

ELLEN GILCHRIST AND ANNE SEXTON:
SYMPATHY AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE, REVISION AND REDEMPTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Ellen Gilchrist's work, in its images, themes and techniques, responds to the life and work of Anne Sexton. Using Gilchrist's own comments, as well as extensive textual evidence from Gilchrist's poetry and fiction, I argue that Gilchrist's work is, at least in part, motivated and sustained by her interest in creating a critical space in which Sexton's work can be re-evaluated. Although Sexton was only seven years older than Gilchrist, the timing of their careers is crucial to their success: for Sexton, who began writing in 1956 and committed suicide in 1974, the second wave of the American Women's Movement and the raising of the collective cultural consciousness that it brought came too late. In contrast, Gilchrist began her professional writing career in 1978, just in time to experience the benefits brought by the movement that Sexton had missed. Throughout her work, Gilchrist pays homage to Sexton and illuminates the contexts in which Sexton's works were created, offering the contemporary reader fresh insight into what Gilchrist perceives of as the previously-dismissed works of Sexton. Gilchrist's writing works toward this end in a variety of ways. In her first novel, *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist imaginatively recreates many of Sexton's experiences, leading the reader to identify and sympathize with a woman in Sexton's historical milieu as she emerges as a writer. In much of her subsequent fiction, Gilchrist proceeds to explore several of the darker issues that led to Sexton's demise and ultimate critical dismissal, including the debilitating nature of mental illness and the inefficacy

of psychotherapy and patriarchal religion to respond. To counter such darkness, both Sexton and Gilchrist emphasize the experiences of writing as a means of self-knowledge and survival. Both authors examine the lives of women throughout their life-cycle in a patriarchal culture, focusing on their often conflicting roles as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers. Later in their careers, both women exercise and strengthen the power that such self-knowledge brings by rewriting existing (male) texts. In examining Gilchrist's work as a whole, I offer the reader an opportunity to consider Gilchrist's poetic lineage and to reread her poetic foremothers, specifically Sexton, in the light Gilchrist's work provides.

INDEX WORDS: American Women's Literature, Ellen Gilchrist, Anne Sexton, American Poetry, Feminism, Feminist Theology, Psychoanalysis

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For Clai

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although the fiction of contemporary Mississippi writer Ellen Gilchrist has received much mainstream critical praise and a modest amount of serious scholarly attention, her poetry has remained largely uncelebrated and unexamined. Gilchrist, best known as a writer of fiction, initially developed her talent writing poetry. “I learned how to be a writer by writing poetry a long, long time before I ever wrote fiction,” she says. “Maybe I didn’t know how to structure and plot yet—and I still don’t know how to plot—but I knew how to write the sentence and the paragraph. And you learn that being a poet” (Interview with Jon Parrish Peede 2). Moreover, Gilchrist often points out that her primary influences have been poets, rather than fiction writers. According to Gilchrist, even her earliest childhood literary influence was poetry: “I taught myself to read poetry. Long before I could read prose I could piece together the words of nursery rhymes and poems. Long before I went to school I knew passages of Wordsworth by heart” (*Falling Through Space* 70). In an interview with Mary McCay, Gilchrist describes her reading habits when she was growing up: “I loved good books of all kinds and especially poetry. I adored Edna St. Vincent Millay and memorized most of her poetry from reading it so often. Also, Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot and huge reams of British poetry. God knows what that poetry did to me, but it certainly made music in my head” (109).

In discussions of herself as a creative writer, Gilchrist consistently identifies herself primarily as a poet, rather than as a writer of fiction. For example, Gilchrist begins an interview with Kay Bonetti by asserting her identity as a poet: “I’ve been all my life a poet and a

philosopher. Those are the things I read. I don't read fiction. I haven't read fiction in years. I read poetry and philosophy and I read books by scientists." In fact, Gilchrist didn't write her first piece of fiction until she was forty-one years old and enrolled at the University of Arkansas Creative Writing Program where she went to study poetry with Jim Whitehead and Miller Williams. As part of the program there, she took a fiction-writing workshop with Bill Harrison. Gilchrist describes this experience:

My ambitions were always to be a poet. . . . [The] thing Bill Harrison taught me [was] that you can contain poetry within fiction. That fiction contains poems, that it can contain poems. . . . He told me that you have to write the libretto before you can write the aria. (interview with Melissa Biggs 88)

For Gilchrist, the movement from poetry to the short story seems natural. Gilchrist explains: "I was a poet before I was a fiction writer, and one reason I like stories so much is because they are close to poetry"¹ (interview with Nicholas Basbanes).

As Gilchrist has stated many times, her poetry and fiction are closely related, and, in many cases, poetry has served as a springboard into fiction; ideas conceived in poems came to fruition in the short stories and novels written much later. For instance, Gilchrist rewrote several pieces from her first collection of poetry, *Land Surveyor's Daughter* (1979), as fiction for her first collection of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (1981).² However, with the exception of Mary McCay's brief discussion of *Land Surveyor's Daughter* and *Riding Out the Tropical Depression* (Gilchrist's first and second volumes of poetry, published in 1979 and 1986, respectively) in the Twayne's United States Authors Series volume *Ellen Gilchrist*, there has been no substantial critical examination of Gilchrist's poetry or of her poetic foremothers.

A study of the poetry seems called for, not only to fill this critical gap, but also to expand the discussion of Gilchrist's fiction. Until very recently, most scholarship has focused on Gilchrist's identity as a Southern fiction writer and her relationship to early and mid-twentieth-century American writers of novels and short stories. The only book-length study of Gilchrist's work to be published so far is Margaret Donovan Bauer's *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist* (1999), which links Gilchrist's works to those of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, and Kate Chopin. More recent scholarship, however, is beginning to suggest Gilchrist's connections to more contemporary and geographically diverse fiction writers. For example, Adrien Lowery's doctoral dissertation from the University of Southern California (2001), *The Unconvincing Truth: The Dialogical Politics of Identity Creation in the Novels of [Margaret] Atwood, [Alice] Munro, and Gilchrist*, explores the connection between Gilchrist and two contemporary Canadian women writers. Gilchrist, however, clearly asserts, "because I'm a woman and I write fiction, modern American fiction by women doesn't appeal to me because it's too close to what I do." Instead, she insists, "The women writers I have read all my life, and continue to read, are mostly poets—Edna Millay, Sexton, others" (Peede 3). Furthermore, in her essays and in interviews, Gilchrist clearly acknowledges the strong influence that a writer's reading often has on his or her own work.³ Based on Gilchrist's own comments, I believe further inquiry into Gilchrist's influences—both as a poet and as a writer of fiction—is in order. Specifically, I am interested in Gilchrist's place in the history of American women's poetry, without regard to region.⁴

So far, only one critic has acknowledged an affinity between the works of Ellen Gilchrist and those of the poet Anne Sexton. In a review of *The Cabal and Other Stories* (2000), an anonymous critic for the *Raleigh News and Observer* remarked that "Gilchrist is more the literary

soul-mate of Anne Sexton than Eudora Welty." Although Gilchrist was indeed influenced by Welty, under whom she studied creative writing at Millsaps College in Mississippi in the middle 1960s, and about whom she writes and speaks fondly, Gilchrist acknowledges the distance, and difference, between Welty and herself.⁵ Instead, in discussing her lineage as a writer, Gilchrist specifically identifies Sexton as an influence upon her work. In a 1988 panel discussion entitled "The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition," Gilchrist responded to a question about her literary influences: "In the late fifties all of a sudden we've got Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. We've got this burgeoning of incredibly powerful women poets in the United States; and all the women in the United States including myself that aspired to write began to write poetry in the shadow of Sexton, primarily Sexton, and then all of the ones after" (17). Gilchrist echoes this significant point in many of her other published interviews and journals, as well as in her fiction. In an entry in *Falling Through Space*, Gilchrist acknowledges the personal value she places on the work of poets such as Sexton, as well as her chagrin at what she perceives as the critical dismissal of such poets:

Anne Sexton is another poet the Academy would like to forget if possible or at least send to the back of the class. Anthologies never do her work justice and she is being passed over as a subject for serious study.⁶ Still, while she was writing she spoke to us with a voice as real and lyrical as the sea and my generation of women learned about ourselves from her. "I am torn in two but I will conquer myself," she [Sexton] wrote. "I will take the scissors and cut out the beggar. I will take a crowbar and pry out the broken pieces of God in me." (73)

The lines cited here are from Sexton's poem "The Civil War" (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*, 1975), and they point to several key themes in Gilchrist's later work, both poetry and prose:

most significantly the theme of self knowledge (and the violence and pain involved in the quest for it) as the key to redemption, even apotheosis. In fact, Gilchrist uses these lines as one of the two epigraphs for *Riding Out the Tropical Depression*. In the “Author’s Note” to this volume, Gilchrist goes on to connect the ideas in her fiction with the ideas first established in her poetry, suggesting that her work as a writer is all interrelated, an organic whole: “Readers of my fiction will see the inception of ideas and themes that later became stories or characters. Things that were dark in the poems often turned into comedies as the work and the mind of the writer became clearer and in more balance.” Thus, it follows that the influence of Sexton on Gilchrist’s poetry also extends to her fiction.

As many critics have noted, Gilchrist’s prose is, although straightforwardly narrative, also quite lyrical. A *Times Literary Supplement* review of her first collection of fiction, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, for instance, describes Gilchrist’s fiction style as “A sustained display of delicately and rhythmically modulated prose.” *The Sunday Times* (of London) describes the short stories in *Victory Over Japan* (1983),⁷ Gilchrist’s second collection, as “sharp-cut,” offering “distinctive and potent triumphs of distillation.” A *Sunday Telegraph* review of *The Annunciation* (1983) points out that, even in a novel, “Gilchrist observes accurately with all her senses. The results are often as vivid as poetry.”⁸ A similar review of a later novel, *Net of Jewels* (1992), declares, “The merits of her prose are the merits of poetry,” describing the dialogue as “exquisitely timed,” the paragraphs as “seamless,” and the sentences as “weightlessly balanced” (*London Literary Review*). The *Chicago Tribune* says that Gilchrist has “a poet’s talent for the astonishing sentence.”⁹ In discussing her fiction, Gilchrist suggests that it begins, in its early drafts, very much like poetry: “I give my editors something that would satisfy any poet’s imagination, and they want me to flesh out parts of it” (“Splendid Irreverence”). And, as Gilchrist

frequently points out, she is quite conscious of how poetic conventions inform and shape fiction, and *vice versa*.

Just as Gilchrist's fiction is strongly poetic, so is her poetry often solidly narrative. This phenomenon is also present in the works of Anne Sexton, who, though primarily a poet, also wrote several prose pieces, a play, and an unfinished novel.¹⁰ In fact, the initial response of Robert Lowell, one of Sexton's earliest mentors, suggests both the prose-like nature of her poems as well as their lyrical nature: "They move with ease and are filled with experience, like good prose" (qtd in Middlebrook 91). And in Sexton's own description of her writing process, she refers to her poems as "stories":

I do have a feeling for stories, for plot and maybe the dramatic situation. I really prefer dramatic situations to anything else. Most poets have a thought that they dress in imagery [. . .]. But I prefer people in a situation, in a doing, a scene, a losing or a gain, and then, in the end, find the thought (the thought I didn't know I had until I wrote the story) . . . This is, in fact, a major criticism of my poetry.

(*Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* 61)

In a review of Sexton's first published collection of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, James Dickey suggests that Sexton's poetry is so narrative that her creative energy might be better expressed in fiction. Although he asserts that Sexton is indeed a writer of "seriousness," who does indeed have a "terrible story to tell," he also remarks, "In the end, one comes to the conclusion that if there were some way to relieve some of these poems of the obvious effort of trying to be poems, something very good would emerge. I think they would make far better short stories, and probably in Mrs. Sexton's hands, too, than they do poems" (qtd. in *No Evil Star* 64).

In many cases, Sexton's "terrible story" closely resembles those told by Gilchrist in both her fiction and her poetry. Both writers' work employs an odd mixture of humor and horror to explore a variety of recurring themes, including the volatile relationships between fathers and daughters, as well as the longing for lost children. Both authors also write extensively about madness, psychotherapy, and suicide. Further, a preoccupation with the female body and the development of the female artist resonates throughout both Gilchrist's and Sexton's works.

In addition to these thematic and formal connections, Gilchrist and Sexton also share key demographic and personal histories that inform their work. Although Gilchrist began to publish just as Sexton's career came to an abrupt end, both emerged from largely the same social, economic and sexual milieu. Born only seven years apart (Sexton was born in 1928, Gilchrist in 1935), both into economically privileged families, Sexton and Gilchrist came of age in households and social groups that had much in common, and their similar experiences are reflected in their writing. As Sexton's biographer Dianne Wood Middlebrook states, "Sexton wrote about the social confusions of growing up in a female body and of living as a woman in postwar American society" (*Anne Sexton: A Biography* xx). The same can be, and has been, said of Gilchrist.

Both women married quite young, before completing their higher educations. Although Gilchrist eventually earned a college degree at the age of thirty-two, Sexton never resumed her pursuit of one after eloping during her first year of "finishing school" (*Anne Sexton: A Biography* 21). Gilchrist did have her bachelor's degree at the time she began her professional writing career; however, it had been a long time in coming, and certainly, she had not been a traditional student. While Sexton eventually collected at least four honorary PhDs, she never earned a bachelor's degree. As a result, neither poet was considered (or considered herself to be) an

“academic poet” in the sense of Adrienne Rich’s discussion of (white, male) “Academic poetry” in her essay “Blood, Bread and Poetry” (1984). In fact, Gilchrist is quite contemptuous of such poetry, claiming that “no one wants to read it but the same bunch of teacher-poets who write it and they are too cornered to allow anything wonderful to happen in poetry” (*Falling Through Space* 72).

Both Gilchrist and Sexton bore children early, and neither began writing until after the birth of their children, long after both women had developed problems with alcoholism. Sexton began writing at the age of 28, when her youngest daughter, Joy, was an infant. Gilchrist’s own start came even later; she was 40 years old and had raised her children almost to adulthood when she began to write professionally.

Interestingly, both women identify the beginning of their writing careers with the almost miraculous creation of a sonnet. Sexton described her experience in an interview with Patricia Marx:

It’s too strange. It’s just a matter of coincidence. I think probably I’m an artist at heart, and I’ve found my own form, which I think is poetry. I was looking at educational television in Boston, and I. A. Richards was explaining the form of a sonnet, and I thought, “well, so that’s a sonnet.” Although I had learned about it in high school, I hadn’t ever done anything about it. And so I thought, “I’ll try that, too. I think maybe I could.” So I sat down and wrote in the form of the sonnet. (*No Evil Star* 70)

Gilchrist’s description of her first writing experience, included in the “Author’s Note” in *Riding Out the Tropical Depression*, is strikingly similar:

In 1975 [the year after Sexton's suicide], I was walking out the door to go to the Caicos Islands on a vacation and I turned around on the steps and went back inside and pulled an old Royal portable typewriter out of a closet and took it with me. The first poem in this book is the first thing I wrote on that vacation. It was the first piece of writing I had done in more than seven years. Whatever my unconscious mind was trying so desperately to tell me, it delivered the first shot in the form of a sonnet. Ten years later, without realizing I had done it, I named my last book of short stories the last three words in that poem. Of such coincidences are the real pleasures of the writer's life concocted [. . .]. (*Riding Out the Tropical Depression*)

Because both writers claim to imagine, at least, that their sonnets emerged quite naturally, perhaps even effortlessly, it seems reasonable to examine their writing as a process at least partly controlled by the unconscious. The language both writers use to describe the process emphasizes the role of the unconscious. Sexton's comment that the writing was "just a matter of coincidence" is echoed by Gilchrist's claim that "of such coincidences are the real pleasures of the writer's life concocted." Gilchrist also comments that "It [writing] feels like memory, which means you thought it up very fast and you are just remembering the parts" ("Do You Think of Yourself as a Woman Writer?" 3). This process seems very similar to Sexton's composition process, which she describes again and again as "milking the unconscious" (Interview with Barbara Kevles 83). For both, writing functioned as a kind of psychotherapy, a refuge from their identities as affluent American daughters, wives and mothers before and during the earliest years of the second wave of the American Women's Movement. Although Sexton did not survive to see the crest of that movement and the freedoms that it brought, Gilchrist did—a crucial detail that shapes her work,

specifically her treatment of Sexton. In Sexton's case, writing was actually prescribed as therapy for post-partum depression by her psychotherapist, Dr. Martin Orne. In commenting on her own work, Gilchrist straightforwardly acknowledges the therapeutic value of writing for her. For example, she mentions the dark and disturbing short story "Rich" (written in Bill Harrison's workshop at the University of Arkansas and the first short story Gilchrist ever published) in which a father murders his daughter and then commits suicide. Gilchrist explains how the writing of the story helped her to process and exorcize the effects of living in the decadent uptown New Orleans society of the 1970s. Specifically, Gilchrist wrote "Rich," a story she describes as "the darkest thing I've ever written," in response to a rash of suicides in that segment of New Orleans society in the mid 1970s. She describes the process: "All of the darkness of those suicides rose up out of my unconscious mind and became one terrible suicide" (Interview with Kay Bonetti). Gilchrist states that the story was "about the disease of that city" and that "[w]riting the story cured me of that" (Interview with Melissa Biggs 87).

As I have noted, Gilchrist considers Sexton's work to be seriously undervalued.¹¹ This perception is perhaps a result of Gilchrist's projection of her frustration with her own critical reception and classification as a writer. Gilchrist claims to be, first and foremost, a poet. Very few of her readers, however, have read—or are even aware of—her poetry. She is known, almost exclusively, as a writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. She also expresses her frustration at this critical perception by arguing that Americans no longer have the capacity to appreciate poetic language. Nevertheless, Gilchrist seems to have taken up where Sexton left off, asserting a powerfully lyrical poetic voice in both poetry and prose. In a journal entry from 1985 that she read as a commentary for National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, Gilchrist expresses her concerns about preserving the tradition of lyrical, poetic language in our culture. She describes

the audiences's utter lack of emotional response to her reading of a long poem by Alvaro Cordona-Hine at a "Book and Author" dinner: "So no one loves poetry anymore and no one wants to publish it and no one wants to buy it and all of that has taken the heart out of young poets. If a young poet showed up today with a poem that began, 'It was my thirtieth year to heaven', he would be laughed off the block" (*Falling Through Space* 73). Later, in this same journal entry, Gilchrist goes on to quote extensively from Anne Sexton's poem "To My Lover, Returning to His Wife" (*Love Poems*, 1969), a poem whose imagery and themes mirror many of those throughout Gilchrist's own poetry and fiction. Gilchrist's affinity for the poetic form—as well as her direct claiming of Sexton as a literary foremother—suggests that Gilchrist's thematic, formal and historical connections with Sexton might provide a valuable framework for reading Gilchrist's works.

Anne Sexton's Continuing Presence in the Novels of Ellen Gilchrist

To establish this framework, I look first to Gilchrist's early novels, which suggest the nature of her relationship to Sexton. In *The Annunciation* (1983), *The Anna Papers* (1988) and (the novella) *A Summer in Maine (I Cannot Get You Close Enough)*, 1990), Gilchrist includes characters whose experiences seem to be modeled on Sexton's life and work. Direct allusions to Sexton in these novels also suggest her presence in Gilchrist's literary vision. Through her early novels, Gilchrist brings visibility and thus a degree of redemption to Sexton's often critically-overlooked or underappreciated works by calling attention to their creator as well as to the historical milieu in which they were created. As they invoke Sexton, Gilchrist's works of homage extend and provide much-needed contexts for what many critics have perceived as the powerful but flawed works of Sexton. For readers of both Sexton and Gilchrist, the textual, writerly

relationship that Gilchrist establishes between Sexton and herself adds a layer of interest that can expand those readers' appreciation of the larger literary tradition that continually evolves with the contributions of each individual talent. As Gilchrist notes about her reading of Edna St. Vincent Millay (a literary mother to both Sexton and Gilchrist), and then of Shakespeare, any given reader's understanding and appreciation of that tradition is continually in flux:

Since I was 13 years old and was taught a poem called "God's World," I have read and loved Millay's poetry. She was a devotee of Shakespeare, and his influence is everywhere in her work. I know all of her sonnets by heart, since I have read them so assiduously when I was young and always in love with whoever wouldn't love me back. Now that I am older and have read Shakespeare, I hear the echoes between his poetry and lines I loved in Millay. She didn't copy him. She was deeply influenced by him, which is a glorious thing for readers to discover, like knowing that two friends knew each other in another world. (*Nora Jane: A Life in Stories* 12)

I argue that Gilchrist and Sexton are also two such "friends" whose relationship, although it occurs entirely inside of Gilchrist own literary works, can be equally enlightening to readers of both Sexton and Gilchrist.

As Margaret Donovan Bauer has pointed out, the collection of Gilchrist's texts is an "organic whole," a cycle of short stories and novels that overlap and frequently refer to each other. Like those of William Faulkner, many of Gilchrist's characters are developed intermittently over the course of several literary works. This development is often recursive and contradictory, but, for the most part, the thematic trajectory is consistent: Gilchrist's works present strong female characters who gain power through achieving self-knowledge. Although Gilchrist's

themes and recurring characters develop gradually throughout all of the works in which they appear, the most sustained and meaningful development occurs in the novels and novellas. While Gilchrist's poetry and short stories offer substantial insight into the literary relationship between Gilchrist and Sexton, the investigation of this relationship is best begun by examining the overarching themes in Gilchrist's longer works (the novels and the novellas), which had their fragmentary beginnings in Gilchrist's poetry. Jeanie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner point out in one of the first published critical discussions of Gilchrist's work that for Gilchrist's characters, "the courage to face the truth about themselves" can lead to a great "wealth" of self-possession and personal power and can even "ennoble" both the writer and her characters, as well as the reader (114). This assessment clearly links Gilchrist's works with those of her closest poetic foremother, Anne Sexton, another writer whose works hail self-knowledge as the primary means of sustaining the self. Further, when read together, the works of Gilchrist and Sexton offer the reader an experience that is greater than the sum of its parts; that is, reading these women's works, and recognizing their connections to each other, illustrates the continuity between women's experience across decades and underscores the great strides that were made during the second wave of the American Women's Movement. Just as Sexton's work points out the great necessity for the resurgence of the American Women's Movement in the 1970s, so does Gilchrist's work demonstrate the benefits it afforded to women writing in the years that followed.

In her early novels, Gilchrist foregrounds the issue of historical context and the varying degrees of freedom afforded to women across generations. In the novels, there are pairs of women, separated by at least one generation, whose experiences as women writing are shaped almost entirely by their cultural milieu. In each case, Gilchrist juxtaposes these women's experiences to point out the limitations the women of the earlier generations endured, suggesting

her own appreciation of Sexton's pioneering achievement as a woman who, for most of her career, was writing before the second wave of the American Women's Movement. In *The Annunciation*, for example, the main character Amanda McCamey accepts a project to translate the "Lost Wedding Songs" of an eighteenth-century French poet, Helene Renoir, whose life story shares key elements with Amanda's own; both women gave birth to children while unmarried, and both had their children taken from them by the Catholic Church. Amanda, who begins translating in 1981, is at first horrified by Helene's suicide shortly after the loss of her [Helene's] child. However, over the course of the novel, Amanda slowly begins to appreciate the cultural and historical limitations Helene suffered and eventually develops an imaginative sympathy with her. Amanda's connection to Helene becomes so powerful that Amanda eventually writes an historical novel in which she revises Helene's experience, allowing Helene to reclaim her child and her life. In this project, of course, Amanda is also able to imaginatively recreate her own life as well. Throughout the novel, Gilchrist includes key details to emphasize Amanda's resemblance to Gilchrist herself and to emphasize Helene's resemblance of Sexton. In doing so, Gilchrist underscores her relative freedom as a writer when compared to Sexton, and she emphasizes the debt that she owes Sexton for her ground-breaking work.

In *The Anna Papers* and its companion novella *A Summer in Maine*, Gilchrist crafts Anna Hand, a professional writer who commits suicide, as a Sexton-like figure. In the novel, Anna has at least two women who look to her to make meaning out of their own lives. Helen, Anna's sister, has played the role of martyr to her husband and five children for most of her life. Anna's niece Olivia has lived in near-poverty for the first fifteen years of her life, cut off from her father and his wealthy family who were not aware of her existence. For both Helen and Olivia, Anna acts as intercessor, leading them both out of despair and into personally fulfilling literary pursuits.

Before her suicide, Anna appoints Helen as her literary executor, in charge of publishing Anna's work to pay for the education of Anna's nieces and nephews. Anna also finds and brings Olivia into the Hand family. Anna, like Sexton, breaks new ground, providing opportunities for the women who come after her that would not be possible without Anna's own work. She provides Helen a life outside of her marriage and the opportunity for intellectually fulfilling work for the first time in her life. She provides Olivia with both a model for and a means to fulfil her own literary aspirations.

As Maxine Kumin, Sexton's closest personal friend, made clear when Sexton's *Complete Poems* was published 1981, Sexton's work paved the way for women who wrote after her. In the Introduction to the collection, Kumin asserts that "Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which twenty years later, seems far less daring" ("How It Was" xxxiv). In her novels, Gilchrist makes clear that she recognizes this debt and actively seeks to repay it in kind.

Poetry as "Life at the Level of Language"

As Gilchrist writes, "we live at the level of our language; whatever we can articulate we can imagine or understand or explore" (*Falling Through Space* 30). This point is central to the lives and work of Gilchrist and Sexton. For both women, writing became a means of self-knowledge and ultimately of self preservation.

Although Gilchrist had some writing experience as a young adult, she does not consider that period of her work to be part of her professional writing career. Instead, she asserts that her life as a writer began only well after she had met certain cultural expectations—specifically,

marriage and motherhood. Gilchrist describes this distinct split between her life as a writer and as a wife and mother:

I had a newspaper column—in a real newspaper—when I was a sophomore in high school. But after I started getting married and having babies, I stopped. I was raised in a world in which you didn't have ambitions after you had children; the moment you had a baby in your arms, the ambitions were transferred to your child. When the boys were young I studied with Miss Welty for a year [in the mid 1960s at Millsaps College], and I had written a lot of poetry and been reasonably successful in publishing it. But then I got married again and forgot all about it.
(qtd. in Smith 47)

When she was almost forty years old and living in New Orleans, Gilchrist resumed her interest in writing, particularly her interest in writing poems, shortly after she read Sexton's posthumously published collection *45 Mercy Street*. Within weeks of first reading *45 Mercy Street*, Gilchrist wrote the first poem of her career. That same year, Gilchrist began editing poetry for the *Vieux Carre Courier*, a weekly newspaper in New Orleans. She also began contributing her own poems and feature articles to this publication as well as to various regional literary magazines. After an entire summer of writing poetry, she entered the Creative Writing program at the University of Arkansas and eventually published two volumes of poetry.¹²

One critical link between Sexton's and Gilchrist's poetry is their shockingly direct treatment of madness and suicide. For example, Ellen Gilchrist published one of the first poems of her career, "Holiday," in an issue of *The Vieux Carre Courier* in December of 1975, just one year after Sexton's suicide:

The Adjunct Assistant Administrator

Of the joint university library
Surprised his colleagues
By opening his veins
In a warm tub right in the
Middle of Christmas Vacation.

It was a gift
From D. Morgan Smith
To D. Morgan Smith,
Something you have always wanted.

The oblong white bowl
Shattered the flash bulbs
With a premature valentine.
The indefinite greeting
Floated its chin upon its knees
With best wishes for the new year.

This poem, written when Gilchrist was living in New Orleans, seems to have been created out of the same impulse that Gilchrist describes as the impetus for her short-story “Rich.” Gilchrist points out that writing such dark pieces was a means for her to internalize, process, and then externalize the horror that surrounded her—a way to “cure” the self from the need to destroy itself. Sexton’s poems that deal with suicide are similarly shocking, and, according to many who knew her, her writing of them was her means of keeping her suicidal impulses at bay for the final

18 years of her life. In a panel discussion at Furman University in 1988, Gilchrist clearly acknowledged her familiarity with this connection between survival and poetry for Sexton. In addressing a question about Sexton's suicide, Gilchrist replied, "Well Maxine Kumin who was Anne Sexton's closest friend and fellow poet for many years, told me once that—I hate to quote her conversation, but she told me that poetry kept Anne alive. Whatever was wrong with Anne was there before the poetry. Poetry didn't kill her" ("The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition" 17). For both women, sublimation through writing provided a defense against the death drive.

Both women also grapple with other issues and themes in similar manners in their poems. Specifically, they explore their identities as women living in a patriarchal culture that necessarily brings into question the essential humanity of women. In their poems, they provide unflinching, yet humorous, views of women's experiences throughout their life-cycles in such a culture, including their often overlapping and conflicting roles as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers.

Psychotherapy

In writing about suicide, both Sexton and Gilchrist naturally write about their experiences with mental health care, specifically with Freudian psychoanalysis and other methods of psychotherapy.¹³ Both women, often unable to respond effectively to treatment, struggled with the patriarchal underpinnings of such treatments, often expressing their frustrations with it in their writing. In Sexton's case, therapy was ultimately ineffective; in fact, much of her interaction with her therapists was actually harmful to her. Beginning with such early poems as "You, Dr. Martin" and "Said the Poet to the Analyst"—both published in Sexton's first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960)—and continuing through her posthumously published collection *Words for*

Dr. Y. (1978), many of Sexton's poems focus on her anger and feelings of helplessness as a female patient in the male-dominated establishments of psychiatry and psychotherapy. In many of her own pieces, Gilchrist expresses a similar frustration with these patriarchal institutions. The most sustained and developed of these is a darkly comic novella entitled *The Cabal (The Cabal and Other Stories 2000)*, which provides a satirical look at psychiatric medicine and focuses on the potential for abuse within the system's inherently hierarchical model for doctor-patient relationships. Although Gilchrist admits that her own experience with psychiatry and psychotherapy helped to provide her with some of the insights necessary to her success as a writer, her creative work makes it clear that she remains deeply skeptical of the patriarchal premises upon which these establishments rest. Unlike Sexton, whose suicide in 1974 prevented her from experiencing most, if not all, of the feminist insight into psychotherapy that emerged in the mid-1970s, Gilchrist was just beginning her writing career during this period. Gilchrist's own healthy skepticism was thus validated by a large-scale shift in public consciousness about women and psychotherapy brought about by such writers as Germaine Greer, Phyllis Chessler and Erica Jong. By the time Gilchrist began publishing, the feminist critique of patriarchal models of doctor-patient relationships had become widespread, allowing Gilchrist the freedom to express her own critiques with impunity and providing her the language and cultural space to articulate her appreciation for Sexton's own pioneering works related to this issue.

Religion

Sexton and Gilchrist's respective cultural contexts for their writing about religious issues are similarly divided by the crest of the second wave of the American Women's Movement in the mid-1970s. Specifically, Mary Daly's publication of *Beyond God the Father* in 1973 marks a

shift in the American intellectual understanding of Christianity. Until her death, Sexton desperately longed for sincere belief in a Christian God; her innate feminist sensibilities, however, complicated her struggle for such faith. For Sexton, the only Christian God she could accept was the patriarchal Christian God, God the Father. Thus, as she forced herself to recognize this God the Father, she inevitably felt betrayed by him—a paradox that she makes clear throughout the final collection she prepared for publication before her death, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975). As Daly's book makes clear—and as do many others that followed it—the Christian God is not necessarily masculine, is not necessarily the Father. Such revolutionary theology, unfortunately, entered our collective cultural understanding of Christianity only after Sexton's suicide. Gilchrist, however, is certainly able to build upon this feminist theology as she creates her own works about religion, many of which seem to celebrate the feminism and humanism ushered into our culture by the American Women's Movement in the mid 1970s. Ironically, Gilchrist, who began writing just a year after Sexton's suicide, lived in a culture that was more receptive to such attitudes than that in which Sexton had lived. Nevertheless, the two writers' attitudes towards Christianity seem similar in some respects: neither woman could trust or accept a patriarchal Christian God. Indeed, after much exploration and genuine hope for Christian salvation, Sexton's final cynicism rivals that of Gilchrist. However, because Gilchrist lives to experience a culture in which she feels empowered enough to rewrite the patriarchal Christian God, she can eliminate him altogether, and replace him with a motherly, feminine god.

Through their writing, both women were able to transform themselves as well as transform the world around them. Specifically, both writers devoted at least part of their careers to rewriting existing (male) texts. Both Gilchrist and Sexton had a significant interest in revising such texts, in order to sublimate, to culturally convert, to give artistic form to their frustration

with their male-centered literary inheritance. For both Sexton and Gilchrist, these revision projects involved collaborations with close female family members. In writing *Transformations* (1971), which contains seventeen poems based on various tales of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Sexton relied heavily on the editorial advice of her oldest daughter Linda. In the historical novel *Anabasis: A Journey to the Interior*, Gilchrist weaves stories that her mother, who had been a Classics major, had told her as a child into her own vast historical research for the novel. The result is a type of “fairy tale” of Gilchrist’s own, set in ancient Greece during the final years of the Peloponnesian Wars. As both of these works demonstrate, for Sexton and Gilchrist, literary creation is a communal undertaking that integrates voices of women across generations—a point that Sexton articulated quite succinctly in a letter to Erica Jong, shortly before Sexton’s death:

. . . I keep feeling that there isn’t one poem being written by any one of us—or a book or anything like that. The whole life of us writers, the whole product I guess I mean, is the one long poem—a community effort if you will. It’s all the same poem. It doesn’t belong to any one writer—it’s [sic.] God’s poem perhaps. Or God’s people’s poem. (414 *Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters*)

It is with this broad assumption that I undertake my discussion of Gilchrist’s connection to Sexton. More specifically, however, I am interested in exploring how and why Gilchrist so persistently reminds her readers of her literary lineage. Her obvious need to emphasize her connection to Sexton as a literary daughter seems both an expression of mourning and an act of celebration and remembering.

