. The house in the poem can be seen as a figure from her childhood. She then goes on to recall "where the butter sits in neat squares" (23) and compares the squares to "strange giant's teeth" (24) which are "on the big mahogany table" (25). The speaker recalls the servants and neat squares of butter, this tells the reader that is a wealthy family home, for the speaker knows the arrangement of the house and its items very well. The speaker then writes, "Not there." The repeating of these two words is significant for the speaker wants to emphasize that 45 Mercy Street is a figment of her imagination, or so she wants her reader to think. Here Sexton describes the squares of butter as "strange giant's teeth." By using this hyperbole to describe the squares of butter, the reader gets the sense that the poem is just one big exaggeration. This hyperbole is also a sign of the speaker's crazed mental state of mind, as it shows that things are not what they seem. For in this state of mind, things seem larger than life to the speaker.

In stanza three, the speaker starts by asking the question, "Where did you go? / 45 Mercy Street" (28-29). Now, the speaker shifts to describe some of the occupants that she previously mentioned in the last stanza. The speaker tells us that Mother was making her "third" child "with the stranger's seed [sperm] blooming in the flower called Horrid." In this line, the speaker indicates to us that she is a child out of wedlock. If we pay close attention to some of the details of this stanza, one will see resemblances of Sexton's personal life. For example, the speaker mentions the many occupants living in the house, and Sexton came from a wealthy family. Then when the speaker says, "the third she will beget" (44), the speaker

alludes to the fact that Sexton was the third child of three girls. This description can be seen as a “nature versus nurture” image as described in psychology. Mental health issues were evident in Sexton’s family (nature), and her terrible upbringing by her parents (nurture) had an impact on Sexton’s mental health in adulthood.

In stanza four the speaker addresses a conflict that revolves around her husband and children. She starts by telling of her clothing and the accessories that go along with her clothing, a white pocketbook containing cigarettes, pills, and her keys. The speaker begins to the reader tell her age but seems disorientated as she isn’t sure if she is twenty-eight or forty-five. This is significant as well to the poem because it makes the reader of the poem stop and question the credibility of the speaker. She continues to walk and walk, holding “matches at street signs” (53) in search of Mercy Street. She then goes on to tell her readers that she even seems to have lost her “green Ford” and her “house in suburbs” where her “two little kids / sucked up like pollen by the bee in me.” This simile suggests that she sucked the life out of her children. Then she goes on to say that her husband “has wiped off his eyes / in order not to see my inside out” (61-62). In these two lines, the speaker is telling the reader that can see what is going on externally, and yet still cannot understand what is taking place inside her mind. She then takes the reader by surprise as she tells us that “this is no dream,” (64) but just her “oily life” (65) where the people are alibis” and that 45 Mercy Steet to the speaker can be seen as a safe haven that she can only dream of. Sexton’s judgment is still a blur from having a hard time telling dream from reality as her life is slick like that of oil and the people are self-justifiers. Sexton at the end of this stanza asks herself if Mercy Street is real or a

figment of her imagination. Sexton here is seeking mercy from something or someone, but to no avail receives none.

In the stanza to follow, the speaker is crying for help to be free from her troubled state of mind. The speaker in this stanza exclaims, “Pull the shades down—I don’t care” (69)! She then goes on to personify mercy as if it can “bolt the door, / erase the number, / and rip down the street sign” (71-73). When the speaker asks, “Who owns the past that went out / and left me only with paper?” (77-78) she is referring to her profession as a poet with the symbolism of the paper. Then refrain, “Not there” (79) is uttered again in a line all on its own. This is quite a dramatic stanza. It is as if the speaker is saying that she wants to be rid of her past and the problems that have brought her to this point. Sexton’s mental anguish in this stanza is intense. It is as if Sexton is screaming, “Mercy!” to be free from her mental illness, which feeds off her like a parasite. The house at “45 Mercy Street” symbolizes her past.

In the last and final stanza, the reader comes to a revelation. The speaker tells us that she opens her pocketbook and picks out “the dollars and the lipstick... and throw them at the street signs” (82,85). She then takes her pocketbook and tosses it “into the Charles River” (88). This symbolizes that the speaker wants to be purged of everything that defines her. Then in the last seven lines, the speaker puts the reader on one last mind trip, as she says,

Next I pull the dream off
And slam into the cement wall
of the clumsy calendar
I live in,
My life,

and its hauled up
notebooks. (89-95)

In stanza four, the speaker exclaims that this is not a dream, but now, in the final stanza, she tells us it is a dream and that she crashes into “the cement wall / of the clumsy calendar” (90-91) she lives in and that her life is “hauled up in notebooks.” This crashing into the cement wall can be seen as an eye-opener to help Sexton to distinguish dreams from reality. This passage refers to Sexton as being stuck in her mundane life as a poet with her poetry dragged along in her notebooks.

“45 Mercy Street” is a “mind trip of a poem” by Anne Sexton. Sexton truly makes it hard for even her reader to distinguish dream from reality. It is as if Sexton puts up a veil that does not let us see what is dream or reality. At the start “45 Mercy Street” reads of a dreamlike state, and then slowly shifts by having that dream become a reality. In the poem, Sexton reflects on her past from mental illness being hereditary, while her upbringing was also in part due to her mental distress. Sexton’s “45 Mercy Street” is a cry for help to those who are suffering from mental illness, as Sexton dwells on the past and well as a place of refuge. A home is a place individuals go to find serenity, something Anne could never achieve.

Conclusion: Pick up the Pen and the Page

According to the World Health Organization “in 2019, nine-hundred million people around the world were living with a mental disorder” (WHO 1). The two main disorders were anxiety and depression. In 2020, when the pandemic started, it made these two disorders rise greatly. Even though there are treatment options for these disorders, many of those affected do not have admission

to successful care. Many individuals with mental illness are prone to encounter stigma, discrimination, as well as having their human rights violated. Lowell and Sexton lived during the 1950s, a time when mental health was considered a taboo subject for many. Mental illness was something that was brushed under the rug, and treatment was not as developed as it is today. Lowell’s diagnosis of manic-depressive disorder, or what is known as bipolar disorder now, in 2019 forty million people suffered from it. In 2019, there were two-hundred eighty million individuals who had depression, which included twenty-three million kids and young adults. Aside from taking medication and seeing a therapist for mental illness, one can be like Lowell and Sexton and practice psychotherapy. One can do psychotherapy by journaling or by writing poetry. According to Dr. Dan Brennan, psychotherapy has some psychological benefits to it. Psychotherapy can help with the following: reducing your anxiety, helping you with continually dwelling on a certain event, it creates recognition, helping to control emotions, and it allows you to open up. So, like that of Lowell, Sexton, and myself, put the pen to the page and begin to write amazing poetry, and never underestimate your work. You never know one day your poems would win you the Pulitzer Prize like Lowell and Sexton did.

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