NOTES

1. It is also worth noting that Gilchrist's novels grow out of (and back into) her short stories. *The Anna Papers*, (1988) for example, is an extended treatment of Anna Hand, who first appeared in a short story ("Anna, Part I," *Drunk With Love* [1986]). After its publication, the characters introduced in *The Anna Papers* continue to be developed in short-story form. Amanda McCamey, the protagonist in *The Annunciation* (1983), also appears several other short-story collections, including her most recently-published collection, *I, Rhoda Manning, Go Hunting With My Daddy* (2002). For an extended discussion of this phenomenon, see Chapter Six: "No Conclusion Possible: An Organic Story Cycle" in Margaret Bauer's *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist*.
2. Examples include, among many others, "Generous Pieces" and "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society" (both stories published in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* [1981]). Other poems also generated stories, treating the same material, but with slightly different titles—for example "The Carnival of the Stone Children," published in *Land Surveyor's Daughter* (1979), became, nineteen years later, the short story "Carnival of the Stoned Children," published in *Flights of Angels* (1998).
3. In a discussion of William Faulkner, for example, Gilchrist points out the importance of a reader's knowing the literary predecessors that came to bear on Faulkner's own work: "Have you ever seen that little bookshelf that's in the room where he wrote at Rowan Oak? I can barely remember it, but it seemed to have about 10 books. Shakespeare's in there. I think John Crowe Ransom's one of them. And the Bible. Everything you want to know about Faulkner is on that bookshelf" (*Splendid Irreverence*).

4. Although she was born in the Mississippi Delta and spent much of her childhood growing up there, Gilchrist also spent a substantial amount of her young life in the north because her father's work as a civil engineer during World War II took him and his family to Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri for several years. As Mary McCay points out, ". . . given her [Gilchrist's] childhood outside the South, her writing looks beyond regional borders and asks questions that link her with women writers all over America" (1). And, I would add, this connection extends to women writers of all genres, including poetry.

5. In a discussion of herself as a child in the emerging civilization of the early twentieth-century Mississippi Delta, Gilchrist both identifies with and consciously sets herself apart from Welty:

[. . .] there were screened-in porches to keep out the mosquitoes and time in the late afternoon to drink whiskey and tell the stories. I was lucky to live when that was going on and curious enough to listen. My mother was telling a story the other day about a friend of hers who married beneath herself and had "rough children." Maybe that's why we are writers. Maybe we are a lot of rough children. Most of the southern writers I know would fit into that category, except, of course, Eudora, who is the exception that disproves everything I say. (*Falling Through Space* 220)

6. For example the Library of America volume *Twentieth Century American Poetry* does not include any of Sexton's work.

7. These two review excerpts appear on the back flap of the dust jacket of the Faber and Faber edition of *The Anna Papers*.

8. This excerpt is printed on the back flap of the dust jacket of the Faber and Faber edition of *Starcarbon*.

9. These two excerpts are printed on the black flap of the dust jacket of the Little, Brown edition of *Net of Jewels*.

10. Gilchrist has also written a play, *Invasions, Incursions, Instructions, Acts of Love*, which was staged twice in New York in 1985. However, there are no extant copies known (McCay xvi).

11. Sexton's critical reception during her lifetime was uneven. Clearly labeled as a "confessional" poet, Sexton openly expressed her ambivalence about this labeling and struggled to move beyond it. Perhaps as a result, she has, at times, been dismissed as a prospect for serious academic inquiry. With Sexton's death, this critical attitude seemed to solidify. According to many critics, Sexton's suicide was the most morbid of self indulgences, the ultimate manifestation of her weakness. Although there was a relatively brief spate of critical attention paid to Sexton in the late 1980s and early 1990s (fueled, in part, by the 1991 publication of Diane Wood Middlebrook's highly controversial biography), there has been relatively little scholarly study of Sexton's work in the last decade. This waning of critical attention is perhaps, in part, due to the unfortunate timing of the posthumous publication of Sexton's *Complete Poems*, which came out in 1981, the same year that Sylvia Plath's posthumous *Collected Poems* was published. The following year, Plath's work clearly overshadowed that of Sexton; Plath was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize for her *Collected Poems*. For a thorough overview of the critical treatment of Sexton's work up through 1989, see Linda Wagner Martin's Introduction to *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton* (1989) entitled "Anne Sexton, Poet."

12. In 1979, her first collection of poetry, *Land Surveyor's Daughter*, was published by Lost Roads Publishing Company, a small press in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Her second collection of poetry, *Riding Out the Tropical Depression*, was published by Faust Publishing in New Orleans in 1986.

13. Throughout their lives, both Sexton and Gilchrist underwent Freudian analysis as well as other forms of psychotherapy. Diane Wood Middlebrook points out in her biography of Anne Sexton that Sexton's psychiatrists, even those who were not strictly Freudian analysts, were "trained during an era in which all psychiatrists were introduced to analytic principles, and these showed up in the language of the insights they reached in the course of treatment" (44). In her fictional treatment of psychotherapy, Gilchrist uses the terms *psychiatry*, *psychoanalysis* and *psychotherapy* interchangeably. For this reason, I will simply use the terms *psychotherapy/psychotherapist* and *psychiatry/psychiatrist* in my discussions of these issues.

CHAPTER 2
RECONSTRUCTING THE LOST MOTHER:
ANNE SEXTON'S CONTINUING PRESENCE IN
THE EARLY NOVELS OF ELLEN GILCHRIST

Upon first reading the poetry of Ellen Gilchrist, I was immediately struck by the images and themes that her poems share with the those of Anne Sexton. Given Gilchrist's open enthusiasm for Sexton's work, the more I have read both women's poetry, the more convinced I have become of their connection. Gilchrist, who had written poetry as a teenager but given up writing after she married and had children, was first introduced to Sexton's work one afternoon when Gilchrist was in her late 30s, and she claims to have been deeply moved by the experience: "I will never forget the first time one of my cousins in Atlanta . . . handed me a copy of Anne Sexton. We drank and read all afternoon. Wow! Wow!" ("The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition" 15). Soon thereafter, Gilchrist began writing and publishing poems, and when her second collection, *Riding Out the Tropical Depression* (1986), was published, its epigraph was taken from Sexton's posthumously published poem "The Civil War" (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*, 1975):

I will take scissors
and cut out the beggar.

I will take a crowbar
and pry out the broken
pieces of God in me.

In a discussion of Gilchrist's early writing career, interviewer Wendy Smith points out the impact that *45 Mercy Street*, another of Sexton's posthumously published collections, had on Gilchrist's impetus to begin her adult writing career:

Just how remote writing had become from [Gilchrist's] life became apparent . . . when . . . a friend casually referred to the excitement of meeting a poet, and Gilchrist realized that "my best friend in New Orleans didn't even know I had ever been a poet." Long-suppressed feelings were stirred up: shortly thereafter, reading Anne Sexton's *45 Mercy Street* in a public place, she found herself weeping uncontrollably. (47)

Years later, Gilchrist began to describe this experience in her highly autobiographical fiction. In the short story "Going to Join the Poets" (*The Age of Miracles*, 1995), for example, Rhoda Manning, clearly Gilchrist's most autobiographical character,¹ leaves her husband and young-adult sons in New Orleans to move to Fayetteville to study creative writing. The narrator describes Rhoda's decision:

She would do it herself, would be a poet, would have her name everywhere. Fools names and fools' faces, always seen in public places. But it wouldn't be like that. It would be like Anne Sexton. Women would weep when they read her poems, would be fused together and save themselves because of it. Tears were welling up in her eyes, the tears she shed every time she thought about the day she started writing. It had happened because of a poem she read. She had gone on her bike to the Tulane track to run. Then she had changed her mind and gone to the Maple Street Bookstore instead and bought a book of Anne Sexton's poems. A posthumous book. *45 Mercy Street*. She had ridden over to the track and sat down

upon a bench and started reading. "I am torn in two, but I will conquer myself. . . .
Then she started crying. (*Age of Miracles* 242)

The impact of Sexton's work on Gilchrist's active pursuit of her own career as a poet seems obvious. However, the significance, or larger meaning, of their common formal and thematic elements did not begin to become clear to me until I considered the poetry of both women in the light provided by Gilchrist's fiction. Although Gilchrist's most significant engagement with Sexton's poetry comes in Gilchrist's own poetry, she lays much of the groundwork for her literary kinship with Sexton in her early novels, which are the topic of this chapter. Her connection to Sexton as a woman and as an artist, as it is established in Gilchrist's novels, provides her readers a guide to understanding the relationship between her own poetry and that of Anne Sexton, which I will discuss in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Beginning with *The Annunciation* (1983), and continuing through *The Anna Papers* (1983) and its companion novella *A Summer in Maine* (1990), Gilchrist's early works focus on the female artist struggling for self-knowledge and subsequent redemption. Such struggles, along with many other key textual elements, suggest strong parallels between Gilchrist's female protagonists and the poet Anne Sexton. Taken together, I believe that these three works create a pattern that makes a strong case for reading them as expressions of Gilchrist's wish to keep Sexton's work alive (or at least visible), if only in Gilchrist's own fiction. Although Gilchrist creates several other characters who seem to be modeled on Sexton in her later works, these early works provide the most compelling evidence of Gilchrist's connection to Sexton.² Therefore, I will limit my discussion here to *The Annunciation*, *The Anna Papers*, and *A Summer In Maine*.

Gilchrist's first two novels include crucial subtexts that address the question of literary heritage and posit Anne Sexton as an adoptive literary parent for Gilchrist. Specifically, *The*

Annunciation marks Gilchrist's finding and claiming of Sexton as a literary mother. In *The Anna Papers*, Gilchrist poses herself as Sexton's literary daughter, someone who preserves the legacy of the literary mother. The experience of claiming, preserving and promoting, empowers the daughter—represented by various characters in the two novels—to overcome the obstacles that have ultimately destroyed the mother. As these daughter-figures emerge as writers, they consciously pay homage to their dead mothers. In her first two novels, using the tropes of translation and literary executorship, Gilchrist fashions pairs of characters, based on mother-daughter models, whose experiences mirror the dynamics between Gilchrist and Sexton.

Invoking the Literary Mother: *The Annunciation*

In *The Annunciation*,³ Gilchrist's quasi-autobiographical first novel, Gilchrist foregrounds her characters' search for literary and biological mothers and offers several "clues" throughout the text that suggest Gilchrist's interest in claiming Sexton as her own literary mother, Anne Sexton. In the novel, the main character, Amanda McCamey, grows from a lost young girl—who at the age of fourteen had a child she gave up for adoption—into a mature artist. Interestingly, the child that Amanda gave up, Barrett Clare, is an aspiring poet whose life and poetry closely resemble the life and work of Sexton. Barrett Clare, therefore, embodies the link between the two poets; she is literally a part of Amanda (a thinly-veiled Gilchrist) and a clear reference to Sexton.

One of the most interesting formal elements of *The Annunciation* is its opening. Oddly, although the entire novel, with the exception of the first paragraph, is narrated in third person, it opens in the first person. The speaker, whose words appear in italics, is apparently responding to a question about his memories of Amanda:

Amanda McCamey, sure I remember her. Lived up on Esperanza when she was a girl. Got famous writing a dirty book about the Church. Fell in with the freethinkers. Too bad. She was a pretty girl. Prettiest girl in Issaquena County. And from good stock. Her cousin was Guy McCamey, the All-American. You remember him, don't you? Well, you would have if you'd ever seen him play. (3)

Amanda's conspicuous absence in the novel's opening, and her subsequent inability to defend herself and her work from the speaker and his audience, set up a novel in which an absent female writer must have another writer advocate for her. The implied question-and-answer situation also suggests the form of a lyric poem, in which the speaker addresses the reader directly—just as the voice speaking about Amanda addresses the questioner who exists only outside of the novel. Like one of Sexton's most famous lyric poems, "Wanting to Die," Gilchrist's novel opens with what seems to be an overheard response to a question asked outside of the text. Sexton's poem begins: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember" (CP 142). The speaker goes on to describe "the almost unnameable lust" for death of the suicidal speaker. Presumably, then, the poem's question is about the nature of suicidal impulses. The poem that emerges to answer the question is among Sexton's most powerful.

Gilchrist's use of this technique that worked so well for Sexton suggests a blurring of genre between lyric poetry and the novel. In fact, because the voice of the third-person narrator seems so closely aligned with Amanda's own voice and imagination as it chronicles her intellectual and emotional growth throughout the novel, *The Annunciation* can be read as a lyrical novel, a "species of novel in which conventional narration is subordinated to the presentation of inner thoughts, feelings, and moods" (Holman and Harmon). In the first published critical analysis of the novel, Jeannie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner point out that "Amanda is the

central focus of the novel, most of which is narrated in a close third person through her perceptions” (105). The scene in which Amanda’s first child is born, for example, illustrates the intimate connection between Amanda and the narrator. As Amanda’s child is delivered via caesarean section, the vividness of the narrator’s description of this bodily experience effaces the division between narrator and character almost entirely. The reader is privy to Amanda’s internal monologue.

Then the sensation of a cow pulling its foot out of the mud. The mysterious feeling of the child leaving the body, like music, like part of herself floating free and away into space, the pull on the spinal column, as though part of her spine were leaving her. It seemed to take a long time for the baby to leave, to rise above her. As if part of her body had moved away, leaving her lighter and at peace. (19)

Although *The Annunciation* is a novel, many passages read more like poetry.

The fragmented, fragmentary, and ungrammatical descriptions that immediately follow the birth, for example, suggest a blending of genre, while also underscoring the close alliance between Amanda and the narrator; the reader is offered a view of the baby through Amanda’s own eyes: “Then the sight of the baby, covered with blood, still attached to the long sinewy cord. A small bloody thing wriggling in the doctor’s hands, struggling for breath beneath the huge circular light. She was afraid the doctor would drop it. It looked so slick and slippery” (19). This immediate maternal anxiety, however, is quickly alleviated—or at least suspended indefinitely—when the child is taken by the nuns and Amanda is sent to recover without ever touching the infant.

Following this scene, the rest of the novel focuses on Amanda’s protracted struggle to make her peace with the horror of that experience. After almost thirty confused and desperate years, Amanda actively sets out to address the rage and sorrow of having her daughter taken from

her. Amanda's journey, her throwing off of her life as a middle-aged, uptown New Orleans wife and moving to Arkansas to work as a translator of poetry, is quite similar to Sexton's own transition from an affluent, 28-year-old housewife in suburban Massachusetts into a poet. The fictional Amanda McCamey and the real-life Anne Sexton describe their transitional experiences in almost the same terms. In discussing her development as a poet, Sexton says, "The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself [. . .] It was a kind of rebirth at twenty-nine." After beginning to write poetry, on the advice of her psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne, Sexton joined John Holmes' adult poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education. Sexton describes the significance of this experience in her development of self-identity: "I found I belonged to the poets, that I was real there, and I had another 'These are my people'" insight (qtd. in Middlebrook *AS* 65).

In Gilchrist's novel, Amanda's description of her own transformation is quite similar. As she is both literally and metaphorically casting off her old life (throwing away curtain rods, hair curlers, cocktail shoes and the like) in preparation for the move to Fayetteville, where she will begin her life as a scholar and poet, Amanda happily hums to herself, "I'm going to join the poets"⁴ (133). Later, after she arrives, she realizes that Fayetteville is where she belongs; she says to Marshall, her mentor for the translation project she is undertaking, "I adore it here It's what I dreamed of. While I was waiting to come up here to live, running around New Orleans selling everything, I used to dream of being here, of walking around the buildings with many books in my arms" (149).

Although Amanda and Sexton have these experiences in common, it is Barrett Clare, Amanda's abandoned daughter (raised by adoptive parents in New Orleans), who is the most Sexton-like character in the novel. Both Sexton and Barrett begin their writing careers as a means

of psychotherapy. In describing her own early experiences, Sexton claims she began writing poems after being advised to do so by her Freudian psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne: “I wrote one the other day, and I took them to my doctor. [. . .] He said they were wonderful. [. . .] I kept writing and writing and giving them all to him—just from transference; I kept writing because he was approving” (qtd. in Middlebrook *AS* 42). In *The Annunciation*, Barrett also writes for her Freudian psychiatrist, Gustave. However, before submitting her poems to Gustave, she first has an established New Orleans poet at Loyola University, Don Brummette (frequently referred to in the novel as simply *Brummette*), review them—just as Sexton frequently had her close friend, the well-established New England poet Maxine Kumin, review her work before submitting or publishing it. For both poets, the fictional Barrett Clare and the real Anne Sexton, this tentativeness about their work reflects their insecurity as women writers. In *The Annunciation*, Barrett has a conversation about her poetry with Brummette that echoes the uncertainty that Sexton often expressed throughout her career. “Its just a rough draft,” Barrett says. “It needs working on. You think it’s a poem? You’re sure it’s a poem? . . . There’re a lot more of them. They’re for him, for Gustave. He’s my doctor. I want to surprise him with them. Get them published. Then surprise him” (123). Barrett’s direct question, “You think it’s a poem then? You’re sure it’s a poem?” resonates with Sexton’s insecurity about her early work. In fact, when Sexton first wrote the now famous “Music Swims Back to Me” (later published in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), she telephoned Kumin, whom she’d met only a few days earlier in John Holmes’ poetry workshop at Boston University, and announced, “I’ve written something—I don’t know whether it’s a poem or not. Can I come over?” (qtd. in Middlebrook *AS* 69).⁵

Barrett’s connection with Anne Sexton, however, is most evident in Barrett’s pathological dependence on Gustave. The poem that Barrett discusses with Brummette, “Notes from the

Crying Lessons,” illustrates this phenomenon quite clearly. Although it seems plausible that the poem addresses Barrett’s absent parents, she has written it for, and I’m assuming *to*, Gustave:

First Lesson, Alphabet Blocks.

Answer me

Blame me

Curse me

Damn me

.....

Swear that you will come to my deathbed. Swear that you will
be there.

.....

Answer me Answer me

Answer me Answer me (122)

Like the poems in Sexton’s posthumously published collection *Words for Dr. Y* (1978), Barrett’s poem makes desperate demands of the doctor, demands that are obviously beyond his power to answer or fulfill. The speaker in Sexton’s first poem in this collection, “Letters to Dr. Y,” for example, begs the doctor to save her life: “Dr. Y. / I need a thin hot wire, / your Rescue Inc. voice / to stretch me out, / to keep me from going underfoot / and growing stiff as a yardstick” (CP). Neither Brummette nor Gustave can any more “answer” or validate Barrett than could Dr. Y save Sexton from death; however Brummette does at least recognize Barrett’s ability to save her own life through her poetry, no matter how horrific (both aesthetically and thematically) it might be. His unspoken, interior reaction to “Notes from the Crying Lessons” mirrors thoughts expressed by many who lived and worked closely with Sexton. Upon reading the poem, Brummette

comments, “This must have been hard to write,” and then thinks to himself, “I would not tell that girl to stop writing for anything in the world. For all I know this goddamn poetry is the only thing that’s keeping her alive” (123). On several occasions, Maxine Kumin, as well as other friends of Anne Sexton have attributed Sexton’s ability to resist suicide during the final eighteen years of her life to her prolific poetic output. In her essay “How It Was,” which served as the Introduction to Anne Sexton’s *Complete Poems*, published in 1981, seven years after her suicide, Kumin states directly, “I am convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative endeavor. . . . Without this rich, rescuing obsession I feel certain she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of the dozen impulses that beset her during the period between 1957 and 1974” (xxiii-xxiv). In a panel discussion at Furman University in 1988, Gilchrist clearly acknowledged her familiarity with this connection between survival and poetry for Sexton. In addressing a question about Sexton’s suicide, Gilchrist replied, “Well Maxine Kumin who was Anne Sexton’s closest friend and fellow poet for many years, told me once that—I hate to quote her conversation, but she told me that poetry kept Anne alive. Whatever was wrong with Anne was there before the poetry. Poetry didn’t kill her” (“The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition” 17).

Another of Barrett’s poems, entitled “Search,” resonates with one of Sexton’s earliest poems, “For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further.” Both poems (Sexton’s and Barrett’s) reference a letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe, dated November 1815, which Sexton includes as the epigraph for her first collection of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be Sophocles’s Oedipus, who seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even

when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further (qtd. in *CP*)

This quotation, obviously referring to the perils of Oedipus' search for self knowledge—which was later picked up by Freud and was instrumental in his foregrounding of the Oedipal quest in his theories of psychoanalysis⁶—is also instrumental in the development of both Gilchrist's and Sexton's approach to poetic exploration of the self. In an opening remark before a public reading of one of her strongest poems, "The Double Image," Sexton proclaimed, "The mother-daughter relationship is more poignant than Romeo and Juliet . . . Just as Oedipus is more interesting" (qtd. in Middlebrook *AS* 87)—clearly linking the mother-daughter relationship to the Oedipal theme.⁷ And, as any reader of Gilchrist knows quite well, she too, openly states her preoccupation with the Oedipal throughout her work.

Sexton uses the Schopenhauer quotation about Jocasta as a poetic reference to her own relationship with John Holmes, her earliest mentor and a man who adamantly attempted to dissuade Sexton from using the raw confessional material that marks her work. In Gilchrist's novel, Barrett's relationship to her Freudian psychiatrist Gustave, for whom she has written the poem "Search," closely resembles the real-life relationship between Sexton and Holmes. Barrett includes part of Schopenhauer's quotation as epigraph for her poem, which explores the lost child's longing for her birth mother: "For each of us carries in his heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further" (324). Both Sexton and her fictional counterpart, Barrett, delve into their subconscious selves through psychoanalysis and therefore necessarily speak of their experiences in terms of the (Freudian) Oedipal quest. Both women's search for the self involves finding and claiming their mothers, in whose ideal reflections they hope to see

themselves. For Sexton, it is the emotionally cool and distant Mary Gray Harvey, the mother figure who, both during her life and then after her death, haunts much of Sexton's poetry.⁸ For Barrett, the (literally) lost biological mother is a spectral figure who alternately embraces and denies her child in Barrett's subconscious life; that is, in her dreams and in her poetry. For Sexton, the quest for maternal connection, and subsequent confirmation of self, is never realized; in fact, after the death of her mother, Mary Gray, the distance between mother and daughter becomes understandably magnified in Sexton's poetry. Her poetry also focuses sharply on her own daughters' forced separation from her shortly after Sexton's self-described "psychotic break"; her poem "The Double Image," which addresses both her relationship with her mother and with her daughter Joy is, in fact, considered to be among the best she wrote.

Although Barrett and Amanda are not reunited in the novel, its conclusion suggests the inevitability of such a reunion. The novel ends on Christmas day when Amanda gives birth to a son, just a few hours after Amanda's lover, Will Lyons, visits Barrett and reveals to her that Amanda is her mother. Barrett, alone on Christmas Eve because her philandering husband Charlie is "snowed in" in Vail with his secretary, is profoundly disturbed by the news. When Will explains that she cannot come with him to Amanda that night, Barrett becomes wild with anger and grief, re-experiencing a lifetime's worth of anxiety and rejection. For Barrett, the situation created by this news constitutes what Julia Kristeva refers to as the *abject*, "a vortex of summons and repulsion [that places] the one haunted by it literally beside [her]self" (*Portable Kristeva* 230). Unable to process the information in a rational or meaningful way, Barrett experiences a complete disintegration of her sense of self. For Barrett, her identity—which is necessarily linked to that of her biological mother—has been long hidden from her. When she is finally confronted with it, she experiences the horror of her existence, feeling suddenly out of place in her own

home. As Kristeva puts it, “abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory”⁹ (qtd. in Oliver 233). Barrett’s thoughts clearly bear out this theory: “It has come, she thought. And it is as terrible as I knew it would be. It is as cold as marble. No it is colder than that. I am a cuckoo bird. I have no right to be in this house. I have no right to be anywhere” (322).¹⁰ When she is unable to reach Gustave on the telephone, these feelings intensify dramatically, and her only coherent thought is of a line from one of her own poems: “I guess I can wait. I am standing outside the door all the time. I am outside the door forever. It was a line from a poem she had written the year before when she was going through a spell of wanting to search for her parents. Later she abandoned the idea and the poem” (323). As Kristeva points out in *The Powers of Horror*, “all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.” Her argument that “abjection, and even more the abjection of self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature” can help to explain Barrett’s obsession with her own poetry, no matter how poorly written it may be (qtd. in Oliver 322-23). Barrett’s only means of addressing her own sense of abjection is her literary work. Although she has abandoned the poem with the line “I guess I can wait. I am standing outside the door all the time,” the image of the closed door remains central to several of her completed works. “Search,” for example, Barrett’s poem with the Schopenhauer epigraph about Jocasta, includes the following stanza:

I am the foundling
 waiting to knock at the door
 of my mother. Here in my arms
 are all of these kisses.
 Why is the door now heavy as doom?

I hear the heart rock in its old soft room. (324)¹¹

In *The Annunciation*, Barrett's story ends with the return of her husband who threatens to take their son if Barrett leaves. Amanda's story, however, ends with the death of her child's father and with her vow to herself that she will find her lost daughter to complete the family over which she will now preside as matriarch.

Six years after the publication of *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist published a follow-up story entitled "The Song of Songs" in *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* (1989). This story begins where *The Annunciation* ends; that is, just after Will Lyons' visit to Barrett Clare in New Orleans on Christmas Eve. After she learns her birth-mother's identity from Will, Barrett is unable to reach Gustave and so medicates herself with "two Valiums and a Seconal." Waking the next morning, Barrett feels groggy and thinks to herself, "the Seconal was too much. That was going too far. Still, it was better than not sleeping. It was better than dreams" ("Song of Songs" 101). Like Sexton, Barrett is dependent upon both her medication and her doctor's reassurance for day-to-day survival. For Sexton, this dependence, specifically her reliance on medication, eventually led to the end of her writing career and of her life. Gilchrist is able, however, to provide a *deus ex machina* to save Barrett from her indecision and possible suicide. Barrett becomes so desperate when she cannot reach Gustave on Christmas morning that she comes dangerously close to shooting herself in the head with a pistol. Gilchrist's graphic image of the possible suicide clearly evokes her earlier description of Tom Wilson's suicide in "Rich," which I discuss in the Introduction to this dissertation. After one last attempt to telephone Gustave, Barrett

walked into [her husband] Charlie's room and took a pistol with handmade wooden handles out of a gun case and walked over to the window looking out on the avenue. Now I will pull the trigger and blow my old blue and brown coiled-up

brains all over the Pande Cameroon and some will spill on the Andrew Wyeth and, why not, some of them can move out onto the balcony and festoon the iron railings. You know, they will say, those old railings New Orleans is so famous for? Yes, it will make a good story around town. It will make everybody's day. ("Song of Songs" 104-05)

Amanda's phone call to her daughter literally interrupts Barrett when she is poised to end her own life, the barrel of the pistol in her mouth. As her husband and son celebrate Christmas morning downstairs, Barrett "put the gun in her mouth and sucked the barrel. It was a game she liked to play. It was the only power she had. The phone was ringing, a lovely ring, soft, like bells. Barrett took it down from its hanger on the wall" (106). Shortly after this first conversation with her mother Amanda, Barrett is finally able to act. She carefully puts the gun back in its case, turns the lock and throws the key off the balcony and "into the branches of a Japanese magnolia tree" (106). Further, she informs her emotionally abusive husband Charlie that she will be taking their son Charles with her that day for her reunion with Amanda and orders him to charter her a plane to Fayetteville.

In addition to Amanda and Barrett, there is at least one other poet in the novel whose life experiences help to develop Gilchrist's exploration of the profound loss of self that accompanies the loss of a parent or a child, as well as the emotional and psychological costs of questing for a reunion. Helene Renoir, the fictional eighteenth-century French poet whose sonnets Amanda translates in the novel, had her child taken from her, just as Amanda and Sexton's "Unknown Girl" have their children taken from them. Renoir also, like Sexton, commits suicide. When Amanda proclaims, "I'm going to be her [Renoir's] nun . . . I'm going to devote myself to these poems," the narrator follows up by stating, "Amanda meant every word of it. She meant to devote

the rest of her life to a dead poet's imagination" (150). Given the various textual clues throughout the novel, one might conjecture that Gilchrist is, by extension, referring to her own relationship with the dead poet Anne Sexton—Gilchrist published *The Annunciation*, in 1983, just nine years after Sexton's suicide. Renoir's *Lost Wedding Songs*, which Amanda translates throughout the novel, tells the story of Renoir's illicit love affair, the child she bore, and her subsequent imprisonment and loss of that child. When Amanda's new mentor Marshall first gives Renoir's manuscript to Amanda, he briefly describes its origin in a letter to her:

Helen of Aurillac, called Helene Renoir. Locked away with the sisters of Lyons for an illicit love affair. After her suicide a maid took the poems to a priest for safekeeping. The poems disappeared. Forty years later the maid described them in her memoirs, which were published during the French Revolution. (148)

Amanda's work with Helene's manuscript, which had been missing or hidden until the French Revolution, parallels Gilchrist's work with Sexton's texts, which had been written prior to the "revolution" that was the second wave of the Women's Movement in the United States. Both Amanda and Gilchrist, then, are charged with bringing pre-revolutionary texts into a post-revolutionary context. For both Amanda and Gilchrist, the pre-revolutionary poets whose writing they work with become metonymic for the pre-revolutionary eras in which the poems were written. Therefore, when Amanda and Gilchrist become frustrated with the poets' historical milieus, they frequently become disillusioned with the poets themselves. Shortly after beginning her work on the Renoir sonnets, Amanda expresses her frustration to Marshall: "When I first heard about the manuscript I thought it was all so romantic and exciting. Then the more I worked on them the worse I thought the poems were. Now I think it's her life I object to as much as the

poems” (297). When Amanda insists that had she been Renoir, she would not have killed herself and would have instead escaped from the nuns and reclaimed her child, Marshall reminds her that she “can’t imagine what things were like that long ago. Two hundred years ago,” thus reinforcing the significance of historical context for any writer and for any literary work.

In the course of translation, as Amanda recognizes the parallels between Renoir’s life and her own, Amanda becomes enraged, and thereby empowered to “revise” Renoir’s experience. At one of her most intense moments of frustration with Renoir’s life and poetry, Amanda directly compares Renoir to Anne Sexton:

Amanda sat back in her chair and sighed, thinking of all that. What good did she do anyone by killing herself? Why didn’t she run away and look for her child instead? Or poison the nuns. I’m sick of all this old depressing stuff. I’m sick of Helene Renoir and Medea and Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath and Berryman and Will’s old buddy Alter and the whole goddamn life-hating death-wish trip. To tell the truth I’m about sick of poetry. (281)

In a literal sense, as a translator, Amanda wants to revise Renoir’s work by actually changing the original, untranslated Middle French of the manuscript to suit her own needs as a woman trying to determine her fate in a patriarchal culture. That is, Amanda transfers her own experience onto that of Renoir, and longs to translate/redeem/revise that experience by changing it on the page—both Renoir’s original page and Amanda’s translated one. She is, however, admonished by her mentor Marshall not to—and, as a reader, I assume that she does not. She does, however, “revise” the experience in her own life (rather than on Renoir’s page). When Amanda becomes pregnant for the second time, at what she considers to be an absurdly old age (she is 44), and again without a husband, she defies social convention and traditional patriarchal

wisdom by keeping the child, whom she names Noel. Upon first seeing Noel just seconds after his birth on Christmas Eve, Amanda whispers to herself: “Flesh of my flesh Bone of my bone, blood of my blood. You are kin to me, [k]in to me, kin to me kin to me.” These whispers recall the musing of Sexton’s *Unknown Girl* about her soon-to-be taken child, whom she thinks of as “my funny kin.” However, the narrator of *The Annunciation* emphasizes the vast differences between the experiences of these two mothers (the *Unknown Girl* and Amanda McCamey), making it clear that with the birth of her second child Amanda has, to some extent, redeemed herself. As Amanda whispers to her new child, the narrator states: “And the memory of the other child was there with them, but it was softer now, paler” (348). With the birth of this child, Amanda, revises her life; this second birth, in fact, leads to the belief that there will be a reunion with her firstborn, Barrett.¹²

Such redemption is made possible not only because Amanda has grown into adulthood, but also because of the feminist revolution of the 1970s. Amanda’s first child was born in 1951—just two years before Sexton’s first child was born. In contrast, Amanda’s second child is born in 1981. In the thirty years between the births of Amanda’s children, there had been, as a result of the women’s movement, vast social changes from which Amanda benefitted substantially. However, both Barrett and Amanda do suffer throughout much of their lives because of the cultural mores of the 1950s that dictated that mother and child be separated. (As Amanda’s grandmother says, it is only because Amanda’s pregnancy was hidden from the community—she had been sent to a Catholic home for unmarried pregnant women in New Orleans to have her baby and leave it there to be adopted—that she was able to “have her chance” in the upper-middle class society into which she had been born (21); that is, had Amanda’s teenage pregnancy not been kept a secret, she would have likely never found a suitable husband).

In their suffering, Amanda and Barrett provide an inside, sympathetic view into the circumstances of women as poets, daughters and mothers in the pre-revolutionary patriarchal culture that was Sexton's historical milieu. Though these characters and their stories, Gilchrist "revives" or at least revisits Sexton, inquiring into the critical (mis)conceptions about Sexton's work and underscoring Gilchrist's own position that many critics unfairly judge Sexton's poetry as morbidly self-indulgent and ultimately weak.¹³ Gilchrist counters such assumptions by illuminating the cultural circumstances that led (at least in part) to Sexton's suicide.

The Literary Mother and Suicide: *The Anna Papers*

Gilchrist's abiding interest in suicide is evident throughout her poetry, short stories, novels and nonfiction. In her second novel, *The Anna Papers* (1988), she continues her exploration of suicide, specifically the suicide of the artist, as it informs her literary relationship to Anne Sexton. Although much of Sexton's poetry dealing with suicide was driven and developed by her own impulse for self-destruction, Gilchrist's treatment of suicide seems more complex. As any reader of Gilchrist's work knows, her writing is littered with suicides, and although some of Gilchrist's ideas about suicide may stem from a preoccupation with her own death, it is also clear that she is concerned with suicide as a larger social issue and is specifically troubled by its impact on art and culture.¹⁴

Early in her career, Gilchrist met and worked closely with the poet Frank Stanford; after Stanford's suicide at the age of 28, she began including fictional treatments of her memories of his death in her work. A character named Francis Alter, a fictionalized version of Frank Stanford, frequently appears in Gilchrist's work. According to Mary McCay, Stanford "may well have been the most influential person" in Gilchrist's life. McCay further speculates that Stanford

“represented for Gilchrist the possibilities of the arts, but more important, he represented a kind of artistic freedom that she herself was trying to achieve” (xi). Although Gilchrist’s interaction with Stanford was brief—they were introduced when Gilchrist moved to Arkansas in 1976, and he fatally shot himself in 1978—it seems to have significantly shaped her work. In fact, Stanford acted as Gilchrist’s mentor when she put together her first collection of poetry, *Land Surveyor’s Daughter*. The collection was eventually published in 1979 by Lost Roads, a small press that Stanford himself established in Fayetteville, Arkansas; however, by the time *Land Surveyor’s Daughter* went to press, Stanford was dead. In a discussion about Anne Sexton in *Falling Through Space*, Gilchrist also alludes to her relationship with Stanford. Her description of their brief relationship and its abrupt end indicates her severely conflicted memories of him:

I knew a poet once and spent many days and nights with him and took walks with him and went into shops with him and watched the world with him and learned to adore the beauty of the world and despise its sadness. *I must write of him someday* and tell the world what it was like to know a great poet and be his friend. When he killed himself over some long-buried sadness, I could not bear to remember him and threw away all his books and all his letters and everything that had anything to do with him except an unpublished manuscript dedicated to me. It’s still around.

Even in my sadness and rage I could not throw that away. (my emphasis, 74)

Gilchrist seems to have attempted several times to re-write Stanford’s life, perhaps in an attempt to save him, in her many works about Francis Alter. However, in these works, Gilchrist does not, or cannot, save him; he consistently ends as a suicide, leaving those characters who had been his companions angry and depressed. According to McCay, Frank Stanford “remains alive in many of Gilchrist’s fictional characters. Her constant return to his suicide is almost a chant about the

death of the artist in the late twentieth century. What Stanford's death does for readers, and quite possibly for Gilchrist, is focus on the need for artists in any society, because society without artists is truly dead" (xi). While Gilchrist may not manage to keep Stanford alive in the fiction, as McCay claims, her "constant return" to his suicide, and the suicide of other characters, expresses an urgent need to *attempt* to save such characters. Although suicides, by definition, cannot literally be kept alive, either in- or outside of literary texts, they can be presented sympathetically, and, more importantly, remembered for their lives and their work rather than for their deaths.

In *The Anna Papers*, as in *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist performs such a service for Sexton. Unlike her relationship with Stanford and his work, Gilchrist's relationship to Sexton and her work is not a personal one charged with the raw baggage of human interaction. Instead, Gilchrist's relationship to Sexton is purely literary; the two never met or worked together. In fact, Gilchrist did not begin to read Sexton's work until after Sexton's suicide. Perhaps because of this distance, Gilchrist is able to address Sexton in her fiction in the manner that she claims she would like to address Stanford—that is, with a sense of celebration of the poet's work. While the ghosts of both poets linger in Gilchrist's texts, it is with Sexton's ghost that Gilchrist seems better able to make her peace.

In *The Anna Papers*, Gilchrist continues her explanation of Sexton's life and art. Not only does the title refer to the literary papers of the fictional suicide-poet Anna Hand, but it also invokes the literary legacy of the real-life poet Anne Sexton. As in *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist offers the reader of *The Anna Papers* hints about the connections between the main character, Anna Hand, and the poet Anne Sexton. Most notable among such clues is, of course, the first name and vocation of the main character, Anna, who writes fiction and poetry. The structure of the novel also suggests the spectral presence of Anna Hand, and her real-life counterpart, Anne

Sexton. Because the novel opens with Anna's suicide and then backs up to describe events leading to her death, including several flashbacks to Anna's childhood, the text seems haunted by her presence. The third-person narrative of the first three major sections of the novel is filtered through Anna's consciousness; as a result, the reader is constantly looking backward and forward at the same time, listening to a narrator who is filled with memories of the past, thoroughly aware of the living characters' innermost thoughts, and eerily prescient about their futures. Like Amanda in *The Annunciation*, Anna represents both Gilchrist the writer (Anna's continued presence in the novel by means of her writing and her will) and Anne Sexton the suicide (Anna's literal death by suicide). As a result of these battling perspectives, the speaker is constantly reviewing the past—attempting to make corrections—and looking to the future, making suggestions and predictions.¹⁵ However, in the final major section of the novel entitled “Helen,” Gilchrist gives the text over to a new voice. For the first time in the novel, there is a first-person narrative, provided by Helen, Anna's younger sister and literary executor, who has assumed the role of speaker. Thus, the literary voice has passed from Anna, whose name so clearly suggests Sexton's first name, to Helen, whose name is a variation of the name *Ellen*.

In a prelude to *The Anna Papers*, a short story entitled “Anna, Part One” (*Drunk With Love* [1986]), Gilchrist establishes some of Anna's motives and personal characteristics that inform *The Anna Papers*: Anna is middle-aged, single and childless, living alone in New York City and working as a highly successful professional writer. Although she is naturally inclined to solitude, Anna decides to move back to Charlotte, North Carolina, to reconcile with her family and to establish her legacy (both literary and financial) for her nieces and nephews.

In *The Anna Papers*, however, soon after returning to North Carolina, Anna discovers she has cancerous lumps in her breast, and, after setting into motion a complex plan to preserve her

legacy and provide financial security for future generations, she drowns herself in the Atlantic Ocean wearing a fur coat.¹⁶ The novel opens with Anna's suicide and subsequent memorial service. The words of the Episcopal priest eulogizing Anna clearly echo those of Gilchrist herself when speaking about Anne Sexton and the impact of her work on Gilchrist and other women of her generation. In his opening remarks, the priest points out the significance of Anna's death, in particular, and the death of artists in general:

So the great writer John Donne taught us and so the great American Writer, Ernest Hemingway, quoted him as saying, and now I borrow from both these men to memorialize another writer. Our Anna, who lived and worked among us and *helped us to understand ourselves*. We are doubly burdened when an artist dies.

Still, as Donne said, a clod is as important as a promontory. (my emphasis, 198)

With this passage, Gilchrist performs several rites: she puts Anna Hand (and by extension, Anne Sexton) into a category with a male writer whose suicide has not significantly tarnished his literary reputation; she absolves Anna Hand/Anne Sexton of any sin incurred by suicide; and she positions a woman writer (Gilchrist herself) as an authoritative figure, able to grant forgiveness and facilitate cultural acceptance of (seemingly) socially harmful behavior. Anna Hand, Anne Sexton and Ernest Hemingway (all literary artists lost to suicide) are equated and shriven. The priest makes it clear that Anna is forgiven, at least by those who mattered to her: "I absolve Anna Elizabeth from her means of taking off. I am sure God absolves her also. *But if he doesn't* I am certain Anna would be satisfied to be absolved by us few, by the ones that loved her" (my emphasis, 198). By invoking Sexton through Anna Hand, Gilchrist publicly grants forgiveness to Sexton as well; the absolution of Anna Hand signifies an absolution-by-literary-proxy of Sexton. The priest's description of Anna's work as a means toward self-knowledge for those who read

it—as well as his presumption that not all will be able to forgive her suicide—echoes a statement that Gilchrist once made about Sexton on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition”: “Anne Sexton is another poet the Academy would like to forget if possible or at least send to the back of the class. Anthologies never do her work justice and she is being passed over as a subject for serious study.¹⁷ Still, while she was writing she spoke to us with a voice as real and lyrical as the sea and *my generation of women learned about ourselves from her*” (my emphasis, *Falling Through Space* 73). Like the priest in the novel, Gilchrist focuses on suicide’s artistic legacy as a means of redemption. Furthermore, by reading from Anna’s own work, rather than from the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer, the priest suggests that in some ways, for those she leaves behind, Anna’s work is at least as important as scripture. Anna becomes, then, much like Anne Sexton reluctantly aspired to be in her later work, her own god and her own moral force.

Not only does Anna assume responsibility for her own literary legacy, by carefully arranging her papers and finances for her heirs, she also acts as a liberating benefactor, expanding the options available to the women who came after her, much in the way that Sexton broke new literary ground for Gilchrist and other women of her generation. Early in her life, Anna acts as an intercessor for her siblings: The narrator elegiacally describes their childhood games of hide-and-seek:

. . . When Helen and Daniel and James and Niall were captured and defeated, caught and shamed, they would . . . sit with their hands on their knees and wait for Anna to come tearing in from under the basketball hoop or from behind the garage. Here I come, she would be screaming and Ole ole in free, which meant, Everyone is free, all in free. . . Ole, ole in free. Who will save her brothers and sisters now? Chained to their jobs and their husbands and wives and ex-wives and children and

habits and ideas and fears, closed and open doors and spidery corners. Who will save the Hand children now and set them free? (24)

Later in life Anna intercedes on behalf of her niece Olivia and her [Anna's] younger sister Helen. In fact, Anna's intercession on behalf of these women provides the central plot-lines in the novel.

Before her death in *The Anna Papers*, Anna names Helen as her literary executor. The novel focuses on the liberation this literary executorship brings about for her sister, Helen Hand Abadie, the middle-aged mother of five who has, for her entire adult life, devotedly fulfilled her role as an affluent stay-at-home mother and wife of a highly successful insurance executive in Charlotte, North Carolina. When Anna commits suicide in the late 1970s, Helen is catapulted from the insular world of nuclear and extended family into the world of literary publishing. As the executor of Anna's papers, Helen is necessarily brought into Anna's "sordid" identity—Helen is charged with vetting and finding literary venues for the literary works that Anna leaves behind. Presumably, Anna leaves these works unpublished at the time of her death because she realizes the embarrassment they could bring to the family. Helen expresses her knowledge of Anna's motives soon after Anna's death: "She used to say, Helen, if anything ever happens to me, be sure to lock up my papers so Momma and James won't burn everything up" (219). Ironically, Helen is charged with getting much of this work published since it will provide financial security for Anna's nieces and nephews—a generation much less likely than those that came before it to feel stigmatized by Anna's deeply confessional material, which includes, for example, a story Anna wrote about her sexual experimentation with her first cousin Phelan Manning. As their Aunt Anna's legacy, these literary papers work to transform the life of Anna's nieces and nephews, but more importantly, they help to liberate Helen, one of Anna's own generation—just as Sexton seems to have aided in the liberation of Gilchrist via literary inspiration. A brief conversation that

Helen has with their mother is quite telling. Without Helen's guardianship, Anna's papers would likely have been left to obscurity, if not destroyed. In fact, Anna's mother denies that Anna killed herself and has a deep desire to keep Anna's personal life, including her writing, a secret (154). When she asks Helen how the work is going with Anna's papers, Helen replies, "Anna was writing about our grandfather's death [by suicide] She was going to publish it in an autobiography." Mrs. Hand is horrified and replies, "Oh my. Well, throw it away," but Helen protests: "She [Anna] said it was a great act of courage, to die that way." Mrs. Hand, however, disagrees, countering, "Oh no, it made us all sad. He didn't even leave a note. At least Anna left a note. . . . You don't know, Helen. It was terrible when my father left that way. He was so sick. Anna wasn't even sick yet." Helen, however, does clearly acknowledge and forgive Anna: "There was a darkness in Anna. There was a part of her that was capable of anything. Which she proved to us all over and over, before we even got to this last terrible darkness. I forgive her. I swear I do. I understand and forgive her" (220).

Just as a close reading of *The Annunciation* exposes numerous layers of clues about the literary relationship between Sexton and Gilchrist, so too can *The Anna Papers* facilitate the close reader's understanding of this relationship. As in *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist provides readers of *The Anna Papers* with several textual clues that her protagonist is a fictional analogue of Sexton. Not only does the confessional nature of Anna's writing suggest the work of Sexton, but the characters and plot of the novel also extend the grounds for speculation about Sexton's literary influence on Gilchrist.

Anna Hand's writing is so highly confessional that it severely strains her relationships with her family members. Anna's father, whose Christian sensibilities are disturbed by Anna's

writing, attempts to censor her work. Near the end of the novel, Helen explains Anna's relationship with her father and their conflict over her writing:

The boxes are all packed now. The only thing I don't know what to do with is this stuff she wrote when she was young. All Daddy did after she died was show people the poetry she wrote when she was young. Once, when she first started publishing, he xeroxed copies of some poems about Jesus she wrote when she was young and taped them over the pages of her books that had sexual scenes in them.
(273)

Mr. Hand's conflict with Anna and her work strongly resembles the conflict that Sexton had with her first literary mentor John Holmes, whom Maxine Kumin refers to as the "Christian Academic Daddy" of his workshop ("Interview with Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith" 165).¹⁸ While Holmes was not successful in his attempt to censor Sexton's work, his response to and advice about her work can certainly be interpreted as stern disapproval. In *The Anna Papers*, Gilchrist presents a literary figuration of Holmes' treatment of Sexton; like Holmes, whose attempt to censor Sexton failed, Anna's father is not able to keep her from publishing. He does, however, have the power to cover Anna's published words after her death, suggesting his lasting power over her and the likely detrimental results of his disapproval even when she was alive. Similarly, when Sexton was revising her first manuscript for publication, eventually published as *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Holmes wrote her a lengthy letter in which he suggested a change in the title, warning Sexton, "I really think booksellers and publishers would be wary" of the implications of such a title. Sexton refused to change it. Holmes' criticism, however, went well beyond the title of the manuscript, and included the following admonition:

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. [. . .] 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. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now.

(qtd. in Middlebrook *AS* 98)

Sexton's response to Holmes' letter, her poem "For John, Who Begg," has since become one of her well-known and widely recognized works. Like Holmes' reproof of Sexton's first collection of poems, Mr. Hands' censorship of Anna's writing, ironically, enriches the work, even making it more valuable monetarily; as Helen points out about Anna's published books with the poems of Jesus taped over pages containing "sexual scenes," "Mike says those books will be very valuable someday" (273).

Like Sexton, and like all other deceased writers we keep alive through reading their works, Anna is in a liminal state. Because she has drowned herself off the coast of Maine just before the beginning of winter, it is not likely that her body will ever be recovered. While working with Anna's papers one afternoon, Helen muses to herself, "I can't believe they can't find the body. I will never believe that she's dead until I see that body" (238). This textual detail easily accommodates Helen's fantasy, in which Anna lives on. It is also the fulfillment of a wish expressed by speakers in several of Sexton's poems, the most notable of which is "The Consecrating Mother," in which the speaker says,

and I simply stood on the beach
while the ocean made a cross of salt

and hung up its drowned
 and they cried Deo Deo.
 The ocean offered them up in the vein of its might.
 I wanted to share this
 but I stood alone like a pink scarecrow. (*CP* 554)

Although Sexton idealizes drowning in the ocean as the perfect suicide, she was not to experience such a death herself; instead, she took her life by asphyxiation. In *The Anna Papers*, however, Gilchrist allows Anna to experience Sexton's ideal death, as if to honor Sexton's thwarted desires.

Like Gilchrist, who came to Sexton's work only after the poet has taken her own life, Helen reads Anna's most powerful works after Anna's suicide. She then experiences radical personal changes as a result of her work with Anna's papers—much in the way that Gilchrist describes the changes that came over her when she first read Sexton's work. In a roundtable discussion of women writers at Furman University in 1988, Gilchrist dramatically exclaimed: "I will never forget the first time one of my cousins in Atlanta, Vice President of the Junior League, handed me a copy of Anne Sexton. We drank and read all afternoon. Wow. Wow" ("The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition" 17). The Junior League affiliation that Gilchrist mentions is echoed in her descriptions of Helen as a Charlotte, North Carolina, Junior League matron who feels duty-bound to wear Chanel suits, complete with matching bag and shoes, because she has "to keep up appearances around here" (105). After Anna dies, Helen, as literary executor, abandons her upscale suburban home and club meetings to assume a bohemian lifestyle. Helen reads Anna's papers, sleeps in Anna's apartment and, to an extent, assumes Anna's identity—even taking one of Anna's former lovers as her own. The first evidence of this

transformation is when the once obsessively compulsive and repressed Helen leaves her home “with the dishes not done and [her] teeth unflossed and beds unmade” to go to Anna’s workroom (221).

As Helen begins to go through Anna’s papers she realizes that she, too, can and will become a writer; she uses Anna’s own typewriter to write her first pieces. In looking at Anna’s papers, she realizes how powerful writing can be, and that she, like Anna, can assume such authority. Commenting on a fragment of one of Anna’s short stories about a writer, Helen thinks to herself: “There are thousands of pieces of paper like that. Pages torn from tablets. Sometimes I think she believed the things she wrote were true. That the people she made up were real. She made this paper world out of pieces of our lives and out of dreams” (240). In the course of sorting Anna’s papers and beginning her own writing, Helen also realizes that she, too, can create her own world (both on paper and in life) and establish her own dominion. The creative process, however, also frightens her, just as it sometimes frightened Anne Sexton, and presumably, Gilchrist. Inevitably, she begins to censor herself when she starts writing about Anna’s suicide. Clearly, the ability to create one’s own life (up to and including one’s own death) is closely aligned with the power of the writing process, of language itself. Such power both thrills and repels Helen. She writes, “Listen, this is too much. I don’t have any business writing this stuff on her typewriter. *I’m beginning to sound just like her. . . .* I’m not going to write any more of this just now. *How do they know when to stop?* The ones that do this for a living?” (my emphasis, 218). It may well be that Helen, like Gilchrist, her namesake, is, despite her personal statements about and literary treatment of suicide, deeply ambivalent about assuming such authority.

Through her writing and work with Anna’s papers, however, Helen does attain some degree of power and autonomy—specifically, she recognizes that she is not obligated to serve the

needs of her oftentimes ungrateful children and husband. Such freedom is a gift from Anna. Anna also provides Helen the opportunity to experiment with sex outside of marriage by appointing a poet and former lover, John Carmichael (Mike), as the co-executor of her papers. As Helen and Mike spend many days and nights together in Anna's apartment going through her papers, they eventually become lovers—presumably in fulfillment of the plan that Anna had for them when she selected them to be co-executors. By opening doors to intellectual stimulation and sexual liberation, Anna facilitates Helen's life-changing experiences. The transformation of Helen is startling and dramatic. As Phelan Manning, a distant cousin of Helen and Anna, notes when he visits Helen and sees Mike's hand around Helen's waist: "Well, I'll be goddamned. Anna, you should have lived to see this. We finally got Helen to leave the yard" (265).

For Helen, Anna remains present. In fact, Helen even has visions of Anna after her death; Anna appears to Helen twice, both times delivering important messages that Gilchrist, herself, might have received through her reading of Sexton's work. In the second visitation, Anna leaves Helen with a blessing and an admonishment to preserve her literary legacy, saying, "I want you to be happy. I want you to have anything you need of mine" (277). Presumably, Helen's work with Mike on Anna's widely scattered papers will provide Helen many years of intellectual stimulation, as well as continued contact with Mike.¹⁹ Just as Helen takes freely from Anna's power, so does Gilchrist seem to draw power from Sexton, the literary ancestor she identifies and claims in her first two novels.

In addition to the writer/writer-to-be relationship between Helen and Anna, Gilchrist further develops the theme of finding and claiming one's heritage in *The Anna Papers* through the character Olivia Hand, Anna's long-ago lost niece, the first daughter of Anna's younger brother Daniel Hand. Although none of the Hand family is aware of Olivia's existence, Olivia finds her

way back to her people through her Aunt Anna's writing. Olivia's mother, Summer Deer Waggoner, a young Cherokee woman, leaves Daniel in North Carolina and returns to her family in Oklahoma before she realizes she is pregnant. She never tells Daniel about the pregnancy, refusing to answer any of his letters; seven months after leaving Daniel, Summer Deer dies giving birth to Olivia, whom she names after Olivia de Havilland because of her starring role in *The Snake Pit*, a film about madness Summer Deer had seen shortly before the birth.²⁰ The Waggoners decide to keep the birth a secret from the Hands and allow Summer Deer's sister, Mary Lily, to raise Olivia. In the interim, Daniel impregnates and marries Sheila MacNeice, the daughter of his father's business partner in North Carolina. At the age of fifteen, however, Olivia knows only the sketchiest details about her origins; she has her parents' marriage certificate along with a few letters and photographs that Mary Lily occasionally allows her to study, but not much else.²¹ Despite the dearth of information, Olivia recognizes a part of herself in Anna's books. Upon bringing home one of Anna's novels from the school library, Olivia announces to Mary Lily, "This is my name Look, Aunt Mary Lily. This is my name and these pictures look like me and you said this is where my father came from. From Charlotte, North Carolina. Here, where this lady comes from" (74-75). Shortly thereafter, with the help of her high-school English teacher, Olivia writes to Anna by way of her publisher. Ultimately, as one of her final acts before the suicide, Anna contacts and visits Olivia, much to the consternation of Olivia's Aunt Mary Lily, the only mother Olivia has ever known. Upon hearing the news of Anna's death, Olivia informs Mary Lily that she will be leaving for Charlotte, to join her father's family for the memorial service. Olivia's Aunt Mary Lily, who feels threatened by Anna from the time Olivia first discovers that Anna is her aunt, initially feels relief when Anna dies. Anna's death, however, begins a series of events that quickly lead to Olivia's leaving Mary Lily and going to live with her

father's family permanently.²² Thus, Anna's suicide introduces a new member to the Hand family, one who is poised to take her place as the writer in the family. Further, it seems obvious in the novel that if it were not for Anna's death, Olivia would have never been brought into the Hand family.²³ Upon hearing the news of Anna's suicide, Olivia immediately travels to North Carolina, where she is eventually welcomed as the newest member of her father's extended family. Like Gilchrist, who recognized an important but underdeveloped part of herself in Sexton's works, so too does Olivia recognize a part of herself in her Aunt Anna's books.

Upon arriving in Charlotte on the occasion of Anna's funeral, Olivia is met with her double—a sister of the same age, Jessie Hand, the daughter of her father's marriage to Sheila MacNeice, his second wife. Although both Jessie and Olivia are introduced in *The Anna Papers*, their connection—both literary and familial—to their Aunt Anna is more fully explored in the novella *A Summer in Maine*. Shortly before Anna's death in *The Anna Papers*, however, Anna contemplates Olivia's literary intuition: "The most amazing thing was that she had found Anna all by herself. Had recognized her family through Anna's books" (74). Further, on her first night in Charlotte, Olivia composes a poem to order the experiences of the long, strange day, including her meeting with her unreceptive father for the first time and attending Anna's funeral. Interestingly the poem begins with a word that Sexton and considered "magic." The word *star*—part of the palindrome Sexton frequently used into her poetry, *rats live on no evil star*—is an emblem of Sexton's intuitive understanding of language that leads the poet's ability to articulate unconscious fears and desires through poetry.²⁴ The word *star* serves also as Olivia's identifier for herself (just before their bedtime, her new sister Jessie had nick-named her Starr). Olivia uses the name to work out her relationship to the members of her new family, beginning

with a distant cousin named King whom she has just met, and reaching inward towards her biological parents.

Starr to Sun, Starr to King
 King of the Sun, King of the Moon,
 Light of the day and night,
 What brought us here?
 Is this wrong or right? Bad or Good?
 Where the Moon shines on you there the world ends for me.
 I am so lonely, Mother, speak to me from your cold bed.
 Father, Father, learn to look at me. (*TAP* 189)

Like Barrett Clare, as a poet, Olivia clearly needs much improvement; the flaw in the poem is suggested concretely by the spelling of the word *star*. With this spelling of the nickname her new sister Jessie has just given her, the palindrome does not work—the “magic”—the access to self-knowledge via poetry—is not yet available to Olivia.

That Olivia’s impulse to write is more significant than is her talent for writing at this point corresponds with an idea Sexton expresses directly in one of most well-known poems, “for John, Who Begs Me,” to which Gilchrist also alludes in *The Annunciation*:

Not that it was beautiful,
 but that, in the end, there was
 a certain sense of order there;
 something worth learning
 in that narrow diary of my mind (*CP* 34)

Even Olivia immediately recognizes her own poem's thematic (if not aesthetic) weaknesses: "She folded the poem in half and put it in the pocket of her suitcase. She was ashamed to have written such a self-pitying poem and slept the rest of the night alone [instead of with her sister] to punish herself for her cowardice" (*AP* 189). However, Gilchrist does not leave Olivia as a failed poet. In a follow-up piece to *The Anna Papers*, the novella *A Summer in Maine (I Cannot Get You Close Enough*, 1990), Gilchrist gives Olivia a chance to work on her writing skills as a means of re-connecting with her literary mother, her Aunt Anna. That Olivia's story extends well beyond the pages of the novel again suggests the far-reaching legacy of the suicide poet Anna Hand/Anne Sexton.²⁵

Claiming Literary Inheritance: *A Summer in Maine*

Gilchrist's collection of three novellas, *I Cannot Get you Close Enough*, includes *A Summer in Maine*, which is quite literally a revival of Anna Hand's literary identity in spirit/ghost form. This piece is set New England, which was not only Sexton's home, but also where Anna Hand drowned herself. So while the novel is literally haunted by Anna, it also strongly evokes the literary and personal legacy of Anne Sexton. The mansion in which Olivia and Jessie stay for the summer, near Tennant's Harbor, Maine, seems very similar to the Squirrel Island estate in Maine where Sexton spent many of her childhood summers, a setting to which she often returns in her poems.²⁶ Both locations are within ninety miles of Biddeford, Maine, where Anna Hand walked into the ocean, ending her life.

Over the course of Gilchrist's novella, the two main characters—Anna Hand's nieces, Jessie Hand and Olivia de Havilland Hand—create a literary cult around the spirit of their dead Aunt Anna. Their preoccupation with reviving and communicating with Anna's spirit seems

almost a literalization of Amanda McCamey's vow in *The Annunciation* to dedicate her life to the imagination of a dead poet (Helene Renoir/Anne Sexton). The two main characters involved in this plot, Anna's nieces Jessie and Olivia, represent the split in Anne Sexton's own personality: Jessie falls in love with, is impregnated by, and marries her distant cousin, King Mallison. Olivia, however, "saves herself" for a literary career. In revisiting the suicide of the character Anna Hand/Anne Sexton through the eyes of these two young female protagonists, Gilchrist creates a counterpoint to *The Anna Papers*, allowing the reader to see the suicide from the points of view of the next generation of the Hand family's women. The pairing of the novel and the novella foregrounds the distinct split between the life-options available to the two generations of women. Further, by pairing Jessie with Olivia, Gilchrist identifies a split within Sexton that may have contributed to her madness and suicide: she is both a writer and a mother—a combination that the culture in which Sexton began her writing career was not entirely ready to accept or facilitate. By writing from the point of view of both generations, Gilchrist not only illustrates the great divide between the two eras but also establishes herself as a bridge between them.

In *A Summer in Maine*, Gilchrist once again foregrounds the issue of literary inheritance by focusing on Olivia's desires to connect with and continue in the tradition of her Aunt Anna. In the novella, set approximately one year after Anna's death, Anna Hand's nieces travel to a summer house on the coast of Maine. Early in the summer, Anna's nieces, Olivia and Jessie, discover a trunk full of Anna's papers. Using these papers, the nieces create what the narrator describes as a "literary cult" (263). Upon discovering the letters, hidden in a trunk in the boathouse of the estate, Olivia comments, "No one will ever know what it meant to me to find those letters. Like no one ever dies really, do they?" (294). After extracting promises from the younger cousins not to reveal the discovery of their Aunt Anna's papers, Olivia announces: "We

have to study them. . . . If we study her writing we can find out how to write” (295). The papers are letters as well as poems and drafts of short fiction. Throughout the summer, the cousins hold secret meetings in the boat house to “study” the papers. Olivia describes the meetings: “Here is how we set up the meetings. First we lit the candles with a reading of her poems. Then we burned incense and I read some of her stories and we all prayed to be writers *who always told the truth when others were afraid to do it*,” clearly in the confessional mode of Anna, Sexton and Gilchrist herself (my emphasis, 299). After one such meeting, Olivia continues to ponder an unfinished poem included in one of Anna’s letters. According to the letter, Anna “couldn’t finish [the poem] because it was about being ‘torn in two’ . . .” (298).²⁷ After reading the poem, entitled “Metaphor,” Olivia fantasizes that Anna is her muse: “She is always with me now. She tells me what to write. I wrote this poem called ‘Friction’ . . . Well that’s only part of it. It goes on for ten pages. She made me write it, she held the pen” (299). Later, Olivia describes a late-night encounter with her dead Aunt Anna:

Last night I woke up in the middle of the night and thought Anna was out on the beach waiting for me. I put on some shorts and sandals and went out there, there was a full moon, so beautiful, so much light. I walked as fast as I could down to the water’s edge and let it climb up to my thighs and then I saw her floating above me like a cloud, in a white dress, and she said, “Write, Olivia. You will write great poems. Don’t drown yourself. I want you to stay alive and finish my work.” (311)

In this scene, Gilchrist inscribes the ghostly Anna, lost to suicide, as a muse for Olivia. Just as Olivia describes herself as being directed to finish Anna’s work, so does Gilchrist seem compelled to comment upon and complete—at least on some levels—the work that Sexton left undone at the time of her suicide.²⁸ However, this relationship between the muse and the artist is,

for both Olivia and Gilchrist, problematic (as is suggested by the title of Olivia's poem: "Friction"). After the brief encounter with Anna's hovering presence over the water, Olivia immediately goes to the boathouse "and [starts] writing everything. [She] wrote about ten poems before it was dawn." Olivia's final thought about the encounter, however, is clouded by fear and uncertainty: "One more thing. Even when she was floating above me telling me to write poems, at the same time I thought she was in the water waiting to eat me up or drag me under" (311). As Joanne Feit Diehl points out in *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychoanalysis of Creativity* (1993), a study of female literary influence based on an object-relations model, the relationship of the younger artist to her closest major literary precursors is often "deeply ambivalent" (7). According to Diehl, the impulse to restore the mother, or at least to compensate for the perceived flaws in her work, is deeply distressing to the literary daughter. Just as Amanda McCamey is tortured by her work as Helene Renoir's translator, so is Olivia tortured by her work as Anna's disciple. As Sexton's successor, and reviser, Gilchrist is similarly distressed; she is, however, through her literary work, able to sublimate, or culturally convert, her anxieties.

Just as Helene Renoir and Amanda McCamey live in different worlds, so do Olivia de Havilland Hand and Anna Hand. Throughout the works in which these characters appear, Gilchrist provides textual clues that the older characters (Helene and Anna) are fictional representations of the Sexton. The younger characters (Amanda and Olivia), then, can be read as fictionalized versions of Gilchrist, who figures herself as Sexton's literary heir. Through creating these dramatic contrasts between women's generational situations and their relative intellectual, sexual and artistic freedoms, Gilchrist illustrates the cultural divide that separates her from her closest literary foremother, implicitly arguing for a sympathetic reading of Sexton's work. Within this historical framework, Gilchrist explores the central connection between Sexton and herself:

literary art as the key to self knowledge and power. The extremes of circumstance in which her characters find themselves emphasize the boundaries of the cultures in which they live. In both situations, Gilchrist's treatment of the issues of motherhood, suicide and artistic expression help define the contrast between past and present, freedom and societal constraints.

It is against such constraints that both poets must argue for the recognition of women's essential humanity. In their poetry, Sexton and Gilchrist explore women's roles throughout their life cycles, critiquing cultures designed to limit and distort feminine humanity.

NOTES

1. Gilchrist openly acknowledges Rhoda as a biographical character. In an interview with Teresa Weaver for *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, Gilchrist states, “[Rhoda] is my imaginary memory of myself, along with what everybody told me about myself” (“Living, Writing Emphatically”).

2. Because Gilchrist’s first two novels directly, and presumably consciously, invoke Anne Sexton and set up Gilchrist’s dialogue with her, I assume that Sexton continues in Gilchrist’s literary imagination at least to some degree Gilchrist’s subsequent novels: *Net of Jewels*, *Starcarbon*, and *Sarah Conley*. While Gilchrist does not necessarily foreground Sexton’s spectral presence in these novels as she did in her first two novels, Gilchrist does continue to grapple with the issues that connect her with Sexton: writing, suicide, motherhood and personal knowledge as freedom. In fact, in the later novels, Gilchrist develops these concepts more fully, in some senses, than in the earlier novels, allowing the reader a more sustained and nuanced view of the conflicts they present for the woman writer. As an example of Bauer’s assumption that all of Gilchrist’s work can be read as an organic whole, I cite *The Annunciation*, *The Anna Papers*, *Net of Jewels* and *Sarah Conley* as providing an example of an extended development of the a central character type, the woman writing. Further, as Gilchrist has pointed out in interviews, she feels that when she first began writing, she was highly subject to influence, but that

after you’ve been writing enough, you are more than likely and more in danger of being influenced by your own early work than you are by another writer’s voice.

Because if you’ve used your own voice enough, it’s yours. I could safely read Faulkner while writing fiction now [1996], but that wasn’t true seven or eight

years ago. If I read Faulkner, I had to quit writing for four or five days while I aired it out. (Wilson and Sell 157)

Having invoked and established Anne Sexton as a literary foremother in the first two novels, Gilchrist has laid the groundwork for the later novels, which can only be fully understood in the light provided by the first two novels, including their treatment of issues that plagued Sexton and informed her work.

The most recent embodiment of the “evolving prototype” that Bauer discusses in *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist* is Sarah Conley, the protagonist of the novel in which she is the title character. Sarah Conley is, despite, the harrowing experiences of her early life, an emotionally strong character who displays the most mental clarity of any of Gilchrist’s embodiments of the evolving prototype to date. For Sarah, suicide is not an threat; in fact, she never even considers it an option. However, she is paired with another character, Eugenie Moore, whom I read as Sarah’s double. Together, Sarah and Eugenie make up a single character; they are two opposite parts of a whole. Sarah’s personal strength and successes are placed squarely in contrast to the failings of Eugenie, a character who, like Anna Hand, commits suicide when she is dying of cancer. Like Amanda McCamey and Anna Hand (as well as like Ellen Gilchrist and Anne Sexton themselves), Sarah uses her writing to heal herself, continuing the theme of confessional writing as a means to self-knowledge and power established in Gilchrist’s earlier novels. (Like Amanda, Sarah loses her father when she is very young, and later makes a bad marriage; soon thereafter, she has her child taken from her in a vicious custody battle.)

In *Net of Jewels*, one of Gilchrist’s most well-known and critically successful novels, Gilchrist offers a compelling portrait of a writer, Rhoda Manning (who is, by Gilchrist’s own admission, her most autobiographical character). Rhoda demands, and eventually earns, the type

of freedom desired by Gilchrist's other female protagonists (Helene Renoir [*The Annunciation*] and Eugenie McAllen [*Sarah Conley*]) who ultimately find such freedom in suicide). Unlike these suicide characters, however, Rhoda survives to tell the tale. The manner in which her tale is told differs significantly from that of Gilchrist's other characters, including Amanda McCamey and Sarah Conley, who also survive to become writers. In *Net of Jewels*, Gilchrist fills in the significant gaps of Amanda's and Sarah's experiences because the novel describes the process of achieving freedom, allowing the reader to watch the development of such a character over the critical years of her twenties and thirties. In *The Annunciation* and *Sarah Conley*, Gilchrist presents her protagonists as adults, and focuses, in third-person narration, on the experiences of early middle age. In most of *The Annunciation*, Amanda is in her forties, and most of the narrative in *Sarah Conley*, Sarah is 56 years old. In contrast, *Net of Jewels*, with the exception of the narrative frame established by a brief "Preface" and "Coda," is told almost entirely through the voice of Rhoda Manning first as a child, then as an adolescent and later as a young adult. At the end of *Net of Jewels*, although Rhoda is alive and telling her stories (as she continues to be up through Gilchrist's collection of short stories, *I, Rhoda Manning, Go Hunting With My Daddy* [2002]), the novel clearly foregrounds the active struggle that has been, throughout her life, necessary to cultivate such a voice. *Net of Jewels* opens with the aged sixty-something narrator, Rhoda Manning, now a critically acclaimed author of fiction, speaking about her beginnings. Her description is quite revealing.

My name is Rhoda Manning and I am a writer. . . . I was cathected by a narcissist. That's how shrinks put it and it means, my daddy is a vain and beautiful man who thinks of his children as extensions of his personality. Our entire lives were supposed to be lights to shine upon his stage. We were supposed

to make him look good. . . . You have to know that to understand this story, which is about setting forth to break the bonds he tied me with. It took a very long time and almost destroyed a lot of innocent people along the way. In the end I got free, so it sort of has a happy ending. (3)

For Rhoda, as for many of Gilchrist's other female protagonists, the only way to establish personal freedom comes through self-knowledge, which, for them, is inextricably linked with their writing.

3. Gilchrist clearly draws on her own experiences as a young girl and her relationship with a male cousin to develop the relationship between Amanda McCamey and her cousin Guy McCamey. However, she allows herself the imaginative freedom to develop the novel far beyond her own experiences. In fact, in reacting to questions from readers and critics, she has pointed out on more than one occasion that the story of the pregnancy and adoption is purely fictional; she even speculates that the motif of the lost child in *The Annunciation* is a direct result of her anxieties about her middle son's move to Alaska immediately after he completed high school (*Falling Through Space* 34). For a revealing glimpse of Gilchrist's relationship with her own first cousin, see her short piece entitled "Lost Loves: Remembrances of Martin" in *The Courier* (September 25 - October 1, 1975, page 4). She concludes the piece by speculating that she

would have married Martin [her first cousin] someday, even if he was my cousin. You can marry your cousin if you promise not to have children. People used to marry their cousins all the time. At least you know they're from a nice family. We could have lived down in New Orleans like Uncle Dudley. We could have touched in the night without fear or sorrow. (4)

4. See the short story “Going to Join the Poets” (from *The Age of Miracles*, published in 1995) in which Gilchrist rewrites Amanda’s story of artistic growth (including a move from New Orleans to Fayetteville), this time putting her most autobiographical character, Rhoda Manning, in Amanda’s place.

5. Maxine Kumin includes this anecdote in her essay “How It Was,” which served as the Introduction to *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*, published in 1981. Since *The Annunciation* was published in 1983, Gilchrist did have access to the essay at the time she was writing the novel, and given Gilchrist’s ardent interest in Sexton’s life and work, I assume that she read it.

6. Freud introduces the myth and its connection to his own ideas in the “Twenty-first Lecture” in his *Introductory Lectures*, which are included in Volume 16 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey (Freud 330).

7. For an interesting discussion of the inception, creation and critical reception of this poem, as well as its personally intense significance to Sexton, see Chapter 5, “From *Rats* to *Star*,” in the Middlebrook biography.

8. Diana Hume George’s *Oedipus Anne* provides the most sustained in-depth critical discussion of Sexton’s poetry as it relates to her strained relationship with her mother, Mary Gray Harvey. For those interested in the problematic relationship between Sexton and her mother, Chapter Two, “Romance and Marriage,” of Diane Wood Middlebrook’s biography offers substantial evidence of Mary Gray’s cruelties toward her daughter Anne. Throughout Sexton’s years in high school, she wrote light verse, of which her mother, herself a frustrated writer, was extremely critical. At one point, in fact, Mary Gray accused Anne of plagiarizing the work of Sara Teasdale. After this incident, Anne did not write again until she was 28 years old. As an adult, shortly after Anne began publishing her work, Anne wrote, in a letter to Mary Gray, “I don’t

write for you, but know that one of the reasons I do write is that you are my mother” (*Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters* 33). Although it is possible to read this statement as a gesture of forgiveness, it can also be read as an expression of continued hostility and rivalry.

9. Kristeva provides the following example to illustrate her point here: “I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, ‘all by himself’, and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him—all gifts, all objects” (Oliver 233). This child, it seems, could very well be Barrett Clare, rejecting the news that she has waited a lifetime to hear.

10. Cuckoo birds lay their eggs in the nests of other species, leaving their young to be raised by the builders of the nests.

11. This poem resonates strongly with Sexton’s poem “Locked Doors,” in which hell is defined as existing within heaven, but closed off from it by doors:

However, there is a locked room up there

with an iron door that can’t be opened.

It has all your bad dreams in it.

It is hell.

Some say the devil locks the door

from the inside.

Some say the angels lock it from

the outside.

The people inside have no water

and are never allowed to touch.

.....

I would like to unlock that door,
 turn the rusty key
 and hold each one in my arms
 but I cannot, I cannot.
 I can only sit here on earth
 at my place at the table. (*CP* 443)

12. Further, Amanda's blasphemous revision of "The Lord's Prayer" at the end of the novel suggests some of Sexton's similar biblical revisions. Although many of Sexton's biblical revisions and religiously-themed poems suggest a true longing for belief, they often end by expressing both defiance and disappointment. Her poem, "Consorting with Angels," for example, ends: "I'm no more a woman / than Christ was a man" (*CP* 112) Amanda's revised prayer at the end of the novel is similarly defiant; however, Amanda, as a revised Sexton character, has no doubts about her divinity:

Then Amanda fell asleep dreaming of herself in a white silk suit holding her beautiful daughter in her arms. My will be done, she said as she moved into her sleep. My life on my terms, my daughter, my son. My life leading to my land forever and ever, hallowed be thy name, goddammit, my kingdom come, my will be done, amen, so be it, Amanda. (352-53)

13. In one of the most well-known negative reviews of Sexton's first collection, James Dickey declares, "Anne Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author's life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than being caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering" (117). According to Sexton's daughter Linda Gray Sexton, her mother carried that

review with her in her wallet for many years and was haunted by it until her death (*Searching for Mercy Street* 96).

14. Gilchrist frequently alludes to the fact that, if she were ever terminally ill, she would certainly end her own life before allowing herself to suffer (*FTS*). Although I realize that our culture does not accept suicide as a reasonable alternative to psychic pain and suicidal impulses, it does to some extent accept suicide as an alternative to physical pain, particularly in cases of terminal illnesses. However, for the purposes of my discussion, I assume that suffering, whether physical or mental, is qualitatively the same. Diana Hume George makes a similar argument, in reference to Sexton's suffering, in *Oedipus Anne* (124).

15. For a more complete discussion of this phenomenon, see Jane Taylor McDonell's "Controlling the Past and the Future: Two-Headed Anna in Ellen Gilchrist's *The Anna Papers*."

16. Similarly, Anne Sexton, a few hours after completing her reviews of the galleys for *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, put on her fur coat, got in her car and asphixiated herself (Middlebrook *AS* 396-97).

17. As an example of this critical oversight, the latest edition (year) of the *American Library 20th Century Poetry* volume omits Sexton altogether. For a discussion of Sexton's poetry as "salvation to others" but not to herself, see Suzanne Juhasz's "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton" (Nagel 149-56).

18. Maxine Kumin uses the term "Christian Academic Daddy" to name John Holmes when she is describing Holmes' admonition that Kumin "stay away from" Sexton in his writing workshop because "she's bad for you" ("Interview With Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith" 165). Maxine Kumin speculates that Holmes' antipathy toward Sexton was based on fear

of her mental illness; Holmes' first wife had been mentally ill and killed herself ("Interview with Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith" 164).

In a letter answering to Holmes about her poem "For John, Who Begs," Sexton speaks of all that she meant, but intentionally left out of, the poem:

I didn't say I *have spent two years wishing* that you would like me and feeling that instinctively you did not. . . . And then I didn't say your criticism of me as a person was difficult, was perceptive, but bitter, or that I would like to cry, 'but I don't know how to be anyone but myself', and that I felt ashamed. . . . I do not know how to be what you would rather have me be. But I will try. (*Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters* 59)

Sexton's hurt and anger are made clear in this letter as well as in another that she wrote to him when he once scolded her for taking up too much time in the workshop. She writes, "Please John, stop making me feel like a toad." Later in the same letter, she obliquely refers to the suicide of Holmes' first wife:

In the long pull, John, where you might be proud of me, you are ashamed of me. I keep pretending not to notice . . . But then, you remind me of my father (and I KNOW that's not your fault). But there is something else here. . . who do I remind you of? Whoever he or she was or is . . . it isn't my fault. I am not them! (Perhaps I am all wrong, but I wish that you would consider this for a minute and remind yourself.) (*Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters* 119)

19. Anna's papers have been left with many of her various friends, and Helen and Mike do indeed have much work to do to gather them all. In fact, Helen and Mike show up at the summer house in Maine in *A Summer in Maine*, looking for the papers, which their owner, Noel

Chatevin, has instructed Crystal Manning to hide from them. (It is when Crystal hides them in the boathouse that Olivia finds them and starts the literary cult.) Crystal reports to Noel that “Helen’s fucking this Irishman, Her sole interest in the papers is keeping him on the string” (362).

20. This textual detail becomes important later, as Daniel and the other Hand siblings begin to speculate that Olivia has inherited some of her Aunt Anna’s “darkness.”

21. Although Mary Lily and Olivia’s maternal grandparents claim that they are planning to give Olivia more information about her origins when she turns 16, Mary Lily’s jealousy of Anna and the rest of the Hand family suggests that such a revelation would not have been likely.

22. Anna plays a similar role as the finder and restorer of lost children in the first novella in the collection entitled *Winter*. In this work, Daniel’s other daughter Jessie (Olivia’s half-sister) is in danger of being taken away from him and forced to live with her mother, Sheila McNeese, who is now a European drug smuggler.

23. Olivia’s father, Daniel Hand, has fought an extremely costly and bitter legal battle to obtain custody of his second daughter Jessie, and her custody status could change if she became unhappy living with her father, as he speculates she would, were he to introduce the previously-unheard-of sister into the household.

24. Sexton’s poem that most clearly articulates this language phenomenon is “An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape of Trickery and Love.” For a fascinating recent discussion of this poem, see Chapter One, “Introduction: Sexton’s Obsessive Combinations,” in Philip McGowan’s *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief*, published in 2004. McGowan argues that “these twelve lines from 1958 provide more insight into the Sexton poetic universe than critics have as yet allowed” (5). Although this poem was never published in any of Sexton’s collections, or in her *Selected or Complete Poems*, I agree that it articulates an

essential component of her poetry: her understanding of the relationship between language and thought. However, at least one major critic before McGowan recognized this poem's importance in Sexton's oeuvre. Steven Colburn's *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interview and Prose [of] Anne Sexton*, first published in 1985, obviously acknowledges the poem in the title. Furthermore, Colburn includes the poem as an epigraph to the collection. The palindrome, which Sexton first encountered painted on the side of a barn in Ireland, was so significant to Sexton that, before her death, she requested that it be carved on her gravestone (*Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters* 423).

25. Gilchrist eventually gives Olivia her own novel, *Starcarbon*, in which Olivia, the protagonist further pursues her literary interests by studying English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Navaho at a community college in Tallequah, Oklahoma.

26. This island in Maine is the setting for Sexton's final poem that she prepared for publication before her suicide in 1974, "The Rowing Endeth."

27. As I have pointed out, Gilchrist includes as an epigraph for her second volume of poems several lines from Sexton's poem "The Civil War," which begins, "I am torn in two / but I will conquer myself. / I will dig up the pride. I will take scissors / and cut out the beggar. / I will take a crowbar / and pry out the broken / pieces of God in me." The poem's final stanza also seems to have been influenced by Sexton's long poem "Flight," in which a woman drives frantically to the airport to take the hourly flight out of Boston to reach her lover only to find that all flights have been grounded due to heavy rains and fog (*CP* 86). Anna's poem ends similarly: "Three times I tried to board a plane / to come to you. Made it all the way to / the airport counter, the last time in the rain, / The rain, the rain, as Cummings called it" (298).

28. For example, in many of Gilchrist's works, particularly her poems, she takes themes and images from Sexton's poetry and integrates them into her own works in which she extends their meaning. Chapter Three of this dissertation, "Life at the Level of Language: Poetry and Self Knowledge," examines this phenomenon in greater detail.

CHAPTER 3

LIFE AT THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE: POETRY AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

“We live at the level of our language. Whatever we can articulate we can imagine or understand or explore.”

—Ellen Gilchrist, *Falling Through Space* (30)

To clarify Gilchrist’s ideal model of the relationship between readers and writers, the following anecdote from Gilchrist’s highly autobiographical novel, *Net of Jewels*, is quite useful. According to Gilchrist, the novel’s protagonist, Rhoda Manning, “is a mirror of myself” (*Rhoda: A Life in Stories* ix). In an interview with Anne McGowan for *The Washington Times*, Gilchrist declares that Rhoda “is not even hidden autobiography as far as I’m concerned. . . . As near as I can remember it, that’s how my mind worked” as an adolescent and a young adult. In *Net of Jewels*, a novel that chronicles her life as a young adult, Rhoda, during a time of great crisis, turns to writing as a means to confront a world she cannot yet understand. While visiting the Montgomery, Alabama, home of Derry Waters, a civil-rights activist who is the cousin of Rhoda’s best friend Charles William Waters, Rhoda is briefly out of her socially conservative father’s realm of control and is for the first time confronted with the larger world. Although her father has kept Rhoda sheltered from—and ignorant of—the civil rights movement, Rhoda, once introduced to the movement, is eager to know more. On the night Rhoda arrives in Montgomery, Derry gives her a collection of poems written by a young civil rights worker killed in an accident.

Derry finds Rhoda the next morning, sitting at the table with pen in hand, and asks Rhoda what's she's writing. "An answer to the book you gave me," Rhoda replies. For Rhoda, writing is a primary means of understanding and interacting with the world of people and ideas around her. The poems she had been given to read, clearly, for Rhoda, call for a literary response. The poem she writes for Derry illustrates her intuitive grasp of the racial situation in 1950s Alabama, despite her father's efforts to obscure it. She writes:

Alabama is not a place you're from,
 Not a shadow you roll up in a drawer
 It will follow you to Boston on the train
 You are my brother whether you want to be or not
 Gandhi said. Sometimes I think I am underneath
 A song, looking up. (260)

When Derry expresses her admiration for the poem, Rhoda reiterates, "It's because of the book. It's only an answer, that's all it is" (260). Although Rhoda is secretly proud of her work, she acknowledges the debt she owes to the original poet. Gilchrist's response to Sexton's work is similar to Rhoda's response to the work of the unnamed poet in the novel. Just as the speaker feels herself to be "underneath / A song, looking up," so does Gilchrist suggest the same of herself. To be looking up from underneath the song can be interpreted as viewing the world through the lens of that song. In Gilchrist's case, she learned to look at herself and her world as she recognized them in poetry, specifically in Sexton's poetry. As a reader of Sexton's poems, Gilchrist is necessarily a writer informed by them. Like Gilchrist herself, Rhoda learns through reading, and then writing, poetry.

Although Gilchrist had some writing experience as a young adult, she does not consider that period of her work to be part of her professional writing career. Instead, she considers that her life as a writer began only well after she had met certain cultural expectations: specifically, becoming a wife and mother. She describes this distinct split between her life as a writer and as a wife and mother:

I had a newspaper column—in a real newspaper—when I was a sophomore in high school. But after I started getting married and having babies, I stopped. I was raised in a world in which you didn't have ambitions after you had children; the moment you had a baby in your arms, the ambitions were transferred to your child. When the boys were young I studied with Miss Welty for a year [in the mid 1960s at Millsaps College], and I had written a lot of poetry and been reasonably successful in publishing it. But then I got married again and forgot all about it.

(Interview with Smith 47)

However, when she was almost forty years old and living in New Orleans, she returned to her interest in writing, particularly her interest in poetry. In a discussion of Gilchrist's early writing career, interviewer Wendy Smith points out the impact Sexton's posthumously published collection *45 Mercy Street* had on Gilchrist's impetus to begin writing again:

Just how remote writing had become from her [Gilchrist's] life became apparent . . . when . . . a friend casually referred to the excitement of meeting a poet, and Gilchrist realized that "my best friend in New Orleans didn't even know I had ever been a poet." Long-suppressed feelings were stirred up: shortly thereafter, reading Anne Sexton's *45 Mercy Street* in a public place, she found herself weeping uncontrollably. (Smith 47)

Years later, Gilchrist describes this experience in her highly autobiographical fiction. In “Going to Join the Poets,” Rhoda leaves her husband and young-adult sons in New Orleans to move to Fayetteville to study creative writing. The narrator describes Rhoda’s decision:

She would do it herself, would be a poet, would have her name everywhere. Fools names and fools’ faces, always seen in public places. But it wouldn’t be like that. It would be like Anne Sexton. Women would weep when they read her poems, would be fused together and save themselves because of it. Tears were welling up in her eyes, the tears she shed every time she thought about the day she started writing. It had happened because of a poem she read. She had gone on her bike to the Tulane track to run. Then she had changed her mind and gone to the Maple Street Bookstore instead and bought a book of Anne Sexton’s poems. A posthumous book. *45 Mercy Street*. She had ridden over to the track and sat down upon a bench and started reading. “I am torn in two, but I will conquer myself. I will take scissors and cut out the beggar. I will take a crowbar and pry out the broken pieces of God in me.” Then she started crying. (*Age of Miracles* 242)

Soon after Gilchrist first read *45 Mercy Street*, she took her portable typewriter, which she claims she “hadn’t touched in about seven years,” on a scuba-diving vacation with her husband. While on that trip, she wrote the first poem of her career, the sonnet “Marshall” (Smith 47).¹ In a 1986 journal entry, Gilchrist commented that, since that experience, “I’ve been writing or wishing I was writing every single day from dawn to noon” (*Falling Through Space* 41).

Shortly after returning from the vacation with the typewriter, Gilchrist began editing poetry for *The Courier*, a weekly newspaper in New Orleans. She also began contributing her own poems and feature articles for this publication as well as for various regional literary

magazines. After an entire summer of writing poetry, she sent a box full of poems to her close friend Jim Whitehead, director of the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Whitehead invited Gilchrist to join the program, and she then spent a year in Fayetteville, where she became even more successful publishing her poetry and also began to study fiction writing under Jim Harrison, another of her close friends. In 1979, her first collection of poetry, *Land Surveyor's Daughter*, was published by Lost Roads Publishing Company, a small press in Fayetteville that her close friend and writing mentor Frank Stanford had recently started with C. K. Williams. Although she published her first book of fiction, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, with the University of Arkansas Press two years later, she continued to write poetry, publishing in various literary magazines and in *The Courier*. Her second collection of poetry, *Riding Out the Tropical Depression*, was published by Faust Publishing in New Orleans in 1985, in a limited edition of 350 copies.

Just as Gilchrist clearly evokes the figure of Anne Sexton in her fiction, so too does she write her poetry in the tradition of Sexton. In this chapter, I look at some of the formal and thematic links between the poetry of Ellen Gilchrist and Anne Sexton, specifically the poets' similar explorations of the family romance. Because Gilchrist makes clear that she considers her fiction to be an extension of her poetry, I also include relevant works of her fiction—specifically her short stories—as they relate to the themes in the poetry (both her own and Sexton's). Both poets, over the course of their careers as writers, chronicle the life-cycle of women living in a patriarchal culture. The largest part of my discussion is divided into sections that correspond to roles that are socially expected of women as they move from childhood into adulthood. Specifically, these roles include that of daughter, lover/wife and mother. I will begin, however, with a pair of poems that raise questions about the ability of women to realize their full humanity

in a patriarchal culture. The first, “Where I Live in the Honorable House of the Laurel Tree,” by Sexton, alludes to the shift from life to death-within-life that females experience as they move into adolescence.

Green Girls

“They are girls. Green girls.

Death and life is their daily work.

Death seams up and down the leaf.

I call the leaves my death girls.”

—Anne Sexton, “Leaves That Talk” (*CP* 30)

Both Sexton and Gilchrist have poems in which women appear as trees, a concept at least as old as Ovid’s account of “Apollo and Daphne” in *Metamorphoses* where he has Daphne declare:

“O help me,
 If there is any power in the rivers,
 Change and destroy the body which has given
 Too much delight!” (lines 557-60)

Ovid’s account of this myth explores Daphne’s role as daughter as well as her potential role as wife. The story begins when Apollo condescends to Cupid, admonishing him that his bow is made for archers far more mature than he is. In retaliation, Cupid strikes Apollo with an arrow “gold and sharp and gleaming,” cursing him to love Daphne beyond all reason and despite his own will (472). Moreover, Cupid also shoots Daphne with a blunt arrow, causing her to loathe

Apollo. In fact, as “a rival of Diana, virgin goddess,” Daphne has “had many suitors, but she scorned them all” (481, 482). She is unmarried and wants desperately to remain free, despite Apollo’s fierce pursuit and her own father’s demand for a son-in-law and grandsons. She entreats her father, the river god Peneus: “Let me be a virgin always” (490). So desperate is she to escape Apollo’s grasp that she begs her father to use his powers to transform her—to “Change and destroy the body which has given / Too much delight”—so that she will not have to marry Apollo. Peneus ostensibly shows mercy to her, turning her into a laurel tree. Apollo, however, is not deterred. He loves her still, and to show his love, imbues her form with symbolic honor:

. . . . He placed his hand
 Where he hoped and felt the heart still beating
 Under the bark; and he embraced the branches
 As if the still were limbs, and kissed the wood,
 And the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god
 Exclaimed: “Since you can never be my bride,
 My tree at least you shall be! Let the laurel
 Adorn, henceforth, my hair, my lyre, my quiver:
 Let Roman victors, in the long procession,
 Wear laurel wreaths for triumph and ovation. (566-75)

As the myth makes clear, neither shape-shifting nor symbolic honors can rescue women from paternal control; the proverbial pedestal from which women long to descend is yet another patriarchal construct that keeps women under the control of men. How, then, are women to escape such domination and assert their own wills? Sexton’s poem “Where I Live in the Honorable House of the Laurel Tree” (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960) poses this very

question, and Gilchrist's response—a poem and a short story both entitled “The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society”—answers it. In writing first the poem and then the short story with the same title, Gilchrist presents one of the few solutions to this dilemma: death.

In Sexton's poem, the speaker retells the story, remaining true to Ovid's original text, but telling it from the perspective of the victimized woman who realizes too late that the transformation she begged her father for is yet another prison:

I live in my wooden legs and O
my green green hands.
Too late
to wish I had not run from you, Apollo,
blood moves still in my bark bound veins. (*CP* 17)

In contrast, Gilchrist engages the original myth much more obliquely. Her revision almost entirely effaces the original text, preserving only its most central image: that of the woman-turned-into-tree. While Gilchrist's poem completely revises and wryly comments on the reality portrayed in Ovid's version, it still preserves the great question posed by Sexton's poem—that is, by what means can women escape the pursuing male and the powers of her male elders? Unlike Sexton's poem, however, Gilchrist's provides a narrative distance between the persona and the woman-turned-into-tree. Although Gilchrist's poem “The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society” evokes sympathy for her sister, the victim, it does not allow the speaker to be victimized herself. The poem, however, works overwhelmingly as a lament for the lost sister rather than as a celebration of the survival, or preservation of self.

I take my sister to the lake at dawn
to search for the great live oak tree at Mandeville

[.]

hearing her call from the path in the morning fog

here is the tree this is the tree

It is another thing to watch your sister

plant her sweater on a thousand year old tree

and disappear into the fog

as if forever (*LSD* 43)

The absence of end punctuation as well as the use of the subjunctive mood/speculative mode indicated by the phrase *as if* leaves the poem unresolved. It is only in her later short story of the same title that she resolves the issue, leaving little room for hope. Gilchrist's debut short story collection *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, includes "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," in which Gilchrist presents the speaker of her poem with another "sister," Lelia McLauren, caught up in a patriarchal system that distorts her humanity. In this case, the sister is a New Orleans Garden District matron trapped in a rigid, narrow existence. Lelia's life is made up primarily of the bi-weekly trips to the "Magic Slipper Beauty Salon"² where she has her hair molded into a "helmet," and arguments with her fourteen-year-old son Robert about the company he keeps. (She is particularly concerned that Robert has been spending most of his time with a young male African American friend with whom he sells and smokes marijuana in Audubon Park.) The narrator's description of her hairdresser's relationship with Lelia illustrates the values of the world in which Lelia lives: "He was vain of his body and his clientele. He put up with a lot from Lelia because she had been named to the list of Beautiful Activists two years in a row before she turned herself into a tennis-playing machine" (33).

This wry reference to her activism suggests Lelia's ironic link to the title of the story. Among the many clubs of the New Orleans region is the "Live Oak Society" of Louisiana, which exists under the auspices of the Louisiana Garden Club Federation, Incorporated.³ Although in some respects similar to a ladies' garden club (or Junior League, for that matter), the Louisiana "Live Oak Society" is staffed by volunteers referred to as "representatives," presumably women of the leisure class who must fill the many long hours of the days while their children are in school and their husbands are at work. The actual club members, however, are many of the most magnificent live oak trees that grow throughout southern Louisiana, and its president is the Seven Sisters Oak in Lewisburgh, Louisiana. As the bylaws state, the "representatives" (read "club women") are only there to represent the real members (the trees), who make up the executive council, referred to as a "committee of elders" (Orso 105). The preamble to the official by-laws states:

Whereas the Live Oak is one of God's Creatures that has been keeping quiet for a long time, just standing there contemplating the situation without having very much to say, but only increasing in size, beauty, strength and firmness, day by day, without getting the attention it merits from its anthropomorphic fellow mortals This Constitution for an universal association of Live Oaks is hereby ordained and established. (Orso 104)

Considered in the context of the Daphne and Apollo myth, the title of the club, as well as of the short story, have chilling implications.

Although Lelia is not literally turned into a tree, nor does she die, she is indeed the ultimate victim of the tree when she loses her second son as he leaps to his death off the third-story balcony of her bedroom. Earlier, when Robert's companion Gus asks him if he is afraid of

Lelia, Robert replies, “God no. She’s scared of me. She’s afraid I’ll die like my brother. He died when he was four. He had something wrong with him when he was born” (27). The second tragedy begins when Robert invites his friend Gus to spend the weekend in the McLaurens’ Garden District mansion while Lelia and her husband go away for the weekend. An obvious outsider to the world in which Robert’s parents assume they are living, Gus conducts his lucrative drug-dealing business in Audubon Park underneath a “tree so old and imposing that people in New Orleans called it the President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society” (24). Gus’s status as a victim of the white patriarchal word that Lelia represents (both as victim and victimizer) is made symbolically and literally clear by his close association with the President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society. When Lelia comes home early from her weekend at the coast and finds Gus and Robert nearly naked and smoking marijuana in her home, her violent overreaction leads to her son’s (and Gus’) death. Finding Gus on the staircase, wearing only one of her monogrammed towels, she shrieks and chases him up to her bedroom, where Robert is looking out the window. As Gus runs to the window after barricading the door, Lelia, enraged, begins to pound relentlessly on the door. Although Robert tries to save Gus by grabbing his arm, Robert ultimately follows Gus to his death. Gilchrist’s description of the suicides, which ends the story, is quite poetic:

Gus jumped into the heart of the crepe myrtle tree. He dove into the tree and swayed in its branches like a cat. He steadied, grabbed for a larger branch, found a temporary footing, grabbed again, and began to fall through the upthrust branches like a bird shot in flight. As Robert watched, Gus came to rest upon the ground, his wet black hair festooned with the soft pink blossoms of the crepe myrtle.

Then, as Robert watched, Gus pushed off from the earth. He began to ascend back up through the broken branches like a movie played in reverse, like a wild kite rising to meet the sun, Robert was amazed and enchanted by the beauty of this feat and jumped from the window high into the air to join Gus on his journey.

And far away in the loud hall Lelia beat on the door and beat on the door and beat on the door. (37)

As the sacrificial victim, Gus is “festooned” or laureled with his own wreath of “soft pink blossoms,” very much in the tradition Apollo establishes to celebrate Daphne, a woman for whom there seems to be no escape. Gus has, unlike Daphne, evaded, through death, his pursuer. Further, with the death of her only remaining son, Leila, the “beautiful activist,” is now left only with her club work, a type of living death, or death-in-life. For Sexton, however, this living-death is not acceptable, and the temptation of a literal death looms throughout her poetry. Her posthumously published poem “Leaves That Talk” (*45 Mercy Street*, 1976) for example, opens with the speaker’s fantasy in which she answers “Yes” to the call of the “green girls,” the leaves on the tree outside of her window who call for her.

Yes.

It is May [twentieth] and the leaves,
 green, green, wearing their masks
 and speaking. Calling out their Sapphic loves,
 are here—here—here—
 calling out their death wish:

“Anne, Anne, come to us.”

To die of course . . . (CP 540)

Although the speaker is sorely tempted by their calls, she falls asleep instead, and wakes, at the end of the poem, to see that the “green girls” have left the tree and that she has missed her opportunity to join them. However, the seasonal motif—the green leaves of summer dying and falling in autumn—reminds the reader that the opportunity will certainly come again.

Despite such poems as these, neither Sexton nor Gilchrist consistently posits death as the most desired means of transcendence. That Sexton’s poetry often presents conflicting points of view has been long recognized by critics and is in fact, openly addressed by Sexton herself. In an Author’s Note preceding the text of *Live or Die* (1966), for example, Sexton articulates the ambivalence implied by the collection’s title:

To begin with, I have placed these poems (1962-1966) in the order in which they were written with all due apologies for the fact that they read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy. But I thought the order of their creation might be of interest to some readers, and, as André Gide wrote in his journal, “Despite every resolution of optimism, melancholy occasionally wins out: man had decidedly botched up the planet.” (CP 94)

Although both writers often speak of death as the ultimate response to “botched” culture, they frequently vacillate between this melancholic view and their own “resolution[s] of optimism.” In fact, to establish meaningful lives for themselves through their literary expression of female experience, seems—for both poets—preferable to death, at least temporarily. Both poets use their work to explore and combat the pain of growing up in a female body in a male-dominated culture.

Daughters

Such suffering is most poignantly experienced by the female as she works to define her relationship with her father. As Diana Hume George asserts in *Oedipus Anne*, her book-length psychoanalytic reading of Sexton's oeuvre, "Sexton was the first contemporary voice outside of the psychoanalytic world to describe the normative relationship between father and daughter from the daughter's perspective" (25). George further argues that Sexton's early poems provide a "structural outline for the psychic biography of a gender, and particularly what Phyllis Chessler calls woman's dependant and incestuous personality in relation to her father" (24). Similarly, in Gilchrist's *Net of Jewels*, the quasi-autobiographical narrator Rhoda tells the reader on the first page of the novel that her life and work have been shaped almost entirely by her quest to "get free" of the powerful father by whom she was "cathected" (3). Therefore Gilchrist's work can be read as George reads Sexton's—that is, as a "psychic biography of a gender" (24). More specifically, Gilchrist's work can be read as a response to Sexton's similar, ground-breaking "psychic biography."

Both women have poems that foreground the key moment when the daughter realizes the bind that she is in, as both daughter and sexual being. Gilchrist's poem "The Terrible Heart of My Father," published in her first collection, *Land Surveyor's Daughter*, bears a striking resemblance to "Oysters," one of Sexton's popular poems. In "Oysters," the first of five poems in "The Death of the Fathers" sequence from *The Book of Folly* (1972), Sexton explores the sexual tension between fathers and daughters, as well as the theme of sexual initiation and corruption.

Oysters we ate,
 sweet blue babies,
 twelve eyes looked up at me,

running with lemon and Tabasco.

I was afraid to eat this father-food

and Father laughed

and drank down his martini,

[.]

It went down like a large pudding.

Then I ate one o'clock and two o'clock. (322)

The key image of the passing of time, signified by the comparison of the oyster plate to a clock, is but one of the many links between Sexton's poem and Gilchrist's similar poem "The Terrible Heart of my Father," which clearly echoes Sexton in its shared theme of sexual corruption and the image of eating:

Across a restaurant table

that night in Vicksburg

He placed it under my tongue.

He said it will melt in time.

He called me Judith.

He poured my first wine.

Now I drink with anyone, with any boy

whose eyes are hungry as possums.

They come and they go, they take

what they need. They leave me books

and wild schemes. They leave me

numbers to call. (29)

In both poems, the child, as a direct result of the experience, has been replaced by a new, sexual person. The dinner hour symbolizes the passage of the daughter through adolescence and into adulthood. By the end of the meal, the girl's identity "melts," like the food placed under the speaker's tongue, and is replaced by a sexually mature woman, or as Sexton notes in the final lines of "Oysters" "The child was defeated. / The woman won" (322). The ritual eating of the symbolic food symbolizes the daughter's initiation into womanhood. In Sexton's poem, for example, Diana Hume George asserts that "the daughter's swallowing of the oyster, or "father food," "hovers on the border between sensuality and sexuality" (*Oedipus Anne* 41). In Gilchrist's poem the food, although not identified, is also a "father-food" as the father's placement of it in her mouth resonates with the image of a priest's ("father's") placement of the communion wafer. Gilchrist's reference to the powerful and heroic seductress Judith, however, suggests the power latent in the new sexuality of the daughter. Like Judith, who seduces Holofernes in order to save her city and, by implication, all of Judea from the invading Assyrians, Gilchrist's speaker is now similarly empowered. However, like Judith, the speaker has only the limited (and limiting) power of her sexuality, which, in a patriarchal society, functions more often as a liability than as an asset. Other textual details further suggest that the transfer of power from father to daughter is just not possible given the larger culture in which males "take what they need" from women and leave. Although the poem asserts that "They leave me / numbers to call"—that is, with some sort of agency—the enjambment of the penultimate line emphasizes that the speaker is abandoned. Both poems, in fact, emphasize the idea of abandonment at the same time of sexual initiation presided over by the father. Once initiated, the woman must necessarily begin to prepare for the death of the father. As George points out in *Oedipus Anne*, "the event they celebrate together is his demise as the only lover in her life" (42).

Although both Sexton and Gilchrist deal repeatedly with the death of the father in their works, two of the most compelling examples are Sexton's "All My Pretty Ones" and Gilchrist's title poem in *Land Surveyor's Daughter*. It seems worth noting here, to underscore the poems' thematic importance, that both poems share their titles with the collections in which they appear. In both works, the daughter-speakers' acknowledgment of the father's mortality is complicated by their anger at their fathers, as well as their recognition of the mutual betrayal between father and daughter.⁴ Both poems foreground memory, suggesting both loss and legacy. Sexton's poem ends with the speaker's putting away the dead father's picture:

Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator,
 my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.
 [.]
 Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
 bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you. (CP 51)

In Sexton's case memory and legacy are artificially collapsed into a "diary" that can be placed on a "shelf," or repressed: "Only in this hoarded span will love persevere." The speaker's relationship with the father from whom she suspects she inherited her alcoholism is so violently conflicted that she can only attempt to forgive if she refuses to remember.⁵

Gilchrist's poem, in contrast, suggests the continuing presence of the father in the speaking daughter's consciousness, who, in the title, names herself in terms of her relationship to him:

My father said swear to keep your feet
 firmly on the ground, hold your head up, wear white
 at night, always walk facing the traffic, whistle

while you work, finish anything you start, stick
with the same job so the boss sees you are loyal.

How I betrayed him.

Last time I saw his face he was holed up on the coast,
he had a room with a view, he said he spent the summer
spying on a hippie. He said, your cheeks look gaunt.

I wanted to say I love you but he strolled off
into the sea breeze. I saw his hands slide against
his penknife. I bit my tongue. I didn't say
you don't eat right. I hated to see no matter
how he tightened his belt, his hips were dried up
like a cow pond in a summer drought. (26)

Although there is no mention of the father's death, the idea of loss is clearly there. The stark contrast in the structure of the first and second stanzas, reflects the abrupt shift in speaker's focus—from the all-powerful father to the inadequate self of the daughter. In the first stanza, the series of imperatives in the first stanza—"swear," "hold," "wear," "walk," "whistle," "finish," "stick with"—establish an ever-present voice of the father, presumably as it lives on in the speaker's mind. The lulling effect that these verbs, along with the paratactic sentence structure, contrasts sharply with the second stanza's terse statement with its single past-tense verb, suggesting a sea change in the speaker's mind—the type of change brought about by profound loss, in this case, the loss (whether actual or imagined) of the father. However, at the moment of

the “death” in the poem, the speaker immediately reverts to actively recalling the past rather than repressing her memory of it. The final image suggests both death and renewal. Although the pond is dry (dead), its “death” is only part of a larger cycle. That is, time can (and will) bring it back; the pond will refill with each new drought-ending rain, just as the father, after his death, will necessarily be resurrected whenever the daughter-speaker’s recalls his voice.

Another of Gilchrist’s poems, published the same year as *Land Surveyor’s Daughter*, but not included in the collection, also addresses the daughter’s response to a father’s inevitable death. Entitled, “Leaving the Clinic,” this poem picks up where “Land Surveyor’s Daughter” left off—with the suggestion that the death of the father is part of a larger, seasonal cycle:

A snowy day, your lightest day passes.
 Every way I look the walls are white.
 You drift, you fold into the flannel,
 your bones grow light. (59)

Like the father’s “dried up hips” in “Land Surveyor’s daughter,” the father in this poem’s “bones grow light,” emphasizing the speaker/daughter’s acute awareness of the father’s loss of virility and her subsequent assumption of power. The speaker declares, “I will not die with you. I will not kiss / your soft incestuous mouth or taste / your bitter tongue” but promises “But I will keep our bargain / if I’m able. You will not die in here.” Like Sexton’s daughter-speaker in “All My Pretty Ones,” Gilchrist’s daughter feels suddenly free when her father dies. For Sexton, this power comes from entombing the father, by folding him into a book and placing him on the shelf, a deliberate act of repression that is likely to harm her eventually. In contrast, Gilchrist’s speaker frees both her father and herself as she keeps their “bargain”; the poem ends with the speaker conspiring with the father against the rest of the family: “I can confide in none of them, they’re

crazy, / but later when they leave in separate cars, I will open up the windows, / and toss you to the stars.” Thus, the poet transforms her concept of her father, whose death is symbolized by the snow. In the speaker-daughter’s mind, the father is now part of the fiery stars.

Lovers and Wives

This theme of the death-and-resurrection of the father extends in both Sexton and Gilchrist’s poetry through the poets’ creation of “new” fathers, in the form of lovers and husbands. As George points out in her discussion of this phenomenon in Sexton’s poetry:

In a woman the paradox [of the desire for life and the necessity of death] is apparent in the relationship to the father, who may be succeeded by a reincarnation of himself in the husband. A woman can spend her life, in effect, divorcing and marrying her father. She appears to have little choice in this, for she normally tends to search out her father to marry and will likely reenact not only the positive aspects of that legacy but the negative ones as well. (*OA* 46)

Sexton’s poem “Divorce, Thy Name is Woman” (*45 Mercy Street*, 1976) clearly illustrates this point. It begins, “I am divorcing daddy—Dybbuk! Dybbuk! / I have been doing it daily all my life. . .” (*CP* 545). Gilchrist echoes this speaker in the voice of Rhoda in *Net of Jewels*. Her description of her young husband Malcolm Martin, yokes him with her father from the very beginning of Rhoda’s relationship with Malcolm. Rhoda describes her evaluation of him upon their initial meeting: “Poor Malcolm Martin, a boy as vain and cold and unloving as my father, a perfect match for my animus” (137). Within six months of this meeting, Rhoda marries Malcolm, whom she divorces three years later after their second child is born. In discussing the image of the daughter being impregnated by the father at the end of the poem (“waiting for Daddy to come

home / and stuff me so full of our infected child / that I turn invisible, but married, / at last”), George declares that “To be born a woman in a patriarchy is often to be compelled to live out precisely this ritual. The maternal urge becomes a parody of its first manifestation in its desire to present the father with a child. This, in the tortured psychic world of the poem, is the only true marriage; all others are only pale and inadequate reflections of this primal union” (47). Rhoda’s experience in *Net of Jewels* illustrates this idea quite clearly. In fact, after she divorces Malcolm, she allows her own father, Dudley Manning, to adopt her two sons, Jimmy and Malcolm Junior; because he is young and financially unestablished, Rhoda’s ex-husband gives his consent for the adoption. As a result, Rhoda becomes the mother of her own father’s children and, in that sense, his wife. Gilchrist suggests such an equivocal relationship between the daughter/mother and father/husband in her poem “The New Father.”

To establish a clear framework for a discussion of “The New Father,” I turn first to a pair of Gilchrist’s poems that help to illuminate the ambiguity in “The New Father.” Both poems in this pair are entitled “Passion.” The shorter “Passion” poem, published in 1992 in the *Prairie Schooner*, foregrounds the Freudian context in which Gilchrist’s literary imagination expresses itself. In it, the speaker directly addresses her lover.

Because I love you

Every third thought is of revenge

Swords in the brain, fire in the loins

Such desire this generates

My friend Enid will visit Vienna this week

She swears to kiss the bricks leading to the house

Where Freud struggled with the wild horses of his mind.

Always at the end a boy tugging at apronstrings,

A small girl on a silver tricycle

Begging her daddy for a kiss

The poem's linking of the desire for sex with the desire for revenge, along with its invocation of the father alongside the lover, succinctly illustrates one of Gilchrist's primary models for male-female interaction. The relationships of Gilchrist's female characters who take lovers and husbands are almost always underpinned by the female's desire to connect with and conquer the father. Paradoxically, these characters are the daughters of seemingly violent, unconquerable, colossal men. Gilchrist's longer "Passion" poem, published in *Land Surveyor's Daughter*, presents the paradigmatic instance of this double bind that Gilchrist's female characters face when they take lovers or husbands.⁶

The Kha Khan marched with his armies

across degrees of longitude and latitude.

Often he obliterated whole cities

or diverted rivers from their courses.⁷

He peopled deserts with the homeless and dying.

Behind him wolves ran and ravens flew.

He wore a cap of kites' wings and deflowered women

moments after he met them

and when it was done

when he was

Emperor of Mankind, Scourge of God On Earth,

the premier danseur of military history,
 he wrote out laws for fifty nations
 without knowing how to read and died young
 leaving the kingdom to his son and his son's son. (*Riding Out the Tropical
 Depression* 13)

In this longer poem, although Gilchrist ostensibly shifts the focus of the speaker's passion exclusively to the lover, the shared title links it to the shorter poem of the same name. The "Passion" poems function as two parts of a whole, so that the overt father/husband-daughter relationship of the shorter poems necessarily provides the subtext for the longer poem. The longer poem simply develops the darker, more violent dimension of the benign father-lover from whom the small daughter begs for a kiss in the short poem. The powerful verbs of the first stanza—"obliterate," "divert," "deflowered"—illustrate the Kha's destructive strength that both attracts and repels the speaker. At the heart of the poem, the speaker, in an aside, conveys her conflict: "Listen, this [the Kha's mystery and her attraction to it] sounds like something / there is no accounting for." She adds, addressing the reader directly, "Dream this man waits for you by the river // leaning back in the wild grass." Like Sexton's persona in "Loving the Killer" (*Love Poems*, 1969) who "vomits behind the dining tent" as the meat from her husband's kill is served, Gilchrist's woman is horrified but still desirous. Interestingly, both Gilchrist's and Sexton's poems end with the man poised to be devoured by the woman. Sexton ends her poem "I will eat you slowly with kisses / even though the killer in you / has gotten out" (*CP* 188).⁸ Similarly, at the end of Gilchrist's poem, the Kha is for the first time presented as vulnerable to attack, "leaning back in the wild grass," waiting for the female lover to assume power over him, perhaps naive to the true power the female lover can wield—as is demonstrated in the story of Judith and

Holofernes. In both of Gilchrist's "Passion poems," as well as in Sexton's "Loving the Killer," conflict sparks dangerous desire.

Gilchrist plays on this resonance between the two "Passion" poems in a third poem entitled "The New Father." Like Sexton's "Divorce, Thy Name is Woman," Gilchrist's "The New Father" presents the reader with a paradox: the dual roles of men as both a woman's father and a woman's husband. The title of Gilchrist's poem (and its lack of specific reference) introduces this overlapping of roles. That is, the reader cannot tell if the speaker is referring to her own father or to the father of her children. Like *Net of Jewels*, where Rhoda allows her father to adopt the children she bore her husband Malcolm, "The New Father" blurs the line between fathers and husbands. The female speaker in the poem fails to identify the "new father" by name or by his specific relationship to her, implying the fluid boundaries between the roles of fathers and husband (and, therefore, between the roles of daughters and mothers). Further, the word *new* in the title assumes, or presupposes, an "old" father; through the creation and naming of the new father, the speaker is necessarily consumed with thoughts of the old father:

I will create a new father
 out of the kindness of my heart
 I will fashion him smiling
 into my eyes, saying yes, and yes,
 and oh, yes, how good to see you
 to be the future through you
 and, oh, the gift of your sons
 and your daughters
 What good you do me

What a death I will have

knowing there is you

Precious, precious

darling angel, dream of order⁹ (*Riding Out the Tropical Depression* 17)

The language of the poem, particularly the unclear pronoun references, can lead the reader in several directions simultaneously, and one key question remains unanswered. As the indefinite article *a* in the first line makes clear, the identity of the new father is unspecified. Who, then, is the new father? Is it her husband? Her father? The abstract idea, or psychic construction, of the father (i.e., the conflated father/husband/lover)? Is the speaker asserting her power to remake, and therefore replace, the unacceptable father she grew up with? The relationship of the speaker to the new father, who is named only with pronouns, is unclear. In the first stanza, for example, the speaker says, “I will fashion him smiling / into my eyes.” Is the “him” the son to whom she will give birth? Is it the speaker’s father who will finally be transformed into an approving, satisfied parent when he is presented with a grandchild? Is it the speaker’s lover or husband, who, with the birth of the child will become for the first time a father? The phrase “to be the future through you” does not help to answer the question. The mother can be carried into the future through her child, of course, but the child is made possible only because of, or “through,” both her father and her lover/husband.

The second stanza only introduces more uncertainty, more linguistic instability, more questions.

Then I will kiss him on the cheek

and take him into my arms

and our breath will mingle with the universe

Oh, luckiest of women, with such a one
 watching as I go carrying him into the future
 What is there to fear with such a man to find
 What dream is not good
 What act that is not charged with light
 What moment that is not new
 What birth that is not welcome (*Riding Out the Tropical Depression* 17)

Whom will the speaker “kiss” and take into her arms? Who is “watching,” and who is carried “into the future”? The focus on the mother’s arms suggests the Madonna and child, but this image is undercut by the reference to “such a man.” The absence of the question marks after the last five lines of the poem—as well as the absence of any other end-stop punctuation in the poem—provides a clue to the context of the poem’s “speaking” voice. Although the lines are syntactically structured as questions, they are not questions, suggesting that perhaps the speaker is not asking questions or even addressing anyone other than herself. If so, the problem of pronoun reference is not an issue since, in her mind, the roles of fathers, lovers/husbands (and even sons) overlap. The conflation of the father, lover/husband, son roles necessarily implies a complementary conflation of the roles of daughter, lover/wife and mother. In “The New Father,” Gilchrist seems to celebrate this overlap, which makes all experiences both eternally fresh (“what moment that is not new”) and comfortingly familiar and orderly.

Sexton’s poem “Old Dwarf Heart” (*All My Pretty Ones*, 1962), however, describes the crippling confusion that such unclear boundaries and relational roles can cause. In stark contrast to the speaker’s fluid integration of roles in Gilchrist’s poem, the speaker in “Old Dwarf Heart” describes progressively dissociated identities. The poem opens:

When I lie down to love, old dwarf heart shakes her head

Like an imbecile she was born old.

Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds

of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.

She knows the decay we're made of." (CP 54)

The speaker introduces herself as a split being. She is both "I" and "she"—the speaker and "Old Dwarf Heart," and by the end of the poem the two are physically struggling with each other:

Oh now I lay me down to love,

how awkwardly her arms undo,

how patiently I untangle her wrists

like knots. Old ornament, old naked fist,

even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you . . .

mother, father, I'm made of. (CP 55)

Like Gilchrist's persona, the speaker of Sexton's poem is both lover and daughter. However, she cannot seem to integrate the two roles into a functional whole. In contrast to the celebration of sexuality made clear in Gilchrist's reference to Molly Bloom's soliloquy, Sexton's persona is barely able to speak. In fact, the poem ends with an interruption of a prayer. Echoing the child's bedtime prayer "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," the speaking voice, thrust back into childhood, begins to struggle with the embodied (sexual) self, the arms tangled "like knots." Like the silent persona of Gilchrist's poem, the speaking, praying voice is then replaced by silence, indicated by the ellipses, and bitter, unspoken (or unprayed) thoughts of covering, or escaping from, "mother, father, I'm made of." The poem's epigraph, from Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, makes it clear that the adult speaker cannot possibly integrate the parts of her being that were dis-

integrated or “decayed” in childhood: “True. All too true. I have never been at home in life. All my decay has taken place upon a child.” In contrast, the speaker of “The New Father” attempts to reach back into the past, to reclaim the father and integrate her relationship with him into her relationship with her husband.¹⁰

In addition to the conflicted psycho-sexual identities women struggle with in establishing themselves as lovers and wives, Sexton and Gilchrist also focus on what might be an equally destructive force in these women’s lives—the stifling of the female self within marriage. Sexton’s early poem “The Farmer’s Wife” (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960) moves slowly from an image of domestic satisfaction and modest prosperity to an image of death, illustrating the diminution of the self and the decline of love within a marriage:

From the hodge porridge
of their country lust,
their local life in Illinois,
where all their acres look
like a sprouting broom factory,
they name just ten years now
that she has been his habit;
as again tonight he’ll say
honey bunch
let’s go
and she will not see how there
must be more to living
than this brief bright bridge

of the raucous bed or even
 the slow braille touch of him
 like a heavy god grown light,
 that old pantomime of love
 that she wants although
 it leaves her still alone,
 built back again at last,
 mind's apart from him, living
 her own self in her own words
 and hating the sweat of the house
 they keep when they finally lie
 each in separate dreams [.] (CP 19-20)

Although the poem begins with an ostensibly positive image of a ten-year marriage, the language, beginning in the first line, suggests decline, deprivation and waste. The “hodge porridge” evokes at least two familiar concepts: the phrase *hodge podge*, or a collection of fragments, and the blandness of a dish of porridge. The use of the word *lust*, rather than *love*, suggests the transience of the couple’s emotional attachment. Even the prosperity of their land is described in mundane language: “like a sprouting broom factory.” From here, the poem continues to chronicle the degeneration of the relationship and its impact on the speaker as she watches “her young years bungle past / their same marriage bed.” The wife literally watches as her life as an embodied, sexual being passes her by. To compensate, she “liv[es] / her own self in her own words”—suggesting that the life of the imagination, of wishes, is the wife’s only genuine reality. This shrinking of her identity leads her to fantasize harm to her husband. Knowing that he is

physically stronger than she is, she changes him in her imagination, “she wishes him cripple.” Knowing that he is not tortured by unfulfilled creative urges or loneliness, she wishes him a “poet / or even lonely.” In the final line the narrator confesses that the wife ultimately wishes the husband/farmer “dead.”¹¹

The death that Sexton’s woman fantasizes is made real, three times over, in Gilchrist’s poem “Ellen Finnell Taylor Martin,” the second poem in her series “Three Ladies Enter the Seventh Decade” in *Land Surveyor’s Daughter*. In this series, Gilchrist presents three women—Yang Tai-Po, Ellen Finnell Taylor Martin and Mrs. Cole-McCall—who are in marital situations similar to that of Sexton’s farmer’s wife. Gilchrist’s women are cut off from authentic experience outside of their own limited roles as wives.¹² Like Sexton’s poem, Gilchrist’s poems offer the readers brief vignettes featuring each of the three women. For example, the persona of “Ellen Finnell Taylor Martin” describes herself at age seventy:

Do they wonder what I dream
as I nod? I remember cruel hands
of the hunter who they fondly refer to
as father, the thin mouth of the soldier
who died screaming with fever.

I remember the soft eyes of the carpenter,
who knew the names of all the trees,
who made my bed of walnut, then carved
my heart from me. (19)

Although the speaker of the poem has outlived her three husbands, their presence lingers—in her three surnames and in her three daughters. Unlike Sexton’s poem, in which the woman never actually speaks and all details are revealed in the third-person, Gilchrist’s poem does allow the woman to speak, thereby giving voice to Sexton’s silent woman. However, the news Gilchrist’s woman delivers is as dismal as the silence in Sexton’s poem. What the reader learns about marriage from Ellen Finnell Taylor Martin is merely that it can be endured, a message that the other two poems of the trilogy affirm.

While Sexton’s “The Farmer’s Wife” is anchored firmly in Illinois and limited to a singular woman’s experience, Gilchrist’s trilogy expands the predicament of Sexton’s woman, giving it a larger historical context. In doing so, Gilchrist’s poems emphasize the pattern of the experience, thereby giving it universal relevance, and also, by extension, pointing out the universal relevance of Sexton’s similar poem. Even though the women in both Sexton’s and Gilchrist’s poems suffer, Gilchrist points out that they do not suffer alone—just as Gilchrist’s work points out that Sexton did not suffer alone.

Because the poems of the “Three Ladies” series expand, or universalize, a primary idea of Sexton’s “The Farmer’s Wife,” they necessarily keep it alive. Like the farmer’s wife, the speaker of the first poem “Yang Tai-Po” emphasizes the waste of the embodied female self in marriage:

I sit all day wearing blue silk,
 smoking raw black opium, watching
 my fingernails turn into antlers,
 my feet roll up like pine cones
 among the pekinese.

At dusk I summon the children,
 I choose a small girl to stand by my side,
 she holds up a mirror,
 we gaze into it and watch
 the sun change places with the moon.

The final image of the woman watching the natural world only as it is reflected, or mediated, by the mirror suggests the speaker's insular, limited view of the world.

Mrs. Cole-McCall's view of the world is similarly limited by her cultural context, and her isolation from the natural world. Like the silk-wearing Yang Tai-Po, Mrs. Cole-McCall's life is dominated by her attention to her appearance.

It is nineteen seventy-three,
 I'm late to Galatoire's, life lasts forever.
 I have fittings at three, I must be home
 for cocktails at the Ewings,
 I need to store my jewels before we leave
 for France, get a raincoat
 find comfortable walking shoes

 and drop a note to our grandson,
 perhaps we'll see him at Christmas.
 Tomorrow I'll count the silver
 and have Clarence plant anemones
 so we'll notice when it's spring.

The series ends, then, where it began; there has been no progress. Mrs. Cole-McCall's "fitting at three" recalls the bound feet, rolled up like "pine cones," of Yang Tai-Po. Mrs. Cole-McCall's "fitting," therefore, suggests torture. Like Yang Tai-Po's bound feet and drugged mind, Mrs. Cole-McCall's body/self is altered to accommodate the trappings of the feminine image. Further, like Yang Tai-Po, who marks the passage of time only because she happens to be looking into a mirror, Mrs. Cole-McCall must rely on the artificially cultivated anemones to be reminded of the change of seasons, to be reminded that she is a living creature, and part of the larger world.

Ironically, the titles of the individual poems, the names of the women, demonstrate the gradual effacement of women's identity when they enter into marriage. While Yang Tai-Po is referred to by her full name, Mrs. Ellen Finnell Taylor Martin retains only her first name, and Mrs. Cole-McCall has even that taken from her.¹³ At the end of the series, Gilchrist's woman is, like Sexton's farmer's wife, defined entirely by her relationship to her husband. In this series, Gilchrist demonstrates the continuity of women's experience throughout generations, and she uses the social and historical context of each woman's experiences to illuminate that of the others, foregrounding the pattern of the women's suffering. Similarly, Gilchrist's poetry, as read in the context provided by Sexton's, takes on multiple layers of meaning.

Mothers

"I rock. I rock.

You are my stone child

with still eyes like marbles.

There is a death baby
for each of us.”

From “The Death Baby,” Anne Sexton (*CP* 358)

As I pointed out earlier, when Gilchrist was once asked about the conflicts of being both a mother and writer, Gilchrist, replied, “I was raised in a world in which you didn’t have ambitions after your had children; the moment you had a baby in your arms, the ambitions were transferred to your child” (Smith 46-7). Given this clear recognition of her own cultural milieu, it is not surprising that when she finally did begin to write professionally (well after she had raised her children and divorced their father), much of the work she published associates children with death. Although all parents naturally fear the death of their children, a writer who is unnaturally required to sacrifice her most essential *self* to her children can also come to identify those children as emblems of death (whether of the child or of the mother). While both Gilchrist and Sexton acknowledge this dark painful sacrifice outright in much of their work, in other works they seem to sublimate it, expressing their fear of death of the self as fear for the death of their children. In *The Annunciation*, for example, when Amanda realizes that she’s pregnant for the second time, she pulls herself into a yogic headstand “trying to stop all thoughts,” but her mind races: “It’s not a baby. A fetus is a fetus is a fetus. When the child is born the parents start dying. It’s a hostage. All it will do is kill me. I can’t do this to myself. I can’t allow it. I can’t let it happen. I don’t have a choice. I can’t have a baby. I’ll die.” (301). A sculpture entitled “Concept,” created by Amanda’s friend Katie, underscores this threat: “Six rows of life-sized baby bottles with silver nipples marched along the Plexiglass in neat lines. The cheerful bottles marched along as though they were headed straight for the viewer” (201). Sexton’s clearest expressions of this

“concept” is in her long poem “The Double Image,” in which she refers to her own death, as well as to her mother’s death. The central image in the poem is of two portraits, one of mother, Mary Gray, and one of daughter, Anne. The speaker in the text is, presumably, Sexton herself, addressing her daughter Joy. The occasion of the poem seems to be Sexton’s reunion with Joy after a long separation.¹⁴ In the first (of seven) stanzas, the speaker refers to Joy’s respiratory illness that was almost fatal and to one of her own suicide attempts, suggesting that the mother’s life was to be traded for the daughter’s:

Death was simpler than I’d thought.
 The day life made you well and whole
 I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
 I pretended I was dead
 until they white men pumped the poison out (*CP* 36)

In the fourth stanza, the speaker returns to this idea, alluding to her mother’s death from breast cancer, which Mary Gray (Sexton’s mother) had blamed on her daughter Anne. The stanza concludes,

They hung my portrait in the chill
 north light, matching
 me to keep me well.
 Only my mother grew ill.
 She turned from me, as if death were catching,
 as if death transferred,
 as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
 That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.

On the first of September she looked at me
 and said I gave her cancer.
 They carved her sweet hills out
 and still I couldn't answer. (*CP* 38)

Clearly, in both Gilchrist and Sexton's poetic vision, the health and wholeness of the mother is compromised by the child; in most of their poems, however, this part of the vision is sublimated into more culturally accepted forms, in which anxieties about the death of the self are not scrutinized so closely or so unflinchingly.

Although Sexton was the mother of daughters and Gilchrist the mother of sons, they still share a great degree of maternal anxiety that is expressed in even their most positive poems about their children. Foremost among these anxieties are their feelings of inadequacy as mothers. Both women struggle with the overwhelming day-to-day tasks of keeping their children safe and are terrified by their children's mortality. The powerlessness of women over their own lives, which is made clear in "The Farmer's Wife" and "Three Ladies," is magnified when they become mothers. Sexton's poem "The Falling Dolls" (*45 Mercy Street*, 1976), for example, illustrates the panic motherhood can bring. For a woman not used to wielding power even over her own life, the responsibility for children's lives can prove overwhelming. Gilchrist's poem "Taboo," a catalogue of proscriptions for pregnant women, emphasizes the relatively precarious, if not powerless, position of women as they enter motherhood.¹⁵ It is, in fact, a barrage of information that would surely exacerbate, rather than calm, any anxiety she might have about her ability to mother. The poem opens with seemingly inane commands:

Do not eat quick animals
 the child will be born too soon

[.]

Do not touch sharp tools

the child will taste blood. (*Land Surveyor's Daughter* 16)

It concludes with an admonishment to “Pray.” Although set in a primitive nomadic culture, this poem reflects the same anxieties expressed by Sexton in her poem “The Falling Dolls,” which is set in contemporary times.

Dolls,

by the thousands,

are falling out of the sky

and I look up in fear and wonder who will catch them?

[.]

I hold open my arms

and catch,

[.]

ten in all,

running back and forth like a badminton player,

catching the dolls, the babies I practice upon,

but others crack on the roof

and I dream, awake, I dream of falling dolls

who need cribs and blankets and pajamas

with real feet in them.

Why is there no mother?

Why are these dolls falling out of the sky? (*CP* 486-87)

The image of the dolls/children falling to their deaths brutally illustrates the anxiety of a new mother in much the same way as Gilchrist's catalogue of taboos. Like Lelia McLauren in "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," whose son literally does fall through the sky to his death, the mothers in these two poems live in constant fear for the lives of their children.

Another of Gilchrist's poems about motherhood continues the surreal imagery of Sexton's "The Falling Dolls." In Gilchrist's "Carnival of the Stone Children" (*Land Surveyor's Daughter*), the mother can only watch as the children are led to their destruction. Set during Mardi Gras, the poem focuses on the excesses to which the speaker watches her children fall prey, leading to an image of apocalypse. Although the children are not falling from the sky, they are poised precariously in trees, using drugs, suggesting that they are likely to fall at any time.

The children sang in the trees. The tallest ladder could
not reach them. Rich ladies wept in the streets named
for orators. Maids wept in the streets named for muses
and anyone who slept kept one eye on the moving cloud
of the starless nights.

The schools melted, the catfish floated belly up,
the river licked its levees, oil spread on the marshes,
pelicans flew upside down,
cars locked teeth at intersections.

The children sang in trees. They had pockets
full of red, blue, green, yellow. Shining needles
danced in their hands. The bundles arrived from

Bogota, from San Juan, from Marseilles, from
Canada, from Eureka Springs.

The children sang in the tees. The books were sewn
shut, the librarians left in disgust, the fathers bled
into the mirrors, the boy screamed you are not my mother.

The rains fell, the river rose, the ferry rammed
the wharf, the batture dwellers stood on the roofs
with wet feet, the curfew sounded, the tourists
lit out for Houston, the police peered into the windows,
the mayor wept on his tennis racket, the drummers

opened the spillway, they walked over the causeway
carrying the knives, the neckties, the uniforms,
the candles, the matches, the needles, the children.

Although the Pied Piper is replaced by a drummer, the story remains the same: the children, and possibly the city itself, are lost. The poem's dedication to Frank Stanford, the young poet lost to suicide at the age of 29, underscores the poem's gravity.¹⁶ Gilchrist also has a short story whose title almost exactly matches that of this poem. The short story, "The Carnival of the Stoned Children" (*Flights of Angels*, 1998), however, also focuses on the disease, decay and destruction of the adults, specifically the women, in the narrow segment of New Orleans about which Gilchrist writes. In the story, the narrator, a wealthy mother of a privileged young son who is

dealing and using drugs (marijuana and LSD), takes off with her friend Abby for a overnight trip to the narrator's house on the banks of the Bougue Falaya River, just outside of Mandeville, Louisiana, where the two women go to relax and rejuvenate themselves. However, the two women cannot leave behind the corruption of New Orleans; Abby is burdened by a sexually transmitted disease, "the first case of herpes simplex that had ever been diagnosed in New Orleans," which she had contracted from her ex-husband "one night when he brought the children home and found her in a lonely mood" (51). The narrator's comment that "We didn't know it then but it turned out that his [the ex-husband's] law firm and their wives and secretaries and secretaries' husbands were infected It was the beginning of the end of the sexual revolution but we didn't know that yet," reveals with dark humor the impact of the social incest that threatens the insular world in which the characters live and raise their children. In this story, then, Gilchrist shifts, or displaces, some of the anxiety about the children onto the adults who are ultimately to blame for the children's endangerment. Nevertheless, the fear for the self does not eclipse the fear for the children; the anxiety about the children dominates the story. The narrator reveals the tangled web of guilt, anxiety and powerlessness that overwhelm her:

We drove in silence for a while. I was glad to be away from my house. I was the mother of three bad teenage boys. Wild boys, the wildest boys in New Orleans, perhaps the world. Well, that's not true, but for fifteen years, since the first one was born, it had seemed that way. I didn't even want any children but here I was with a passel of wild boys, a career of boys, eating up about ninety percent of my brain on any given day, since the first one was born when I was nineteen years old and wilder than any of them would ever be. I knew wild. I was born wild and I was

still wild so they couldn't fool me, except that they were fooling me and would keep on doing it. (54)

Just a few hours after the women arrive in at their destination, Rhoda is on the beach, composing the poem that Gilchrist had previously published as “The Carnival of the Stone Children.” Roughly halfway through the poem—she has just written the description of the catfish floating “belly up”—she is interrupted by a call from her husband informing her that her middle son Jimmy, and his friend Danny, are “high on LSD and being kept in their room by [Rhoda's] cousin Ingersol until a doctor can get there” (65). Rhoda, then, is forced to complete the poem in the car, as Abby races them back to their children in New Orleans. When Rhoda reads the final stanza of the poem aloud, Abby seems stricken, uncomprehending: “God that, is so sad,” she says, “Are we in that much trouble?” (66). The two pieces, the poem and the short story, are two parts of a single work, and the two pieces, read in tandem, reveal more than either of them can separately.

The minor difference in the two works' titles—the word *stone* versus the word *stoned*—has major implications. In the poem, which deals almost exclusively with the fate of the children, the word *stone* (evocative of the children's tombstone's Gilchrist describes in her poem “The Children of Chermie Cemetery,” published in *Land Surveyor's Daughter*) suggests death, whereas the word *stoned* in the title of the short story suggests a temporary state of endangerment or corruption. The two pieces both illustrate extreme maternal anxiety involved in caring for children and keeping them alive.

Because Gilchrist's fear for her children's lives is so fierce, she returns to it again and again in her poetry, often using humor to diffuse terror. In “A Mother's Dream,” for example, she fantasizes that she can control her wild son's behavior:

I travel around in time.

I can stop parties.
 I can stop everyone from getting drunk
 all the time.
 [.]
 If they drink they cannot drive.
 I keep the babies with me.
 Not in this room, I say, and turn the lights out.
 They have a parade outside my windows,
 beer, ice, all that stuff, cymbals and drums.
 I am alone and free. No, I'm wonderful.
 They love me. I can keep them safe.
 I can keep them from blowing up the world,
 or the school cafeteria.

Despite her bold statements, the speaker, like the narrator who admits “that they were fooling me and would keep on doing it,” realizes her limitations, as is indicated by the word *dream* in the title. The final line, with its dark humor, further emphasizes the limited amount of the mother’s control. Controlling the chaos that children bring is not possible, nor can a mother ever be “alone and free.” Sexton makes this point in “The Child Bearers” (*45 Mercy Street*, 1976), a poem in which a mother, concerned about losing a child to cancer, addresses another mother:

Jean, Death comes close to us all,
 flapping its awful wings at us
 and the gluey wings crawl up our nose,
 Our children tremble in their teen-age cribs,

whirling off on a thumb or a motorcycle,
 mine pushed into gnawing a stilbestrol cancer
 I passed on like hemophilia,¹⁷
 or yours in the seventh grade, with her spleen
 smacked in by the balance beam.
 And we, mothers, crumpled, flyspotted
 with bringing them this far
 can do nothing now but pray.

Let us put your three children
 and my two children,
 ages ranging from eleven to twenty-one,
 and send them in a large air net up to God,
 with many stamps, *real* air mail,
 and huge signs attached”

SPECIAL HANDLING.

DO NOT STAPLE, FOLD OR MUTILATE!

And perhaps He will notice
 and pass a psalm over them
 for keeping safe for a whole,
 for a whole God-damned life span. (*CP* 489-50)

The mixed curses and entreaties for blessings illustrate the mother’s frantic need for power to protect her children, as well as her knowledge that such power cannot or will not be granted. The

key difference between Sexton's and Gilchrist's poem is the speaker's assumption about God. In Sexton's poem, the speaker is at the mercy of a careless God who disappoints and angers her. She must remind him not to "fold, staple or mutilate" and hopes that "He will notice." She expresses her disgust at her powerlessness in dealing with such a god in her admission that her children's lives are limited to a "God-damned life span." In contrast, Gilchrist's speaker becomes her own god-like force, "travel[ing] around in time," if only in fantasy.

Throughout her poetry, Sexton struggles with this issue. Although Sexton desperately wants to believe in a Christian God who has the kind of power Gilchrist claims for her characters, she is ultimately unable to do so. (I will discuss Sexton's struggle for such belief in much more detail in Chapter Four.)

In contrast, Gilchrist looks to more promising manifestations of divine power in the material world. That is, she turns to humanism; she ultimately comes to see the self as the only possible god, often investing divine power in herself and in those around her. In a poem about an injured child, for example, she casts the surgeon as a savior. In the poem "Southpaw" (*Riding Out the Tropical Depression*, 1986), the speaker, once again a mother terrified by the mortality of her child, puts her faith in the surgeon who repairs her son's injured hand. The structure of the poem suggests two forms of divinity. In the opening stanza, the mother-goddess creates the child who now lies on the operating table:

Wearer of my hair, keeper of my smile, sixteen years
since your left hand lay clenched inside
my womb sharing my cigarettes and sherry
though a Kansas City winter. The hand
increased half a millimeter a day.

Muscle, sinew, spread along the bones,
 fingers formed, knuckles bloomed. (*Riding Out the Tropical Depression* 2)

The speaker is clearly awed by the power of her body to create another; her body becomes a microcosm for the universe in which new life simply “blooms” into being.

In the final stanza, the divine power can only manifest itself in human form:

God of the skillful eye,
 God of the opposable thumb,
 guide the hands that stitch
 my child’s split hand,
 that it may grasp its limbs and pull,
 may hold, touch, stroke, love.

The poem’s implication that the act of touch is the essence of love, and thus of life, echoes yet another ideal that Sexton struggled to invest with absolute belief. In Sexton’s poem, “The Touch,” as in Gilchrist’s “Southpaw,” the speaker focuses on the hand as the locus of embodied power, a metaphor for humanistic belief: “And all this is metaphor. / An ordinary hand—just lonely / for something to touch that touches back.” The poem begins with an image that Gilchrist imports into “Southpaw.” Sexton’s poem opens: “For months the hand had been sealed off / in a tin box.” The second stanza continues

The hand had collapsed,
 a small wood pigeon
 that had gone into seclusion.
 I turned it over and the palm was old,

its lines traced like fine needlepoint
and stitched up into the fingers. (*CP* 173)

The end of the second stanza of “Southpaw” clearly recalls Sexton’s image of the “sealed off,” “stitched up” hand. Gilchrist describes the surgeon piecing “the hand / together like a patchwork glove.” After all is repaired, “the cast goes on / locking the hand in a private room.” As “Southpaw” illustrates, for Gilchrist, the divine is clearly present in the embodied self. In a moment of optimism, Sexton also expresses hope in such a world. For both poets, however, the threat of injury and isolation (both physical and psychic) complicates the speaker’s relationship to all other beings. If the body can be destroyed or injured, then we are all held hostage, emotionally and psychically, by those we love.¹⁸

Such knowledge haunts Sexton and Gilchrist. As Sexton’s poems “The Falling Dolls” and “The Child Bearers,” as well as Gilchrist’s short story “The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society” and her poem “The Carnival of the Stone Children,” establish, both poets repeatedly present mothers whose lives are terrorized by their children’s mortality. Gilchrist’s most direct treatment of this issue is in her poem “The Children of Cheramie Cemetery Terrebone Parish Louisiana” (*Land Surveyor’s Daughter*, 1979). The poem’s epigraph, “for Clarence Laughlin,” pays homage to one of Gilchrist’s close friends, an internationally famous New Orleans photographer.¹⁹ The narrative poem describes the speaker’s visit, accompanied by her photographer friend, to a children’s cemetery, and presents what is possibly the only way of dealing with the fragility of children and the attendant anxieties of motherhood. In the poem, the speaker looks at the tombstones of many generations of children as she is accompanied by a masterful photographer, and is therefore able to see the tombstones through his eyes, through the

lens of art. Such sublimation is the only relief available in the face of utter tragedy. The poem opens:

Tiny cement tombs proclaim the sun
 shining and white like masks for virgins.
 On each an iron cross awaits a time of miracles.
 On some rosaries swing light as webs.
 Shadows lean to the west in such a way
 that Matille lies in the arms of Albin
 whose cross falls on Delphine and points out
 Avaida and Osema, twins of the Terrebones.
 The cross of Cheramie Divides Attica
 from Justilla, darkens my shoes
 where I stand by Elodie, who died at three,
 a bright sleep in silk flowers.

The speaker's appreciation for the art of photography shapes her view of the cemetery. Her descriptions include, for an example, an analysis of the interplay of lines and shadows, making it clear that although she does see the tombstones, the actual death of the children is obscured and transformed by her vision. Although the simile "shining and white like masks for virgins" reminds us that these children did, indeed, die virgins, the effect of the sunlight on the surface of the stones, which of course symbolize death, emphasizes the stones as merely artifice or masks. The children, in fact, do live on in the imagination and the eye of the speaker. Viewing the shadows, she sees that "Matille lies in the arms of Albin," vaguely sexualizing the children and clearly undercutting the effect of her original perception of the "masks for virgins." Further,

Albin's "cross falls on Delphine and points out Avida and Osema, twins of the Terrebones." The speaker views these connections in tableaux, as if her mind expects the actors to break the scene and resume their lives. And briefly, at least in the mind of the speaker (and perhaps in the mind of the reader), the children are resurrected. However, as the final stanza of the poem makes clear, although the arts can offer some comfort, they cannot protect us from the reality of death:

The white-haired genius who brought me here
 opens his sack and hands me a sandwich.
 We feast on cold bread in a difficult year.
 We chew our deaths.
 Even rain does not enter
 La Societe Des Enfantés du Silence.

The speaker gives voice to the poet's philosophy that although art cannot save us, it can help us to make sense of experiences that are otherwise beyond our comprehension.²⁰

Although Gilchrist is a writer and many of her characters are writers, as the previous poem points out, she clearly acknowledges the debt that writers owe to the visual artists.²¹ In *The Annunciation*, for example, Amanda McCamey creates a new life for herself in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she becomes friends with a potter, Katie Vee. One of Katie's pieces that Amanda admires—a vase topped with a cross—becomes emblematic of Amanda's relationship with the Catholic Church. Amanda is drawn to the piece because it is "the most irreligious statement [Amanda's] ever seen" (108). The piece, which Amanda first sees in her friend Brummette's office at Tulane University, represents for Amanda her own suffering as a young woman whose child had been taken from her by the nuns at the home for unwed mothers in New Orleans. The vase, or vessel, a symbol of women's fertility, is blocked, cut off, by the church,

which is, of course, represented by the cross. Katie's piece becomes an objective correlative for Amanda's experience with her adolescent pregnancy, which she was forced to bring to term, and which therefore left her seemingly infertile. When Amanda visits a doctor in Virginia shortly after the delivery of the child, his reaction makes clear just how much damage has been done.

After examining Amanda and assuring her that she will be fine, he becomes enraged:

But she won't be fine, he thought . . . she won't be fine goddammit all to hell. That gorgeous child, with a mind like that. Goddamn their crazy outworn used-up terror and ignorance and hypocrisy and fear. Imagine letting a child carry a baby to term. She'll probably never conceive again. . . . Not to even mention the really unforgivable part.

How long until she starts seeing that baby in every one-year-old on the streets, in every two-year old, in every three-year old . . . ? When I am sheriff of the world I will bomb Rome off the face of the earth. I will watch the Vatican go sailing up to God in a million pieces. (42)

However, through Katie's piece, Amanda is able to make sense of her experience, to recognize and therefore renounce the forces that would destroy her.

Similarly, in Sexton's poem "The Double Image" (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960) the speaker, who has also lost a child, is able to look to a pair of portraits (of herself and of her mother) as a focal point for her fear, self-loathing and regret. Interestingly, Sexton says of this poem that it is the "real" or "true" version of the story she had tried to tell in "The Unknown Girl in The Maternity Ward." On the advice of Richard Snodgrass, Sexton looked in this poem not to an imaginary figure, but to an experience in her own life to explore the theme of motherhood and loss (Interview with Heyen and Poulin 137-38). In "The Double Image" the speaker's mother

(like Sexton's own mother) has the daughter's portrait painted after the daughter's first nervous breakdown and subsequent separation from her infant daughter. As the poem explores the motives of the speaker's manipulative mother, it comes to reveal the speaker's own, previously unacknowledged guilt:

I, who was never quite sure
 about being a girl, needed another
 life, another image to remind me.
 And this was my world guilt; you could not cure
 nor soothe it.
 I made you to find me. (*CP* 41-42)

The poem, then, is ultimately about the inherent selfishness of the creative urge, specifically the creative urge to mother children.

This maternal guilt permeates the poetry of both Sexton and Gilchrist. In fact, the first poem Gilchrist ever wrote as an adult is, very much like Sexton's "The Double Image," both an apology and an appeal for forgiveness. Like "The Double Image," Gilchrist's "Marshall" (*Riding Out the Tropical Depression* 1) focuses on both the mother's narcissism and the mother's absence:²²

Beautiful son, by your shining hair
 and the wind that sings to this island
 once more I am missing your birthday.
 How many times has the year turned around
 and found an ocean or a mountain range
 between your hand and mine.

Sexton wrote “The Double Image” during her separation from her daughter Joy, following her nervous collapse. Gilchrist wrote “Marshall” while she was away from her adult son on his birthday. While the differences in the situations are obvious—a mother’s leaving her infant because of her own nervous breakdown precipitated by post-partum depression is quite different than missing an adult child’s birthday—the poems are motivated by a similar impulse, the pursuit of redemption. Gilchrist closes her poem:

Forgive me my omissions, forgive me
 my strange motherhood, keeper of my eyes and hair,
 grown beneath my heart like a great pear.
 Wearer of my smile, shall we redeem each other?
 Shall we drink compassion like champagne
 across the continents and roll across the oceans
 drunk with love?

Despite the tone of optimism in this poem, both poets ultimately suggest that such redemption is not simple, or even possible. As the speaker says in another of Sexton’s poems written in the voice of a mother speaking about her child. The poet begins “A Little Uncomplicated Hymn / *for Joy* / is what I wanted to write” (CP 148). However, the speaker realizes that love is never uncomplicated, that forgiveness can never be complete and that poetry cannot fully accommodate the complexities of human, specifically maternal, love. The poem ends:

I wanted to write such a poem
 with such music, such guitars going;
 I tried at the teeth of sound
 to draw up such legions of noise;

I tried at the breakwater
 to catch the star off each ship;
 and at the closing of hands
 I looked for their houses
 and silences.
 I found just one.

 you were mine
 and I lent you out.

I look for uncomplicated hymns
 but love has none. (*CP* 152)

Gilchrist also realizes that the mother-child relationship can never be free of conflict. In her own poetry, she often uses humor to diffuse the potential tragedy of this knowledge. One of her very early poems, "Poem Found in a Ladies Jewelry Box, Dated 1975," published in 1975 while Gilchrist was a contributing editor at *The Courier*, describes the accidental conception of a child. In this poem, the speaker's celebration of motherhood is permeated with dark humor, beginning in the first line, where she addresses her son as "Little broken rubber child." Nevertheless, its ending is one of the most positive of all of her poems about mothering children.

Little broken rubber child
 I look back and forth
 from your red hair
 blazing in the ocean,
 to my Caesarean scar,
 your autograph.

Thirteen years since
the two of us rolled into O.R.
[.]
I am twenty,
in the dingy bathroom light,
half tight,
in my shortie nightgown
on my own birthday night.
Where is that yellow douche bag?
By the time I found the light switch
half your genes
were on their way to my DNA,
skiing up the fallopian tubes
to make a connection with the future.
Outside, three feet of new snow
had fallen on Kansas City.
Inside was some love,
and no money.
But my head was already
full of your cosmic chatter,
your big plans.
Such a luxury,
you were a present

I would never have given myself.²³

A similar tone of celebration tinged with resignation marks one of Sexton's most well-known poems "Live" (*Live or Die*, 1966):

two daughters, two urchins,
 picking roses off my hackles.
 If I'm on fire they dance around it
 and cook marshmallows.
 And if I'm ice
 they simply skate on me
 in little ballet costumes. (*CP* 168)

Like Gilchrist's reference to her youngest son as her "little broken rubber child," the image Sexton's speaker creates of her relationship to her daughters is bittersweet.

For both Sexton and Gilchrist, one way of dealing with the anxieties and disappointments of mothering is through writing. As Sexton's occasional poem to her daughter Linda as she enters womanhood, "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" illustrates, writing is one of the only ways of both communicating her hopes for and displacing her fears about, her daughter. Gilchrist's humorous poem "A Mother Visits the Last Frontier on Labor Day," which describes a mother's reaction to her son's moving to Alaska, illustrates this connection between maternal anxiety and literary creation.²⁴ The first three stanzas catalogue the dangers that await him in his new home, including everything from "Fairbanks mulatto hookers" to the scarcity of daylight. The speaker-mother, conflicted about leaving her child there, considers staying on, occupying herself with her writing:

Tomorrow I leave my son to his own devices. To kill

a big-horn sheep or fuck a bear, whatever. Well,
hurry up, I grumble, I am no longer young
and my hair is turning grey.

But I too am caught in the fever, the gold stain.
I think it over. Fifty men to every woman!
And God knows this town could use a living poet
and God damn it might be fun to spend a winter
locked in at fifty below,
turning out heroic couplets.

The self-mocking tone makes it clear that the writer is not deluding herself. As a self-described “living poet,” she is, indeed, as healthy and independent as any mother can possibly be. Although she realizes that her options are limited, she will, as usual, deal with the situation with creativity and humor.

It is with such humor that Gilchrist ultimately triumphed over the patriarchally imposed limitation on her humanity as she fulfilled each of the culturally-defined roles that were required of her as a woman who came of age in a pre-feminist culture. Born to a father whose wit and tenacity were matched only by her own, she seems to have made eventual peace with him, and, by extension, with her husbands who ultimately took his place. Instead of simply acquiescing to the father/husband’s culturally mandated role as her superior, she simultaneously conformed and rebelled, combining disingenuous solemnity and subversive seduction. As a mother, although she did indeed have serious, emotionally wrenching conflicts about her role in her son’s lives as they grew into adult men, she also accepted her limitations and later processed her anxiety in the only

way that came naturally to her—through writing. Sexton, it seems, approached many of her own roles as a woman within a patriarchal culture in a similar manner. However, unlike Gilchrist, Sexton did not survive to experience a culture that could validate and celebrate such an achievement. The unfortunate timing of Sexton's suicide in 1974 prevented Sexton from participating in the mainstream feminist culture that was just then beginning to make itself known and that has since fostered Gilchrist's writing in which she so prominently displays her debt to Sexton.

NOTES

1. A subtle strain of self destruction and brooding madness also runs throughout both poems. Interestingly, Gilchrist also uses the penultimate line of “Letter” as the title for her short story “The Gauzy Edge of Paradise,” which she published in the collection *Victory Over Japan* (1983), which is divided into four sections. The section including “The Gauzy Edge of Paradise” is entitled “Crazy, Crazy, Now Showing Everywhere,” and, as its title suggests, the stories in this section focus on madness and self-destruction—issues I will examine in Chapter Four.
2. Gilchrist uses the name of the salon to invoke and subvert the ideology of fairy tales. Her method here is very similar to Sexton’s treatment of fairy tales in her collection *Transformations*, which I will discuss in Chapter Five.
3. For a fascinating look at the history of live oaks in Louisiana—and their human “representatives”—including the history and bylaws of “The Live Oak Society,” see *Louisiana Live Oak Lore*, by Ethelyn G. Orso (1992). Although the “Live Oak Society” was established in all seriousness in 1934, the bylaws drafted in 1981 suggest a bit a self-mockery. Nevertheless, the truth suggested in jest is difficult to ignore. For example, Article V of the 1981 bylaws states: “The membership of the Society shall consist of designated individual live oak trees known or suspected to be more than one hundred years old. Live Oaks less than one hundred years old, possessing honorable qualifications, will be eligible to be enlisted in the Junior League” (Orso 104). Further, although I am not suggesting that Gilchrist was necessarily aware of the these bylaws, which were drawn up the very year that *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* was published (1981), I do believe that the impulse that drove the membership at the time was palpable to Gilchrist, particularly during the years in the 1970s when she was herself an affluent New Orleans wife and mother.

4. For a recent discussion of the literary patterns that emerge in the works of women (including Anne Sexton) as they confront such feelings about their fathers, see Chapter Four, “Fathering Daughters: Oedipal Rage and Aggression in Women’s Writing,” in Judith Harris’s *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* (2003).
5. For an revealing discussion of this poem, and about Sexton’s writing of “confessional” poetry in general, see her 1970 interview with William Packard. When asked if her confessional poetry was necessarily autobiographical, Sexton replied that it was not. She went on to add that her poetry was, *nevertheless*, therapeutic. She used this poem as an example in her answer, which, interestingly, she began with a question of her own: “Was Thomas Wolfe confessional or not? Any poem is therapy. The art of writing is therapy. You don’t solve problems in writing. They’re still there. I’ve heard psychiatrists say, ‘See, you’ve forgiven your father. There it is in your poem.’ But I haven’t forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did” (46).
6. The longer version, which opens Gilchrist’s first collection, *Land Surveyor’s Daughter*, was published 13 years earlier than the shorter version. Nevertheless, the close thematic connections and the shared title of the two poems cannot be ignored. Like the poems and stories that share titles, these two pieces work together to illustrate the evolution of Gilchrist’s thinking.
7. Gilchrist’s abiding interest in land and man’s manipulation and engineering of it remains clear throughout her published works and in her public comments. In the title of her first published collection of poems, *Land Surveyor’s Daughter*, for example, she defines herself through her relationship to both her father, the levee engineer and, through him, to the land itself. She begins her published journals, *Falling Through Space*, with an entry describing the landscape of the Mississippi Delta: “This is the bayou that runs through my dreams . . .” (11). With great pride, she goes on to point out she was conceived in a tent, where her parents were temporarily

living as her father, Garth Walker, a civil engineer, worked to fortify the levee after the flood of 1927 (13). This point, in fact, seems so important to her that she goes on to set Amanda's "immaculate conception" of her second child on the banks of the Buffalo River in Northwest Arkansas; further, the child's earthly father, Will Lyons, is a land surveyor who has studied the rivers of his state since childhood. In the single longest entry in her journals, which was previously published in 1986 as "In Search of the White River" in *Southern Magazine*, Gilchrist discusses her epic quest to find the source of the White River, which feeds into the Buffalo. For an extended discussion of this phenomenon, see Courtney Adkins' doctoral dissertation, *Intersecting Geographies: A Study of the Female Body and the South in the Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist and Jill McCorkle*, for a discussion of Gilchrist's women's bodies as analogues to the often exploited landscape of the New South. Margaret Bauer's "Women and Water" also provides a detailed examination of Gilchrist's female characters and their relationship to various bodies of water throughout the region.

8. This autobiographical poem is based on Sexton's experience with her husband Kayo, on safari in Nairobi. The excursion was a gift from Sexton to Kayo as a "thank you for his support during the long years when her development as a writer taxed the family resources in every way" (Middlebrook *AS* 254, 262).

9. The concept of order is key to the psychological health of both Gilchrist and Sexton. In their works, the word *order* functions as a shorthand means of communicating this complex concept. For example, Sexton's "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," opens with the lines, "Not that it was beautiful, / but that, in the end, there was / a certain sense of *order* there; something worth learning in the narrow diary of my mind, / in the commonplaces of the asylum / where the cracked mirror / or my own selfish death / outstared me" (my emphasis, *CP* 34). In

these lines, Sexton refers both to her poems and to her experience in Bedlam; in both, she finds the beginnings of order, of sanity and even satisfaction. In an interview with Patricia Marx, Sexton states, “. . . the writing actually puts things back in place. I mean things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again, and world is again a little more sensible and real. I’m more in touch with things” (73-3). Similarly, in Gilchrist’s *The Annunciation*, when Amanda first moves from New Orleans (a city which reminds her daily of her lost child and of her dying marriage) to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she will begin her work as a translator and poet, she says to her new mentor Marshall, “I adore it here It’s what I dreamed of. While I was waiting to come up here to live, running around New Orleans selling everything, I used to dream of being here, of walking around the buildings with many books in my arms.” To this he answers, “You were dreaming of the Academy, A dream of order. A good dream” (149).

10. In a very frank discussion of human history and incest, Gilchrist points out just how psychically close these two relationships are (*Falling Through Space* 155-56).

11. For an interesting close reading of this poem in which the author argues its debt to Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sonnet sequence, see Artemis Michailidou’s “Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anne Sexton: The Disruption of Domestic Bliss.” Because Millay is a common literary ancestor to both Sexton and Gilchrist, this article will be of particular interest to those interested in the connections between Sexton and Gilchrist.

12. Her title, “Three Ladies Enter the Seventh Decade,” is, at first, puzzling. Yang Ti Po lives in 1803, Ellen Finnell Taylor Martin lives in 1903, and Mrs. Cole McCall in 1972. The seventh decade, then, can only be that of each woman individually. That is, each septuagenarian woman lives at the center of her own universe, outside of linear, or monumental time. The time in which these women live is, like Kristeva’s concept of reproductive time, or women’s time, concerned

primarily with the life-cycle of the individual woman (*Kristeva Reader* 188).

13. The hyphenated “Cole” seems ironic since, although it can be seen as an effort to preserve the woman’s original identity, it represents only her father’s (and not her mother’s) name.

14. Sexton was separated from her daughter Joy shortly after Joy’s birth; after the breakdown, Joy was sent to live with her paternal grandmother, where she remained for more than 3 years. For a more detailed description of this separation, see Chapter Two, “From Rats to Star, 1957-1958” in Middlebrook’s biography of Sexton.

15. In a lighter, more humorous treatment of this issue in *Net of Jewels*, Gilchrist describes Rhoda’s reaction to being left alone to care for her two young sons when she and her husband move away from Rhoda’s extended family in Alabama to live on their own in Louisiana. Her immediate reaction to the situation is to hire a nanny “to keep the wolf of motherhood from [her] door” with the two thousand dollars her father has put into an account for her to use for emergencies: if motherhood “wasn’t an emergency, [Rhoda] didn’t know what one was” (277).

16. Chapter Two of this dissertation includes a discussion of Gilchrist’s relationship with Stanford and its impact on her work.

17. One of Sexton’s primary specific anxieties about her older daughter, Linda, was that she would develop cancer as a result of Sexton’s use of the drug DES during her pregnancy with Linda (*Searching For Mercy Street* 165). Beginning in the 1930s, DES was commonly prescribed for pregnant women until 1971, when research revealed a pattern of a rare form of cancer in daughters born to women who had used the drug during pregnancy (United States).

18. In a discussion about parenting in *Starcarbon*, Daniel Hand’s brother Nial refers to the problem as “the hostage factor.” He goes on to explain, “You can bear misfortune or bad luck or

even death. You either fix it or you bear it, but when it is your children . . . it isn't that easy. When they suffer, you can't fix it and you can't bear it, and you are doomed to watch it" (99).

19. Laughlin's "Welsh Actress" appears on the cover of *Land Surveyor's Daughter*, the collection in which the poem was published. For a fascinating discussion by Gilchrist of Laughlin's photography, see the chapter entitled "Visual Poems: Clarence, A Celebration," in *Haunter of Ruins: The Photography of Clarence John Laughlin* (19).

20. In *Falling Through Space*, Gilchrist includes a description of her first meeting with Laughlin and the profound effect his artistic sensibilities had upon her own:

. . . on the walls were the most incredible photographs I had ever seen. Absolutely original, as was their maker. He came into the gallery, wearing a coat thrown over his shoulder like a cape, and took the podium and began to talk about art in a way I had never heard. About the relationship between art and the subconscious mind, about the forms art takes in its insistence on telling us what we're thinking. About how art takes us past the veils of illusion and returns us to ourselves. About what a photograph means and why light and shadow fascinate us (78)

21. In an entry dated August 1, 1985, Gilchrist describes an interesting dream she had about a conversation with Picasso and adds, "In real life I also hang out with painters and potters and photographers. They are the best friends a writer has. They teach you to use your eyes." She goes on to describe her relationship with Clarence Laughlin, the New Orleans photographer to whom "The Children of Chermie Cemetery Terrebone Parish Louisiana" is dedicated: "Clarence Laughlin was my first artist friend after I started writing, a wonderful, outlandish, completely original man" (*Falling Through Space* 82).

22. These words and their sentiment could easily be those of Amanda McCamey and her quest to find and reclaim her lost daughter, Barrett Clare, in *The Annunciation*. Amanda realizes that her claiming of Barrett could actually do more harm than good for the daughter; in a conversation with Guy McCamey [Barrett's biological father], Amanda tells him, "You think that girl down there is so going to be so thrilled to see us. You think we're so grand because we're McCameys. No one in New Orleans know who the McCameys are. That girl lives in a very tough, very snotty world. We would embarrass her to death. An old athlete who married a mafioso's daughter and a woman who has boyfriends half her age. I've seen that would she lives in. They don't like people like us. We scare them to death" (291-93). Eventually, however, Amanda ultimately agrees to a reunion with her daughter.

23. In the original poem, as it was published, key terms such as "rubber," "Caesarean scar" and "douche bag" are footnoted and glossed, adding some very dark humor. However, the poem contains several typographical errors, including misnumbering of the footnotes. Unfortunately, this misnumbering makes the poem rather difficult to read, so I do not include the footnotes here.

Mary McCay alludes to this confusion in a discussion of Gilchrist's work at the newspaper:

"[Don Lee] Keith was a contributing editor at the paper while Gilchrist was there, and he worked closely with her. He had noticed a poem by Gilchrist in the *Courier* and, witnessing her pique at the typos in the poem when the newspaper was published, befriended her. His articles, too, had suffered from the same careless typesetting so he was prepared to sympathize with Gilchrist" (*Ellen Gilchrist* 12).

24. Gilchrist mentions that her writing of *The Annunciation*, in which Will Lyons' death suggests her fears for her adult son's life, might very well have been a reaction to the trauma of her son's move (*Falling Through Space* 34).

CHAPTER 4

SEXTON, GILCHRIST AND THE GREAT DIVIDE:

PSYCHOTHERAPY, CHRISTIANITY AND SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

In addition to their preoccupations with family relationships, Gilchrist and Sexton also share concerns about mental health and emotional survival. Both writers explore these issues as they relate to their individual struggles with religious belief and artistic development. Throughout their careers, both women move towards an understanding of psychotherapy and religion as limiting social constructs predicated upon patriarchy and therefore necessarily damaging to women. In many ways, Gilchrist's work goes further than Sexton's, which was, of course, prematurely ended when she committed suicide at the age of forty-four. In examining the development of Sexton's work leading up to her suicide, many critics have identified a clear pattern of increasing antagonism between the poet and two of the most powerful institutional forces in her life: psychotherapy and religion. Although Sexton desperately wanted to believe in the redemptive power of both, as she continued to struggle with these ideas in her poetry and in her life, it became increasingly obvious that neither could save her. Gilchrist comes to a similar conclusion but is able to modify her thinking about herself and her relationship to these cultural constructs before they can destroy her. That is, she is able to take from them, partly due to her experience with Sexton's texts, a certain knowledge that makes her stronger while turning away from the elements that would harm her. Although Sexton was, in a limited way, able to recognize and combat these forces as well, they ultimately overwhelmed her. Her legacy, however, has

provided other women with the lessons and tools necessary to understand and therefore combat the psychic and cultural forces that hastened her own death. Sexton's eighteen-year-long struggle to resist suicide allowed her to write poems that might possibly help her readers in a way that they couldn't help Sexton herself.¹ Gilchrist acknowledges her own debt to Sexton—both as a woman and as a writer—when she claims that her own “generation of women learned about [them]selves from her” (*FTS* 75). Indeed, as Susan Juhasz has argued, “Sexton's lasting significance . . . lies in the fact that at least some of the time she did manage to speak as a mother—to daughter-readers and daughter-writers. . . . who now understand in a more self-conscious fashion the need for a mother as source and model.” Juhasz also speculates that one of the reasons for Sexton's demise was that Sexton “never had an awareness of a real precedent for her role as a mother-poet and hence found insufficient support for her endeavors” (*Contemporary Women Writers* 468-69). Gilchrist, however, does claim such a model “mother-poet,” to whom she pays homage. Gilchrist not only learns about herself through Sexton's work but also takes up where Sexton left off, specifically in the quest for mental and spiritual sanctuary, assuming the mantle of Sexton's legacy and working to illuminate its social context.

In a discussion of Sexton and the “poetics of suicide,” Jeffery Berman compares his appreciation for Sexton's poetry to that of other female poets lost to suicide, specifically Sylvia Plath:

I feel a pang more of something for Anne Sexton because she stayed here with her pain, instead of trying to leave it, and bringing it with her anyway. Whenever I have been really down, I've always thought, “But if only I could get away. Then it would be OK.” But I've come to learn that this is not so. So I think that if we face the pain and are able to sit in the same room with it, we can accept it. Not love it.

Just accept it. This running away part of me has always bothered me, and I'm not always sensitive to that part. And that is the way my feelings are divided between Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. (176-77)

Gilchrist's appreciation of Sexton's life and work seems similar. Although she mourns the loss of the poet, she deeply appreciates the gift of the poetry and what it has taught her about survival—so much so that she goes to great lengths in her own writing to critique the societal forces that seem to have contributed to Sexton's demise. As Juhasz succinctly states, “Psychoanalysis created Anne Sexton the poet out of Anne Sexton the madwoman and helped to destroy her. It gave her the tools for her trade—poetry—but at the same time it taught her to put those tools to work in the service of the father” (*Modern American Women Writers* 468). In her own work, Gilchrist paints decidedly unfavorable portraits of psychotherapy and religion as they were institutionalized in mainstream American culture during Sexton's lifetime—and, in some instances, as they remain today.

Psychotherapy and the Feminism

Both Sexton and Gilchrist spent many years in psychotherapy, and it is not surprising that they incorporate that experience in their art. However, the difference in outcomes for each writer is obvious: after eighteen years of therapy, Sexton finally succeeded in committing suicide. After twenty-four years in therapy, Gilchrist emerged as a strong artist, a woman highly aware of the ability of the life of the mind to preserve the life of the body and spirit. Although Sexton was indeed seriously mentally ill, and Gilchrist has always maintained a strong degree of mental health, I also suspect that the timing of their experiences as female psychiatric patients likely influenced the efficacy of their treatment and their subsequent literary responses to it.

As Nancy Chodorow points out in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, “The dominant feminist stance during [the late 1960s and early 1970s], beginning with Betty Friedan, and continuing with major statements by [Shulamith] Firestone, [Kate] Millet, [Naomi] Weisstein, and others, was an enormous hostility to and condemnation of Freud. Freudian theory and therapy were taken as major factors in women’s oppression” (165). The mainstream feminist critique of psychotherapeutic methods, however, did not take hold until the early-to-mid 1970s, in the wake of such works as Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1971) and Phyllis Chessler’s *Women and Madness* (1972). Both offer ground-breaking insights into the problematic relationship between women and the methods of mental-health treatment available at that time. Specifically, in *The Female Eunuch*, Greer critiques the Freudian model of analysis as resting on the tautological “corner-stone of Freudian theory of womanhood”—that is, “the masculine conviction that woman is a castrated man” (104). Chessler’s *Women and Madness* went even further, presenting the idea that much of what our culture understands as madness is merely deviation from culturally defined sex-role stereotypes, that “It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must ‘adjust’ to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable,” concluding that “The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture” (68-69). Chessler goes on to state that “the *sine qua non* of ‘feminine’ identity in patriarchal society is the violation of her incest taboo, i.e., the initial and continued ‘preference’ for Daddy, followed by the approved falling in love and/or marrying of powerful father figures” (138). Although Sexton was still living at the time of the publication of these works, their impact on mainstream cultural consciousness was, I believe, not largely realized until after her death.² The ideas, that is, had not reached a critical cultural mass in time to reach her. It

would be another five years after Sexton's suicide, for example, before Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would publish their landmark *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

According to her own admission, for nearly all of her writing career, Sexton lived and worked outside of the feminist movement. As a result, she did not benefit from its intellectually progressive thinking until the ideas it spawned reached the mainstream culture, which naturally lags a few years behind the cutting edge of any political or social movement. In a conversation with Elaine Showalter and Maxine Kumin a year before her suicide, Sexton notes that "when we [Sexton and Kumin] began, there was no women's movement," nor did Sexton associate herself with it later on. In her biography *Anne Sexton*, Diane Wood Middlebrook points out that Sexton "never affiliated herself with the politics of women's liberation" (151). In fact, Middlebrook describes an incident late in Sexton's career (1972 or 1973), when Sexton made a curt reply to a University of California at Santa Cruz professor who had asked her advice about a women's studies course she was preparing. Sexton's advice: "Just remember that women are human first" (365). Middlebrook explains that "the question of whether she was a feminist bothered Sexton, possibly because of the word's associations with anger"; whatever her reasons, Sexton certainly did work "outside of the arena of public debate" (365, 364). As Middlebrook points out, Sexton did not review books or share ideas about "the social purposes of art" (364).

That the rejection of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy was indeed taking hold at least within the self-proclaimed feminist community in the United States was, however, made quite clear with the publication of Erica Jong's landmark novel *Fear of Flying* in 1973, just one year before Sexton's suicide.³ Eli Zaretsky, a historian of psychoanalysis, and author of *Secrets of the Soul*, points to the "emblematic" key scene in Jong's novel, in which a woman dramatically breaks with her analyst, as a literary example of the larger social phenomenon:

“Don’t you see that men have always defined femininity as a means of keeping women in line? Why should I listen to you about what it means to be a woman? Are you a woman? Why shouldn’t I listen to myself for once? And to other women” As in a dream (I never would have believed myself capable of it) I got up from the couch (how many years had I been lying there?), picked up my pocketbook, and walked . . . out . . . I was free. (qtd. in Zaretsky 328)

Interestingly, several years after Sexton’s suicide, Jong herself, who was strongly attracted to Sexton’s work, stated, “If Anne had stuck around another ten years, the world might have caught up with her” (qtd. in Middlebrook 365). In other words, Anne’s intuitive or instinctive feminism was quite real, but the institution of feminism had not yet grown mainstream enough to reach the women who could most benefit from its power to legitimate their concerns. Such women included Anne Sexton, who expressed fear of “writing as a woman writes” (*Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters* 40).⁴ Gilchrist, however, does survive to reap the benefits of feminism as a mainstream American institution and is therefore well-positioned to continue the feminist critique of psychotherapeutic methods.

In one of her own journalistic pieces, “Going Sane in New Orleans,” written in 1976 for *The Courier: The Weekly Newspaper of New Orleans*, two years after Sexton’s suicide and three years after the publication of Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, Gilchrist discusses the current modes of psychotherapy available, wryly commenting on their methodology:

Plan on spending from five thousand to twenty thousand dollars with this crowd and several hours a week on the couch for more than several years. These *men* will refuse to tell you at the outset exactly what you are in for on the assumption that it will arouse false hopes, but essentially you will make a

prolonged transference (which means you will fall in love with the guy or think he is your father, and if you are a woman, do a lot of fantasizing about how to get him to proposition you). If he is good, by professional standards, he will resist all of this foolishness and forgive you at the same time.

Any attempts on your part to tell him what you would like to be doing are out. You are trying to “take over therapy” (down, boy, down). (6)

Although Sexton also recognized such flaws in the psychotherapeutic process, she was never able to break away from her engagement with it. Gilchrist, however, was able to end her psychotherapy after twenty-four years and went on to articulate the limitations and inherent dangers of psychotherapy throughout her work, in which she frequently foregrounds the stories of women, including Sexton, who were seriously harmed by it.

Both writers’ struggles with psychiatric treatment and its patriarchal underpinnings are well documented in their creative works. In Sexton’s case, therapy was ultimately ineffective; in fact, much of her interaction with her therapists was actually harmful. For example, for a brief period in 1966, Sexton was in therapy with Dr. Zweizung, whom she called her “doctor-daddy” (Middlebrook *AS* 258). During her treatment with Dr. Zweizung, the two had a sexual affair that culminated in one of Sexton’s many suicide attempts. Gilchrist, in contrast, was ultimately able to extricate herself from the bonds she had with her therapists because she recognized the patriarchal underpinnings of such relationships—a point she makes clear in the *Courier* article. Although Gilchrist admits that she is “funnier and wiser and more balanced because of it [therapy],” and that it made her “like” and “trust” herself more, she is still ambivalent about the efficacy of therapy, speculating: “Of course, I might have been that way [“funnier and wiser and more balanced”] because I got older. Or maybe it’s just because I’ve gotten up every day for eight

years and done my work and am still doing it. Maybe my work healed me of the small amount of civilizing I was exposed to” (*Falling Through Space* 90-91). Like Sexton, Gilchrist emphasizes the connection between literary work and psychological health. In a journal entry entitled “More Repressed Papers,” Gilchrist includes the following verse:

I would still be a writer whether or not I had ever been
 in psychoanalysis but I would be a different writer
 more driven, frightened, wild and unsure, a poet hiding behind
 the mask of poetry, talking in riddles,
 obsessed for days with words and riddles,
 caught in traps of language,
 unable to understand the sources of language or my own
 subconscious motivations and drives.
 I would not know as much, maybe.

Maybe I found out as much writing as I did talking. (90)

With the exception of two very short pieces of her own juvenalia, this is the only poem of her own that Gilchrist includes in her journals, and its form emphasizes its theme—that the kind of writing most closely associated with self-discovery and psychic insight is poetry. Gilchrist’s poem, however, also emphasizes that poetry itself can become a trap if the poet doubts her own mind—as Sexton was frequently led to do. Gilchrist’s piece, in both form and theme, can be read as a response to and commentary on one of Sexton’s poems that specifically addresses the issues of self-discovery, poetic language, and self-doubt: “An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love.”⁵

Busy, with an idea for a code, I write

signals hurrying from left to right,
 or right to left, by obscure routes,
 for my own reasons; taking a word like “writes”
 down tiers of tries until its secret rites
 make sense; or until, suddenly, RATS
 can amazingly and funnily become STAR
 and right to left that small star
 is mine, for my own liking, to stare
 its five lucky pins inside out, to store
 forever kindly, as if it were a star
 I touched and a miracle I really wrote.⁶

The poem has an ostensibly positive ending in which the speaker creates a “miracle”; however the speaker’s meaning seems so intensely personal that it cannot be articulated for a reader. It is hidden within the “code” of the poet’s wordplay, “the traps of language” that Gilchrist’s poem alludes to. Although the speaker of “Inscape” claims to be writing “for my own reasons,” those reasons are never revealed. As a result, meaning is confounded, at least on one level, for a reader; this failure to communicate emphasizes the speaker’s isolation from the world that exists outside of the poem. The poem is, of course, as the title indicates, an act of “trickery,” yet it clearly expresses its theme of “hiding” behind language—what Gilchrist describes as “the mask of poetry” behind which a writer can remain “obsessed for days with words and riddles . . . unable to understand the sources of language.” In her poem, Gilchrist points out the necessity of moving past this “obsession” with language, an obsession that Sexton was not consistently able to fight in creating her own poetry.

From the beginning of her treatment, Sexton's relationships with her psychiatric doctors were fraught with conflict that she documents throughout her poetry. The most obvious example of Sexton's poetry about psychotherapy is her first posthumously published collection, *Words for Dr. Y*. According to Caroline Bernard Hall King, the poems

take the form of journal entries presented as one long poem: records of meetings with the psychiatrist Dr. Y., responses to sessions, examinations of subjects discussed in or occasioned by therapy, notes addressed directly to Dr. Y., recollected dialogues with the doctor. These poems catalogue the peaks of a ten-year history of fears, desires, failures, psychoses and triumphs. (162)

Hall also observes that, throughout the collection, "God and Dr. Y. merge into a composite male-Other authority figure" (163). In addition to this posthumously published volume, other volumes of Sexton's poetry explore psychotherapy as well; such individual poems include, among many others, "You, Dr. Martin," "Said the Poet to the Analyst" and "Cripples and Other Stories." In most of these poems, the male doctor condescends to the female speaker, dominating their encounters and dismissing the patient's immediate needs. Perhaps the most well-known of these works is "Cripples and Other Stories," which begins

My doctor, the comedian
I called you every time
and made you laugh yourself
when I wrote this silly rhyme
[.]
Each time I give lectures
or gather in the grants

you send me off to boarding school
in training pants.

God damn it, father-doctor,

I'm really thirty-six.

I see dead rats in the toilet.

I'm one of the lunatics. (*CP* 160)

As is clearly evidenced in Anne Sexton's own papers, the kind of relationship described in this poem is not merely a fictional one. On one of her worksheets for "Flee On Your Donkey"—a poem whose speaker experiences deep inner conflict and an urge to flee when she arrives at a mental institution to check herself in—Sexton describes an incident that took place shortly after she wrote the poem. When the idea for the poem first came to her, she quickly wrote a draft and took it to her psychiatrist. According to Middlebrook, at this point,

A bizarre quarrel with her doctor ensued: "He [the doctor] had a moment of fury and hit me [Sexton] on the nose." At the end of the session, Sexton again entered the mental hospital—though as she remarked [on the worksheet], "It might have made more sense to put him in the hospital, but I wasn't strong enough to know that." ("Poet of Weird Abundance" 451)

In this case, the doctor's aggressive, violent behavior clearly crossed professional boundaries. Despite the predictable result—Sexton's return to the hospital—her notation that "It might have made more sense to put [the doctor]" there suggests a degree of healthy awareness about her condition as a patient. The comment demonstrates Sexton's recognition of the dangers inherent in

the psychotherapeutic doctor-patient relationship, not only for the patient, but also for the doctor, whose inflated sense of importance and power can become pathological.

Gilchrist's discussions of psychoanalysis also explore this sort of bizarre power dynamic in the psychoanalytic relationship. In fact, some of Gilchrist's earliest work deals directly with this issue; for example, in her poem "Notes From the Crying Lessons," published in *Riding Out the Tropical Depression*, the speaker describes a woman's interaction with her male analyst, "the crying teacher," who flippantly devours the speaker's identity, through literally drinking a vial of her tears. The only power that the speaker asserts is a half-joking sort of maternal authority concerning his reckless ingestion of this mysterious liquid: "There's no telling where / that's been," she exclaims. She goes on to ask, "how do you know what's in there?" The doctor curtly answers, "I don't" and, "folding his fine hands / in his lap, leaning back in his listening chair" (13).

In her journal entries for National Public Radio, Gilchrist alludes to her resistance to such a model of therapy. She describes her experiences with her "so-called" analyst: "My Freudian said I was not in analysis. I would never lie down on the couch. I sat cross-legged on the floor looking at his shoes" (*Falling Through Space* 90). Throughout her short stories and her nonfiction pieces as well, Gilchrist frequently refers to psychotherapy. Her tone when treating this issue in her fiction suggests that she has grown steadily to recognize and discount the patriarchal ideology underpinning psychotherapy.

To examine the theme of psychotherapy in Gilchrist's thinking and literary creation, I look again to her 1976 article "Going Sane In New Orleans" in *The Courier: The Weekly Newspaper of New Orleans*. This issue of *The Courier* in which "Going Sane" was published also includes an article about Louise Belew, a New Orleans writer trained in psychiatric social work

who was unjustly silenced for critiquing “the power structure” of the mental-health industry. She was declared a paranoid schizophrenic (by the same coroner who declared Governor Earl Long insane) and subsequently “sent to Jackson State Hospital and pumped full of tranquilizers” (10). She remained incarcerated against her will for more than two years, escaping three times. The article concludes with Belew’s comments about psychotherapy and an admonition from the author:

She loves to read, takes walks and exercises all the rights of vigorous free speech and candid self-expression that most of us are too “sane” to enjoy. And she has met “hundreds” of psychiatrists, she says, “And with the exception of three, I’d rather any member of my family be dead than go to a shrink. I wouldn’t send anyone to a snake pit against his will. I’d rather be in prison. It has more dignity.

Write on, Louise Belew. Write on. (Carter 10)

Although not the author of the article, Gilchrist, as an editor, certainly read it, and, as her own article “Going Sane in New Orleans” suggests, she was in sympathy with it. In fact, Gilchrist’s short story “Crazy, Crazy now showing Everywhere” (*Victory Over Japan*, 1984) features a character who appears to be modeled loosely on Belew. The story features a wealthy Louisiana woman, Mrs. Fanny Yellin, who is a virtual prisoner in her home, which she shares with her husband Gabe, the president of “Yellin-Kase, The World’s Largest Manufacturer of Waterheaters” (130). The story is narrated by Fanny’s much younger friend, Lilly, who is the new wife of Gabe’s business partner Duncan. Fanny’s husband, Gabe, has had Fanny declared mentally incompetent and threatens to have her institutionalized again if she refuses to take the many medications he has had his own physician prescribe for her—a frightening textual detail that melds the identity of the husband with the doctor. Together, Gabe and the doctor represent a

stern, cold father, or the larger patriarchal structure in which Fanny lives. Gilchrist makes clear the corruption of their collusion when Fanny describes for Lilly their relationship: “They’re crazy about each other. They give each other things. Gabe gives him money and he gives Gabe pills,” which he gives to Fanny (132). An early description of Gabe’s homecoming and greeting of Fanny after a day at the office suggests the role of Lilly’s own husband in this power structure and thus the potential for her own life to become a mirror of Fanny’s:

I sit here two blocks from Fanny’s house, gazing out my window. I sit here nearly every afternoon, listening to jazz on the radio and waiting for Duncan to come home and ruin my day. And two blocks away his revered ideal idol, Fanny’s husband, Gabe, Gabe Yellin, the gorgeous ageless archconservative, by which means he means with Duncan’s help to conserve whatever made and keeps him a millionaire, Greedy Gabe, as Fanny calls him, her stormtrooper, lugs his briefcase up her stairs and hands her the pills. (129)

Gilchrist’s description of Lilly, alone upstairs and staring out of the window, presents her as a double of Fanny and clearly suggests the possibility, the danger, of Lilly’s life degenerating into an existence similar to Fanny’s—just as Duncan, as Gabe’s protégé, is poised to grow into the role of “Greedy Gabe,” Fanny’s Nazi-like husband.

When Lilly and Fanny meet for the first time, Fanny declares, “I’ve just come home from Mandeville . . . You know, the Loony Bin” (135). Lilly, of course, assumes that Fanny is mentally ill, and fully supports the treatment Fanny receives from her family and her doctors—even encouraging Fanny to take the many medications that Gabe provides for her. Over the course of their relationship, however, Fanny becomes a teacher and a friend to Lilly, instructing her about the family into which Lilly has married and giving advice for emotional and mental survival.

Such advice is welcomed by Lilly, who realizes too late that she has made a bad marriage. Interestingly, Lilly withholds the confession that she has married for money until she describes her meeting with Fanny—as if meeting Fanny empowers her to acknowledge, and perhaps change, the problems she has created for herself. That they met on New Year’s Eve suggests the possibility for redemption or renewal engendered by their relationship:

That was the night I met her, a New Year’s Eve, the year I married Duncan for his money and came to live in Alexandria. I am from Monroe. My parents were school-teachers. I thought I would have a more exotic life. I was raised to worship money. I was raised to get money any way I could. I met Duncan at Tulane. He couldn’t even ask me to marry him without asking his parents’ permission. I married him in spite of that. I married him to have his money. Now I have to pay and pay and pay. I am a cliché. Except for Fanny. She makes my life different from the lives around me. (134-35)

On the night of this meeting, Fanny tells Lilly, “*You are next. . . . Come to see me. Come right away. I will save you if I can. You have to come to see me*” (134). When Lilly does come to visit Fanny, Fanny introduces Lilly to the “madness museum” that is her bedroom. The room is covered entirely in words, painted in watercolors and acrylics and crayon. There is a wall with long lists of brief stories under two large headings: “Conspiracies” and “Swindles.” There is even an entire wall devoted to the psychiatrist R.[onald] D[avid] Laing, the utopian Freudian who encouraged individual artistic expression as therapy and who “described society, not the individual, as mad” (Zaretsky 317). Although the room, and this wall in particular, suggests Fanny’s own understanding that her condition is constructed by society and by family, it also underscores Fanny’s inability to resist the label of madness. Lilly seems similarly seduced by the

mystique of madness. Sadly, it is far more interesting than anything else in her life as an economically privileged wife in 1960s America, and she sees it as her only connection to the larger world. By her own admission, Lilly is “frightened, but . . . could not stay away. Fanny’s room was the most exciting place in Alexandria. Anyone was likely to be there, a museum director, a painter, a journalist, a poet, one of her former inmates from Mandeville, visitors from New Orleans.”

As the story progresses, however, Lilly chronicles her changing relationship to Fanny, foregrounding Lilly’s growth and ending by suggesting the possibility of her escape. Fanny’s crucial influence on Lilly is made clear when she insists that Lilly inscribe her own thoughts and feelings into and onto the walls of the room. Lilly describes her dramatic first visit to the room:

“Crazy, Crazy, Now Showing Everywhere,” it said on the door in two-inch letters. Below that, in God forgive me, my handwriting, “Lilly says, spit in one hand and worry in the other and see which one fills up the fastest.” She made me write it there. At that time, the first year I knew her. . . . you had to be very careful what you said around her as she might seize on anything and make you write it on the wall. (136)

That is, Fanny facilitates Lilly’s emerging confessional voice. This voice, which Gilchrist uses to narrate the story, seems to save Lilly from a fate similar to Fanny’s. Lilly’s telling of her story -- prompted by an argument she had with her husband Duncan—suggests that Lilly has broken free from the world in which she has been trapped. However, she owes her achievement to Fanny. Not only did Fanny explain the complex dynamics of the patriarchal Yellin-Kase family to Lilly (who is, by her own description, clearly an outsider); Fanny presents her own life, via her “madness museum,” as a cautionary tale. In Lilly’s own narrative, she embeds Fanny’s story, thereby

acknowledging her debt to Fanny, and, to a degree, liberating Fanny by sharing her story with the reader. In her writing of the story, Gilchrist performs a similar rite for her own “mad” mentor, Sexton, acknowledging her literary indebtedness to Sexton as a literary mother and model. Like Lilly, who begins to write, to tell her own story, only after witnessing Fanny’s experiences, so does Gilchrist claim to write “in the shadow of Sexton, primarily Sexton” (“The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition” 17).

While it seems clear that Gilchrist is informed by the story of Louise Belew, the impulse for “Crazy, Crazy Now Showing Everywhere” also seems to have been determined by Gilchrist’s knowledge and appreciation of Sexton’s work.⁷ Lilly’s description of the many medications Fanny takes seems to voice Gilchrist’s own lament at the destruction of a creative woman, perhaps even Sexton, wrought by similar medications:

The drawer is always open, the bottles are always there for us to see Elavil and Stelazine and lithium. Her little maids, she calls them. They travel day and night around her bloodstream, destroying the muscles, doing God knows what to the liver and kidney and spleen, to will and desire and ambition and rage. Not the intelligence. Her intelligence is beyond the reach of the chemicals. Who knows? Perhaps she is right to believe this bed, these pills, this childlike life are her only refuge? (133)

In her own poems about the many medications that she relied on, Sexton describes her pills as caretakers, just as Fanny calls her pills “her little maids.” In Sexton’s poem “The Addict,” for example, the speaker describes her pills as “a mother—but better” (*CP* 165). The poem goes on to emphasize the pills’ violent effects upon the body as they deliver “blows eight at a time, socked in the eye” allowing the “patient” to be “hauled away by the pink / the orange, / the green and the

white goodnights.” Gilchrist’s description of the pills destroying Fanny’s muscles and organs seems similar. For Lily, more horrifying than the bodily destruction is the damage done to Fanny’s self, to Fanny’s mind, to the “will and desire and ambition and rage.” Similarly, the self is also lost in Sexton’s poem: “I’m becoming something of a chemical / mixture. / That’s it!” Interestingly, Sexton speaks metaphorically of her relationship, or “war,” with the pills as a “kind of marriage” wherein the only contact with the husband/lover is in the “chemical kisses.” Similarly, Fanny’s only contact with her husband Gabe is when he delivers the medications he has paid his own doctor to prescribe for her.

The ending of the story goes on to echo one of Sexton’s well-known poems, “Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound,” which Gilchrist quotes at length in an essay published in *Falling Through Space* (70-4). The persona of Sexton’s poem is a woman who is breaking off a relationship with a lover, determined to find freedom and to recognize the benevolence of the world in which she lives. At the end of the poem, she looks to a group of nuns standing on the deck of the ferry and invests them with great personal meaning as she prays:

Oh God,
 although I am very sad,
 could you please
 let those four nuns
 loosen from their leather boots
 [.]
 to rise out over this greasy deck. (*CP* 82-83)

As if a miracle, the nuns begin to rise, as the speaker experiences her own transcendence. The poem ends, “They call back to us // from the gauzy edge of paradise,⁸ // *good news, good news*”

(CP 84). The dilemma Lilly faces at the end of “Crazy, Crazy” is similar to that of Sexton’s speaker who looks to the sky for guidance, confirmation and miracles. Near the end of Gilchrist’s story, Lilly has a heated argument with Duncan about how much time she is spending with Fanny. Duncan does not approve, of course, and says to Lilly, “You’re crazy . . . You’re as crazy as she is to even go over there, Lilly.” In response, Lilly simply goes out to sit on the front steps both to escape Duncan and to enjoy the late afternoon. She ends her story, “I like to sit here this time of day, watching the jays and nightjars fight above the city roofs, turning and swooping and diving, calling, caw, caw, caw, calling *good news, good news, good news*, calling hunger, hunger, hunger” (my emphasis, 142). While Gilchrist’s ending certainly brings to mind Sexton’s nuns in flight at the end of “Letter,” it also suggests a line from one of Sexton’s most well-known poems about madness and psychotherapy, “Flee on Your Donkey” (*Live or Die*, 1966), which I will discuss later in this chapter as it relates to Gilchrist’s novella *The Cabal*. With this poem, Sexton includes an epigraph from Rimbaud: “*Ma faim, Anne, Anne, / Fuis sur ton âne . . .*” In English, this phrase reads, “My hunger, Anne, Anne, flee on your Donkey.” The long narrative poem describes the speaker at the registration desk of a mental hospital, trying desperately to convince herself to flee rather than check in. In the poem, hunger is a metaphor for madness, and the line “O my hunger! My hunger!” becomes a refrain.⁹

Gilchrist continues her literary exploration of psychiatric “care” as a potentially destructive force in her novella *The Cabal* (*The Cabal and Other Stories*, 2000). Unlike her treatment of the issue in the short story “Crazy, Crazy, Now Showing Everywhere,” however, this novella suggests a healthy and distant (even absurdly comic) view of psychotherapy.

The Cabal opens with the following preface:

This is the story of a group of people who had a bizarre and unexpected thing happen to them. Their psychiatrist went crazy and started injecting himself with drugs. The most useful and dependable person in their lives became a maniac in the true sense of the word. He was the glue that held their group together. He was the one who had taught them to trust one another. One by one he had planted the seeds of kindness and empathy in their hearts. . . . Later when he went mad, they didn't know what to do. It tore the fabric of their common reality. A brilliant, useful man who spent his days solving other people's problems became the cause of them. Much harm was done, many sleepless nights were spent by twenty-two people who had put their lives in his hands. This is the story of some of them. It is not a warning or a proscription. It is an attempt to keep an account. (3-4)

The tone seems disingenuous, particularly the protest that it is not a "warning." Like Fanny's story for Lilly in "Crazy, Crazy," the events of this story are very much a cautionary tale for its main character, Caroline Jones, who bears a strong resemblance to Lilly in "Crazy, Crazy Now Showing Everywhere." Most notably, Caroline has succumbed to the allure of money, making a life for herself that doesn't suit her. Like Lilly, Caroline is a victim of her parents' material greed: "It was not entirely Caroline's fault that she had been seduced by Hollywood," where a producer had offered Caroline two-hundred thousand dollars to write a screenplay about Edna St. Vincent Millay's life. Throughout the novella, Caroline, a graduate of Vanderbilt University and a published poet, laments having resigned from a tenure-track position at Yale because, as the narrator states, her parents "had given her bad advice. They had taught her to worship money over

all things. It would be years before Caroline began to recover from the greed they placed in her heart” (5).

As the novella opens, Caroline is returning to academia after two years of “whor[ing] for the movies” in California (52). When she finally takes a job teaching Shakespeare and creative writing at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, however, she has writer’s block.

Nevertheless, she feels that leaving California and moving to Jackson, the home of her best friend from college, Augustus Hailey, who now teaches at Millsaps College, will enable her to revive her creative self. Interestingly, as she drives from her parents’ home in Nashville, Tennessee, to Jackson, her creativity seems to return, and she even contemplates moving into a new genre. Her mind wanders first to fiction as she drives down the Natchez Trace toward Jackson:

“the old buffalo trail” Eudora Welty called it. Caroline was peopling the woods with Miss Welty’s characters as she drove. . . . I’ll start writing again. If I’m teaching poetry, it will make me write. Well, who cares if I write or not? Who gives a damn about publishing some crappy little poems in magazines that don’t pay? Where did I get the idea that I’m a poet? There’re only one or two poets in any generation. That confessional dribble I’ve been writing isn’t poetry. I should be writing plays. (7-8)¹⁰

At one point, in fact, just outside of Tupelo, Mississippi, it begins to rain, a symbol of Caroline’s returning poetic powers. She immediately parks her car under an overpass and begins to write a poem about driving in the rain and the return of her muse. As the narrator points out, “it was the first one she had written in more than a year” (8). Within minutes of completing the poem, however, she decides that the poem is “so stupid” that she will write an autobiographical play instead, thinking to herself, “If Tennessee [Williams] can make plays out of his family, so can I . .

. . My family's as dysfunctional as anyone else's. Just because they're attractive and don't abuse their children doesn't mean they didn't harm us in other ways" (8). Although Tennessee Williams' dark brand of tragic humor pervades the novella, so too does that of Anne Sexton. As if to underscore Sexton's presence in *The Cabal*, Gilchrist follows the novella with what can be considered its literary prequel, "The Sanguine Blood of Men," a short story about Caroline's time in California, just before she leaves for Millsaps. At one point in the story, Caroline's cousin LeLe Arnold says to her that Sexton "is so underrated. They put such terrible poems in the anthologies. I think the men poets are trying to keep anyone from knowing about her." Caroline agrees, assuring LeLe that "When I teach I'll revive her, and Millay too" (138).

When she arrives in Jackson, ready to revive Sexton and Millay, Caroline is to replace a recently-deceased poet and Millsaps faculty member named Topeka. Knowing that Caroline has been depressed and experiencing writer's block since she left California, Augustus has planned to give Caroline, as a welcome gift, several sessions with his own psychiatrist, Dr. Jim Jaspers. On the day of her arrival in Jackson, Augustus tries his best to convince Caroline to accept the gift, describing Jim to her: "He's intense. He's an unusual man. . . . Listen, we're lucky to have a real psychotherapist in Jackson, one who's a medical doctor. They are rare. The good ones are rare" (23). However, later that same day, Jaspers displays his first public psychotic episode, which is subsequently diagnosed as a schizophrenic break. As soon as Caroline arrives in Jackson, Augustus informs her that "the most powerful woman who ever lived on the planet," Jean Andry Lyles, the founder and director of Jackson's most successful theater, has died of a heart attack at age sixty and that the funeral is to be held that very afternoon (9). As Caroline hurriedly dresses for the occasion, Augustus informs her that this funeral is the best possible introduction Caroline could have to the community into which she is moving, which he refers to as "the cabal." This cabal

includes some of the most wealthy and powerful members of Jackson society, and they are linked because they share a psychiatrist, Dr. Jim Jaspers. Their group is a gravely dysfunctional family, centered around their shared doctor-father and their queen-mother, Jean Andry Lyles, who has, over time, assembled the “family” by referring them all to Jim. As is often the case, the funeral exposes the family members in their most volatile and vulnerable states. Augustus tries to prepare Caroline for her introduction into this “family,” which is made up primarily of Millsaps faculty, the players in the Jackson amateur Paine Theater, and their wealthy patrons. He assures her that the funeral “will be a wonderful way to see the cabal. They’ll be at their best and worst, on common and alien ground, with the body of a queen at stake” (12). The actual funeral and its aftermath, however, are beyond what even Augustus predicts.

Unbeknownst to his patients, Jim Jaspers has become addicted to an unnamed pre-op anesthetic that makes him believe he is “enlightened.” After Jean’s funeral, at a gathering at her home, Jim strips off his clothes, climbs onto a garden wall and declares to his terrified patients who have gathered to mourn their friend:

“You’re all in cages You’re locked up in cages with bars made of your mother’s bones. You can’t get out. You can’t see where you are. You’re in a space-time continuum. You’re made of carbon and you’re going to die. You’re going to die before you ever taste of freedom. You don’t have the slightest idea of freedom. You’ve never been free a day in your lives. I could tell you where you are but you won’t listen. You refuse to listen to me.” (26)

As he continues, to the horror of his patients and other funeral attendees, he makes clear that the only way to true freedom is to escape embodiment, the “cages made of . . . mother’s bones.” He points to Jean, the woman whose funeral they are attending, as a model of enlightenment: “Jean

took responsibility. Now she's gone into the red-hot business of the atoms and you're still walking around your cages. You won't learn a goddamn thing from this. I'm sick of the lot of you" (26-7). This outburst seems to interrupt, perhaps permanently fracture, civilization. The narrator's description of Jim's forced removal suggests that it has: "They managed finally to get him off the wall and out of the house to the front yard. On his way through the living room he knocked a thousand-year-old Pueblo vase off the table and broke it into pieces" (27). Earlier, Caroline's comments about the collection of Native American pots in the entry hall to Jean's home foreshadow just such a disaster. Amazed at their fragility and apparent lack of protection, she asks Augustus if they are real. When he says that they are, she replies, "I can't believe they're just sitting there. They could break." Augustus' reply—"They haven't. They won't"—suggests an unrealistic faith in the stability of the world as he understands it (25).

During Jim's tirade on the wall, when one of his patients tries to talk him down, he simply replies, "I am enlightened and you are a speck of dust. This is freedom I am showing you. It did no good to tell you about it, so I'm showing you" (27). Indeed, the patients are powerless in the face of Jim's drug-induced mania, and they know it. Finally one of them admits, "We aren't competent to know what's wrong with him He's our psychiatrist for God's sake," clearly emphasizing how utterly one-sided the analyst-patient relationship is, and how problematic such an uneven division of power can be (29). What is even more terrifying to Jim's patients, however, is the fact that he begins telling their secrets: stories of tax evasion, adultery, abortion, hidden homosexuality, and obstruction of justice in a federal investigation—among many others.

When Donna Divers, Jim's partner, has to be called in to try to calm him, Gilchrist clearly subverts the notion of the father-analyst's power, replacing him instead with the probing mother that is suggested by her name. Donna is a child psychologist Jim hired and trained so that he

wouldn't have to be bothered by his patients who requested that he treat their small children. Ironically, she is the only one Jim's patients have to call on when Jim needs help himself. It is Donna then, who must confront both Jim's psychosis and his patients' panic.

As the novella progresses, it becomes clear that Jim's treatment of his patients has led him into a dangerous counter-transference. He believes that he is their spiritual leader, or prophet, or perhaps even their god. He has been asking his patients to "pray for [him] to become enlightened" so that he could lead them (40). Near the end of his life, Jim openly declares to his lover, "I'm enlightened. . . . I saw it, the why and how of all reality. I'm seeing God. I am God. If you leave me now . . . [y]ou'll never find another person who knows what I know. . . . Don't be crazy, this is the only chance you'll ever have to know divinity" (73).¹¹ After this announcement, Jim's behavior becomes even more erratic, terrifying his patients, and putting his own life in danger. His experimentation with the pre-op drug, his means of becoming God, eventually leads to his death in a fiery car wreck when he injects himself with the drug while driving 105 miles per hour in his red convertible. Just before Jim's death, the narrator describes his plans for pharmaceutical apotheosis:

It had not been simple to figure out the exact dosage it took to dissociate the mind from the body and still leave him able to function. He had started low and worked up. Too much put you to sleep. Too little didn't last long enough and you couldn't do it twice in one day. Which was still okay with Jim. Being God for several hours out of twenty-four was sufficient until he figured out how to do it full-time. (88)

Jim's patients are both horrified and relieved by his death; they are also, most importantly, left with overwhelming feelings of guilt. Despite Jim's unorthodox behavior—he often called his patients late at night, asking them to read and critique his poetry, for example—his patients feel

an attachment to him that exceeds their objectivity. They simply assume that he is working towards their best interests, no matter how outrageous his behavior might seem. Ironically, according to the narrator, the man in whom they invest their greatest hopes brings them to a realization of their greatest fears.

Maybe Jim Jaspers went crazy. Maybe he was driven crazy by his patients. If he had come to believe he was omnipotent, who had made him believe it? It was a heady thing to have the most powerful people in the state of Mississippi calling him day and night for advice, using him for their father and mother and spiritual advisor, asking him to forgive their sins, letting them turn him into God, since even godless people are always wanting something to believe in, especially something they create themselves. The creation of James Jaspers, M.D., was a group effort but it would be some time before any of the people involved began to arrive at that conclusion. (72)

Although the plot may seem tragic, this piece is ultimately a work of dark, subversive comedy that dismantles the idea that the therapist or analyst is a God, pointing out the dangers of the patient's investing such power in the psychiatrist. One patient, C. C. Montgomery, however, is mistrustful of Jim's psychotherapeutic methods from the beginning of her relationship with him. The young daughter of one of Jim's most wealthy and powerful patients, the manipulative Celia Montgomery, C. C. is an alienated, depressed and angry Millsaps freshman who writes poetry and enrolls in Caroline Jones' creative writing class. In discussing her relationship to Jim Jaspers with Caroline, C. C. mentions that her mother initially seduced her into seeing him by giving her Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Specifically, Celia Montgomery points out to her daughter the epigraph from Schopenhauer that Sexton includes in "For John, Who Begg Me" (*To*

Bedlam and Part Way Back, 1963): “It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles’ Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues indefatigable inquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer . . .” (98).¹² Although C. C. as a writer understands that self-knowledge can be a means of generating creative energy, she deeply mistrusts the psychotherapeutic process, and for good reason. As he does with his other patients, Jim Jaspers betrays C. C., secretly sharing his notes about her with her mother. However, the astute C. C. intuitively understands what many of Jim’s other patients failed to realize. She tells Caroline,

“He could do a lot of damage in a sentence. . . . He knows everyone’s fears. He can confront people with their demons. Think of the stuff he must know on Mother and Mack [Jean Andry Lyle’s lover]. They’ve been going in there and telling him everything about themselves and saying things about other people. God knows what. He doesn’t know much about me. I was very selective in what I told him. I knew he was conferring with mother the whole time he was treating me. I could tell because they’d keep telling me the same things in the same words.” (90-1)

Interestingly, after Jim’s death, Celia tries to enlist Caroline to take his place as Celia’s spy to gather information about C. C.’s personal life—a role Caroline flatly refuses. Instead, she works with C. C. on her creative writing, respecting C. C.’s privacy and critiquing her work honestly. The “Postscript” that ends the novella is testament to the success of Caroline’s method. A very healthy and productive C. C. delivers to Caroline a 360-page draft of a novel about Jim Jaspers and his patients. Given C. C.’s buoyant mood when she delivers the manuscript, its writing seems to have been quite cathartic for her. In the manuscript, C. C. recreates “her mother into a thirty-

six-year-old tennis champion who had aborted four fetuses in an attempt to hold on to her career.”

The story begins, however, with Jim:

Jim Jaspers was an eighty-year-old Freudian who analyzed his patients over the phone and by e-mail until he was killed by an anti-abortion activist who had gotten the wrong address and the wrong doctor. Ironically, he was just typing up an e-mail to the tennis champion begging her not to abort a fifth pregnancy when the shot came through the window and blew his brains all over the computer. (130)

Although Caroline recognizes the flaws of the manuscript, she is pleased with the peace its writing seems to have brought C. C. As the narrator of *The Cabal* states, “as of January 2000, the official *roman à clef* about Jim Jaspers and the Jackson cabal has not been finished or published” (132). Instead, “this manuscript is just a holding action,” the dark, comically absurd result of sublimation, or a necessary means for C. C. to process and move past her potentially devastating relationships with her mother and her psychotherapist.

In *The Cabal*, Gilchrist presents psychotherapy not only as ineffective, but also as potentially dangerous. This idea, I think, can be tied directly to her understanding of the role therapy played in Sexton’s own life and works. As Sexton so often suggests in her poetry, her relationships with her psychiatrists and psychotherapists were often conflicted. In the poem “Flee on Your Donkey,” for example, Sexton explores this possibility in great detail.

In “Flee on Your Donkey,” the speaker, at the registration desk of a psychiatric hospital, tries to convince herself to turn her back on the hospital and its doctors, relying instead on her own creative gifts to heal her. Early upon her arrival at the asylum, the speaker points out to herself,

Everyone has left me

except my muse,
that good nurse. (*CP* 98).

Clearly the speaker knows that her muse, if it cannot heal her, can at least treat her symptoms. However, the poem continues as the speaker alternately condemns herself to madness and attempts to talk herself into self-sufficiency. At one point, she laments the loss of a significant part of her adult life to madness:

Six years of such small preoccupations!
Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!
O my hunger! My hunger!
I could have gone around the world twice
or had new children—all boys.
It was a long trip with little days in it
and no new places. (*CP* 99)

However, she reverts to memories of her mad ancestors, convincing herself that the hospital is her true home.

Meanwhile,
they carried out my mother,
[.]
My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood
he used up on other women in the Middle West.
He went out calling for his father
who died all by himself long ago—
that fat banker who got locked up,

his genes suspended like dollars,
 wrapped up in his secret,
 tied up securely in a straightjacket. (*CP* 99-100)

Like many of Jim Jaspers' patients (and Jim himself), the speaker of the poem elevates the doctor to the position of a savior:

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
 were better than Christ;
 you promised me another world
 to tell me who I was
 [.]
 You my bachelor analyst,
 [.]
 were the new God,
 the manager of the Gideon Bible.¹³ (*CP* 100)

Like C. C. Montgomery, Sexton's speaker seems to realize the folly of her therapy; however, she seems also to accept madness, and thus psychotherapy, as her inheritance since "Those I loved best died of it—/ the fool's disease" (105). As a result, she remains, "held like a prisoner / who was so poor / he fell in love with jail" (103).

In contrast, Gilchrist's *Cabal* presents a revision of such a personality. Armed with wisdom gleaned from Anne Sexton's work (which her mother had given her) and from Caroline's mentoring, C. C. Montgomery overcomes her anger and depression and is finally free. Like the speaker in Sexton's "The Doctor of the Heart," C. C. Montgomery is able to extricate herself

from the grasp of her mother and Jim Jaspers; moreover, she refuses to let her anger at them destroy her. At the end of this poem, Sexton's speaker announces

I am no longer the suicide

with her raft and paddle.

Herr Doctor! I'll no longer die

to spite you, you wallowing

seasick grounded man. (*CP* 302)

The gesture that C. C. makes when she delivers her manuscript to Caroline seems to echo this speaker's declaration of triumph. Like Sexton's speaker, C.C. has escaped the "wallowing seasick grounded man" that Jim Jaspers became. Instead, she looks for healing to literary mothers, both to the instruction of Caroline, her poetry teacher, and to the work of Anne Sexton. Her comment to her mother Celia, following Jim's death, expresses her own understanding of the situation quite clearly. As Celia attempts to console her, C.C. simply replies, "I was only seeing him to keep you happy. I'll be glad to have my afternoons back. Why don't you give me the money you were spending and I'll buy myself a poetry magazine" (70).

Christianity and Feminism

The reference in "Flee on Your Donkey" to the speaker's doctor as "the new God, / the manager of the Gideon Bible," is one of many instances in which Sexton conflates the concept of the Christian God with the concept of the psychiatrist-god. The two concepts, in fact, do overlap inasmuch as they both signify the locus of oppressive patriarchal power in the lives of Sexton's

female speakers. Although Gilchrist does not overtly fuse these two institutions in her works, she certainly takes aim at both. Like Sexton, whose obsession with religion became more and more obvious in her work as her career progressed, so does Gilchrist present an ongoing critique of Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, throughout her work. As my reading in Chapter Two emphasizes, *The Annunciation* is deeply anti-Catholic.¹⁴ Many of Gilchrist's later works also demonstrate antagonism towards a variety of other Christian denominations, as well as against several other world religions. In most of Gilchrist's creative work—and in many of her public statements—she embraces humanism rather than organized religion, citing the deep harm that religious belief can have upon those who, like Sexton, are culturally coerced into seeking it.

In the short story “First Manhattans” (*Drunk With Love*, 1986), for example, Gilchrist's narrator exposes the pettiness and hypocrisy of some of the most prominent Christian churches in New York City. The farcical “First Manhattans,” like “The Cabal,” chronicles its underdeveloped characters through a series of somewhat improbable events. However, the power of these works is in their comic subversion of seemingly monumental social institutions. In *The Cabal*, the institution is psychotherapy; in “First Manhattans,” it is organized Christianity. Just as Jim Jaspers establishes his own unorthodox methods of practicing psychotherapy, Annalisa Livingston carves an equally nontraditional niche for herself as a journalist. Employed by the *New York Times*, Annalisa, much like a food or theater critic, writes a weekly column critiquing the churches of Manhattan. Again like Jim Jaspers, she takes her work seriously, despite her obvious inability to live up to standards her “profession” demands. The daughter of an Episcopal priest who was defrocked after a sex scandal in his parish in Mobile, Alabama, Annalisa becomes obsessed with religion, earns a degree in journalism, and moves to New York City to begin her crusade. Although her stated motive is to “help her fellow man,” her real motivation, seemingly

unknown even to herself, is to make a mockery of Christian churches of all denominations, presumably to vindicate her father. As she prepares the proposal for her column for the religion editor of the *New York Times*, Annalisa deludes herself: “*I could write a column. Go around to different churches and praise the good ones and admonish the bad and give advice and check up later to see how they’re coming along. Oh, that would be a good and useful thing to do. It would be good work*” (126). Like Sexton’s Ms. Dog—a persona that Sexton adopted late in her career as a darkly comic reference to the emerging Women’s Movement as well as to her own potential for deity (*Dog is God* spelled backwards)—Annalisa takes a cavalier approach to her work with the church.¹⁵

As unlikely as it might seem, Annalisa has a large following; according to the narrator’s description, however, her supporters are those with little social influence:

“The mail was running about three to one in her favor but the complaints were on good stationary with impressive letterheads. The mash notes were from ladies with spidery handwriting and flowers on the envelopes” (139). Eventually, Annalisa is counterattacked by yet another church critic who exposes her father’s past on the Phil Donahue show. At this point, Annalisa’s life unravels, exposing the corruption of both the church and the media. However blasphemous Gilchrist’s story seems, Annalisa’s readers genuinely seek affirmation of their spiritual beliefs. Like Jim Jaspers’ patients, however, they are left on their own to ponder the folly of their fallen leader. The story’s irreverent treatment of Christianity also brings to mind Sexton’s poems that seem paradoxically both sincere and impertinent in their examination of Christianity. In many of Sexton’s poems, as in the “notes from the ladies with spidery handwriting” that Annalisa receives, Sexton’s speakers are quite earnest in their questioning and in their longing for belief.

Sexton leaves these poems' questioning speakers, like Gilchrist leaves Annalisa's female supporters, without comfort and without definitive answers.

Sexton's poem "For Eleanor Boylan Talking With God" (*All My Pretty Ones*, 1962) for example, opens with the speaker visiting her friend Eleanor. The two of them are in Eleanor's kitchen and the speaker observes Eleanor trying to talk to a God who is not likely to provide a response: Eleanor "stands in her lemon-colored dress / motioning to God with her wet hands / glossy from egg plates" (CP 87). Eleanor, the quintessential housewife, is not only cut off from God; she is also trapped in her domestic role. The speaker further emphasizes both her own limitations and those of Eleanor when she refers to their mortality. As she listens to Eleanor's one-sided conversation with God, the speaker describes herself as "breathing in [her] cigarettes like poison." The poem ends with a reference to Eleanor's death: "Eleanor, before he leaves tell him . . . / Oh Eleanor, Eleanor, / tell him before death uses you up." Interestingly, although the speaker expresses her own lack of conviction or faith ("Though no one can ever know, / I don't think he has a face"), she acknowledges her friend's belief and even encourages Eleanor in her struggle to pray. This situation illustrates Sexton's own complex, conflicted struggle toward belief, which she chronicles throughout her career and which culminates in the final collection she prepared for publication before her suicide, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1976).

As Sexton's speaker so succinctly states in "With Mercy for the Greedy" (*All My Pretty Ones*, 1962) "need is not quite belief." But fortunately, in the seeking itself, there is a comfort. For both Sexton and Gilchrist, this comfort is literary creation. Written "For my Friend, Ruth who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession," Sexton's "With Mercy for the Greedy," illuminates the complex relationship of need, belief, and creation:

Concerning your letter in which you ask

me to call a priest and in which you ask
 me to wear The Cross that you enclose;
 your own cross,
 your dog-bitten cross, no larger than a thumb,
 small and wooden, no thorns, this rose—
 I pray to its shadow,
 that gray place where it lies on your letter. . . deep, deep.
 I detest my sins and I try to believe
 in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
 its solid neck, its brown sleep. (*CP* 62)

Although the speaker does wear the cross, and does feel in it the warmth of friendship, she ultimately declines the request to speak with a priest and seek conversion. Her brief explanation expresses the conflict that dominates Sexton's religious poems: "But I can't. Need is not quite belief." In the absence of such belief, the speaker turns to the only lasting comfort she knows, literary creation:

My friend, my friend, I was born
 doing reference work in sin, and born
 confessing it. This is what poems are:
 with mercy
 for the greedy,
 they are the tongue's wrangle,
 the world's pottage, the rat's star. (*CP* 63)

It is despite such apparent conviction that religious faith would always elude her that Sexton continued to seek salvation in a Christian God throughout her career as a poet. Beginning with her earliest poems and continuing through the last, Sexton battles her uncertainty, frequently seeming to make progress toward belief but later returning to her original questioning, often veering into outright blasphemy. The quest, for Sexton, is not linear, but rather highly recursive and ultimately unsuccessful. In one of her earliest poems, “Protestant Easter” (*Live or Die*, 1966), Sexton establishes a theme that will continue throughout her work. According to the subtitle, the speaker at the beginning of the poem is “eight years old,” and the opening lines establish the theme and set the sardonic tone for the entire poem: “When he was a little boy / Jesus was good all the time. / No wonder he grew up to be such a big shot” (*CP* 128). Throughout the poem, the speaker speculates on the nature of the several key Christian myths including, most importantly, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, pointing out how easily they can become confused with the secular trappings of the Easter celebration:

Once I thought the Bunny Rabbit was special
and I hunted for eggs.
That was when I was seven.
I’m grownup now. Now it’s really Jesus.
I just have to get Him straight.
And right now. (*CP* 129)

The speaker’s childish need to “get Him straight” is one that will haunt Sexton’s other speakers well into their adulthood, as do several of the questions that the speaker poses to herself. As she sits through a Protestant Easter service looking up at the ceiling of the church, following the lead

of those around her, she wonders, “Who are we anyhow? / What do we belong to? / are we a *we*?” (CP 130). Her struggle to work out the answers to such questions leads only to greater confusion:

Jesus was on that Cross.
 After that they pounded nails into his hands.
 After that, well, after that,
 everyone wore hats
 and then there was a big stone rolled away
 and then almost everyone—
 the ones who sit up straight—
 looked at the ceiling.

The speaker’s analysis of those around her, singing and looking up, suggests the doubt that will plague Sexton and her speakers throughout her later work:

Alleluia they sing.
 They don’t know.
 [.]
 [T]hey couldn’t be sure of it,
 not so sure of it anyhow,
 so they decided to become Protestants.
 Those are the people that sing
 when they aren’t quite
 sure. (CP 130-31)

For Sexton, such action, when unaccompanied by belief in a literal truth, is folly—a point she makes quite clear in the epigraph to the second (of three) sections of *All My Pretty Ones* (1962):

“I want no pallid humanitarianism—If Christ be not God, I want none of him; I will hack my way through Existence alone” (*CP* 60). This quotation from Domino Guardini establishes just how desperately Sexton wanted and needed faith in Christianity; such faith, however, was to elude her.

Even during the times when Sexton seems to express faith, God is at best mundane, and at worst, indifferent. In her poem “Gods” (*The Death Notebooks*, 1974), for example, when the speaker, “Mrs. Sexton,” goes out in search of God “looking into the sky — / expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch,” she instead finds “No one.” After looking in books, talking to poets, and visiting “all the churches in the world,” still she finds “No one.” It is only when “she journeyed back to her own house” that she found “the gods of the world” unceremoniously “shut in the lavatory” (*CP* 349). In a later, posthumously published poem “After Auschwitz” (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*, 1975), although the speaker acknowledges a Christian God, she also recognizes the evil of his creation. After contemplating the atrocities of the holocaust, the speaker describes her deep disgust at the God in whose image man was created:

Man with his small pink toes,
with his miraculous fingers
is not a temple
but an outhouse,
I say aloud.
[.]
Let man never again raise his eyes,
on a soft July night.
Never. Never. Never. Never. Never.
I say these things aloud. (*CP* 433)

The poem ends with the speaker begging “the Lord not to hear” her curses. Whether she feels genuine guilt at her own anger, or whether she fears God’s wrath or retaliation, is unclear. In either case, the God the speaker seems to believe in is certainly flawed.

Despite such flaws, Sexton relentlessly attempted to reconcile herself with Christianity, turning her attentions near the end of her life almost exclusively toward its mythology. *The Book of Folly* (1972), the last collection that Sexton saw to publication during her lifetime, concludes with a nine-poem sequence entitled “The Jesus Papers.” The epigraph to the sequence succinctly articulates the central paradox of Sexton’s vision: “God is not mocked except by believers.” The sequence, which begins with “Jesus Suckles” and ends with “The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks,” chronicles the experiences of Jesus and his mother Mary as embodied humans, emphasizing violation of the maternal body. For example, in “Jesus Suckles,” the infant, declares to his mother:

You gave me milk
and we are the same
and I am glad.

No. No.

All lies.

I am a truck.

I run everything.

I own you. (CP 337)

The final lines of the final poem, “The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks,” echo this image of devouring the mother. Just as the mother is delivering the child (symbolized in the poem by the woman’s drawing the baby out of the “hollow water” of a well), God speaks:

Here. Take this gingerbread lady
and put her in your oven.

When the cow gives blood
and the Christ is born
we must all eat sacrifices.

We must all eat beautiful women. (*CP* 345)

The gingerbread lady is simply part of the ritual of the Christmas celebration, which she has been forbidden to criticize:

Then God spoke to me and said:
People say only good things about Christmas.
If they want to say something bad,
they whisper.

Although Sexton appears to acknowledge the Christian God's existence in this poem, she openly defies him; the poem is not a whisper, but is instead a published work, a violation of God's proscription.

In several other poems in which Sexton's speakers express belief in a Christian God, the poet rewrites Christian mythology in ways that can accommodate and empower her in her role as a woman. In "Consorting With Angels" (*Live or Die* 1966), the speaker expresses her despair about "the gender of things":

I was tired of being a woman
tied with the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks. (*CP* 111)

Later in the poem the speaker “has a dream” in which she compares herself to Joan of Arc, who was “put to death in men’s clothes”; in the dream, the speaker also enters into a city where she became “not a woman anymore, / not one thing or the other.” In this dream, the speaker transcends gender altogether: “I am no more a woman / than Christ was a man,” as she describes a world in which Christianity recognizes only pure humanity and gender does not exist. In a poem written much later, “Welcome Morning” (*The Awful Rowing Toward God* 455), the “housewife” speaker become even more bold, declaring that “All this is God, / right here in my pea-green house / each morning” (*CP* 455). Such belief, however, cannot be sustained; the collection that includes this poem ends with “The Rowing Endeth,” the final poem that Sexton prepared for publication before her suicide. “The Rowing Endeth” makes clear that the end of this quest is bitter; although the speaker does reach God, he is a brute who cheats and mocks her.

As Alicia Ostriker points out in “That Story: The Changes of Anne Sexton,” Sexton’s religious poems reveal the poet’s sense of her own evil, someone set apart from God. This alienation, presumably, contributed to her suicide. Citing the series of religious poems in *The Death Notebooks* and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Ostriker points out that Sexton “was not a protest poet. Her religion is determinedly patriarchal. Her God is not Self but Other” (82). Ostriker describes Sexton’s creation of “The Jesus Papers” as a “mordantly comic dismantling of Christian myth from a female point of view, anticipating by several years the feminist critique of patriarchal religion” but goes on to make it clear that, these poems also demonstrate “the crucial distinction between critique and transformation.” That is, “the woman poet here can analytically penetrate but cannot transcend—cannot imagine transcending—a patriarchal theology which swallows her alive. . . . an intellectually devastating subversion is equaled and canceled by an emotionally devastating submission” (*Stealing the Language* 158).

Sexton's theology seems to have been, like her gender politics, informed primarily by the larger culture in which she lived. Sexton's god was clearly God the Father. Ostriker goes on to speculate that had Sexton avoided suicide for a few more years, her religious beliefs might have become more progressive and that her self-loathing might have been alleviated by the new feminist theology that was emerging in the first half of the 1970s. She points out that the landmark book *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly's "attack on patriarchal religion," was published in the very year of Sexton's suicide. In a discussion of Sexton's religiously themed poetry, Estella Lauter points out that Sexton, at the time of her death, seemed to have been close to believing in her own god-like power. However, Lauter also goes on to speculate that Sexton would not have been able to realize fully the benefits of such belief without a corresponding widespread cultural shift. Lauter cites Daly's own assertions that full realization of female deity necessarily involves "exorcism of internalized patriarchal presence" and that it is "naive to think that healing can take place in isolation," that a female deity can be realized only when women collectively bring into being "a counterworld to the prevailing sense of reality" (qtd. on 159). The publication of Daly's book was indeed just the kind of catalytic event necessary to bring about this new way of thinking. Writing in 1982, Ostriker claims that, "Among feminist theologians and historians of ideas it has subsequently [since the publication *Beyond God the Father*] become a commonplace assumption that the passive-female imagery of Western religion is inadequate for women's spiritual needs, and a countercultural search for goddess figures has become something of a cultural brushfire" (82 "That Story").

Beginning her writing career in 1975, Gilchrist seems to have worked by the light of this fire, contributing her own goddess-like characters and, in several cases, bringing the unfulfilled desires expressed in Sexton's work to fruition. When Gilchrist began writing, the feminist

theology of Daly and others had begun to influence American intellectual culture significantly. As a result, Gilchrist is able to transform, rather than simply critique, in a way that Sexton could not; to use Ostriker's terminology, Gilchrist "transcends" what Sexton could only "penetrate" (158). Given the many references to Sexton in Gilchrist's works, specifically her characters' expressions of the desire to "bring back" or redeem Sexton, I assume such a desire in Gilchrist herself. In this respect, Gilchrist works as a sort of literary apostle for Sexton, continuing her work in a culture that is prepared to accept it.

This relationship is encoded in many of Gilchrist's most well known and received works. In *The Anna Papers*, Anna Hand, for example, seems to experience an apotheosis through her drowning. Not only does her presence continue after her death, for she becomes a benevolent force in the lives of the women she has left behind, liberating her sister Helen from her role as an upper-middle-class housewife, she also acts as a muse for her niece Olivia, as Olivia struggles to emulate Anna by becoming a writer. Anna's drowning in the Atlantic Ocean has been cited by Margaret Donovan Bauer as evidence of Anna's merging with the great goddess of the sea.¹⁶ Her drowning, in fact, can be read as an enactment of the speaker's implied wish in Sexton's poem "The Consecrating Mother," the final poem in the posthumously published *45 Mercy Street*. As the speaker in this poem gazes at the sea, the mother of all things, she sees in it the sanctuary she longs for. In turn, the sea speaks to her, telling her not to "give up one god / for I have a handful," suggesting that staying alive, or on shore, will be continually frustrating to the speaker who desperately "needs" but cannot "believe." In contrast, the ocean offers a knowable god, the collective forces of nature itself, including the "trade winds in their twelve-fingered reversal" whose blowing of the waves creates the voice of those who have already joined the pantheon; they sing, "*Deo, Deo*" (CP 554). At high tide, the ocean reflects the moonlight in its "breasts

made of milk water” and invites the speaker to enter and commune. The speaker realizes that the ocean is indeed holy, that

She should be entered skin to skin,
and put on like one’s first or last cloth,
entered like kneeling your way into church,
descending into that ascension (*CP* 554).

However, the speaker, failing to recognize the similar divinity in her own female humanity, assumes that God is necessarily outside of herself. The poem concludes with an expression of infinite longing: and a return to Christian scripture:

I am that clumsy human
on the shore
loving you, coming, coming,
going,
and wish to put my thumb on you.
like the Song of Solomon. (*CP* 554-55)

The return to Christian scripture at the end of the poem underscores the speaker’s inability to accept “consecration” by a mother-goddess and her ultimate need for a Christian Father-God.

Like the speaker in “The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks,” Amanda McCamey addresses the issue of maternal sacrifice that is central to the Christian myth. After the birth and loss of her first child, which Amanda blames on the Catholic Church, Amanda is emotionally and spiritually lost for the next thirty years of her life. However, when she begins writing, she is able to speak beyond the proscriptions of the God in Sexton’s poem. Far from “whispering,” she tells her story in what can be read as a literary shout. Gilchrist describes the day that Amanda leaves

her husband in New Orleans to move to Fayetteville, where she will pursue her career as a translator and writer. It is on Christmas Day, one year-to-the-day prior to the “miraculous” birth at the end of the novel, that Amanda begins her move. As she listens to Christmas music on a New Orleans radio station, she packs for the move, casting off the remnants of her old life as a rich uptown New Orleans wife, just the type of “beautiful woman” who is sacrificed for the benefit of those around her:

“Adeste fideles” . . . the radio was playing . . . “Joyful and triumphant . . . Oh, come ye . . . Oh commmmmmmmme ye to Be . . . eth . . . lee . . . hem . . .” I’m going to join the poets, Amanda hummed to herself as she moved across the bare floors throwing cookbooks and heated rollers and cocktail dresses and curtain rods on the piles of stuff in the hallway [to be thrown away]. . . “Glory to Gaaaaddddddd . . . in the highest glory. . .” (133)

Amanda is not whispering; she is singing out loud, co-opting the words of a religious carol to celebrate her own glory, her own spiritual journey to embrace a new faith, the religion of creative work, of art. After her arrival in Fayetteville, Amanda’s work as a translator gives her both power and a new, elevated identity. As her friend Katie Dunbar points out on meeting Amanda for the first time, Amanda—as a writer—is a creator, and as such, has divine power: “I’d know she was a writer without anyone telling me. She just *makes up the world* as she goes along” (my emphasis, 109).

After she becomes pregnant during her first year in Fayetteville, during an affair with a much younger lover, Amanda is poised to become the divine mother, giving birth to her new son late on Christmas Eve. Although Jeannie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner argue that Amanda’s “hardline stand against organized Christianity, and against the Roman Catholic Church

in particular, makes the possibility of the author's intention to render a strict biblical reference or allegory highly unlikely," I disagree.¹⁷ Like Sexton's commentary on Christian scripture, Gilchrist's work deliberately references the original source as a way of investigating and commenting on it. Not only does Gilchrist's novel directly reference Christian scripture; it revises that scripture. Although Amanda initially resembles the Virgin, she progresses beyond the role of the Virgin as it is rendered in the Christian Gospels, replacing the God of the Father altogether, and becoming Goddess. Her revision of the Lord's Prayer at the end of the novel suggests as much. As the novel closes near midnight on Christmas Eve, Amanda is surrounded by her friends, including her mentor Marshall, who, like the magi, have traveled to be with her at the scene of the birth. The novel closes with Amanda falling asleep and dreaming of herself dressed, goddess-like, in a "white silk suit holding her beautiful daughter in her arms" (352). The daughter in this fantasy can only be her first born, the long-ago lost Barrett Clare, for the child she has just given birth to is a male. Through her newly-acquired powers, she has redeemed not only herself but also her daughter. The holy family, of which she is now head, is complete.¹⁸ In the novel's final lines, the words of a newly-revised Lord's Prayer drift through her writer's mind: "My will be done, she said as she moved into her sleep. My life on my terms, my daughter, my son. My life leading to my lands forever and ever and ever, hallowed be my name, goddammit, my kingdom come, my will be done, amen, so be it, Amanda" (353). Thus, like Anna, Amanda has achieved what Sexton's speakers so ardently desired but could not accept: their own divinity.

Throughout Sexton's life, most Christian churches in America were openly patriarchal institutions that kept women in subservient positions, denying them power and refusing to recognize their full humanity. As a result, Sexton's quest for faith was complicated by her gender. This excruciating dilemma, paired with Sexton's inability to resolve her conflicted relationships

with her patriarchal psychotherapists, seems to have contributed to her suicide. Both struggles appear to have led Gilchrist into imaginative sympathy with Sexton, influencing Gilchrist's own literary vision and prompting her to act as Sexton's literary advocate. Like her character Caroline Jones, the professor of creative writing at Millsaps whose stated goal is to "revive" Sexton's work, Gilchrist promotes Sexton's work through direct allusion and overtly shared thematic concerns. In her fictional exploration of psychotherapy and religious belief, Gilchrist clearly foregrounds the repressive cultural milieu in which Sexton lived and worked, inviting a new generation of readers to consider Sexton's work and appreciate its pioneering achievement in the years leading up to the second wave of the American Women's Movement.

NOTES

1. For an extended discussion of this phenomenon, see Suzanne Juhasz's "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton," first published in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* in 1979 and then reprinted in Diana Hume George's *Sexton: Selected Criticism* in 1988.
2. Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* was not published until 1974. At the time of its publication, this work was controversial but well respected scholarship refuting the idea that Freudian analysis was a tool of the patriarchy. In the years between Greer's work, and Mitchell's refutation of it, however, there was, as there still is, much critical debate about the connection between patriarchy and Freudian thought and practices.
3. It is important to note that Jong has, from the beginning of her career, consciously identified with the feminist movement in a way that Sexton did not. In answer to a question about the beginning of her self-identification as a feminist, Jong replies, "I have been a feminist my entire life. I read *The Second Sex* when I was 13 and knew DeBeauvoir was right. All I had to do was listen to my mother's rage, the ambiance in which I grew up" (Interview).
4. Shortly after Sexton's death, Adrienne Rich had also suggested Sexton's feminist sensibilities, despite her failure to identify politically with the feminist movement. In a discussion of Sexton's poem to her daughter Linda "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" as a "feminist poem." Rich makes her point quite succinctly: "That poem is dated 1964, and it is a feminist poem. Her head was often patriarchal, but in her blood and her bones, Anne Sexton knew" (*AS: 1928-1974* 121).

5. Sexton discusses a particularly interesting example of this phenomenon in a 1974 interview with Barbara Kevles. When asked about the relationship between her art and her therapy, Sexton explains that sometimes “I understand something in a poem that I haven’t integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself while I was revealing it to the readers. The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious” (85). For a concrete example, Sexton talks about a poem that “suddenly” came to her after her psychiatrist asked her what she thought of her parents having sex. In this poem, entitled “In the Beach House,” the speaker describes overhearing a “deeply primal scene”—the speaker’s parents having sex: “it is plain that they are at the royal strapping.” When asked about this image by her psychiatrist, Sexton recalls a long forgotten memory of her father beating her with a riding crop. Although this image had not consciously dictated the language of the poem, Sexton discovered that it was, upon reflection, a clear influence on the poem. Sexton concludes, “As I related this to my doctor, he said, ‘See, that was quite a royal strapping’, thus revealing to me, by way of my own image, the intensity of that moment, the sexuality of that beating, the little masochistic seizure—it’s so classic, it’s almost corny. Perhaps it’s too intimate an example, but then poetry and therapy are intimate” (86).

6. This poem does not appear in *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*. However, it is included in *Selected Poems* and as an epigraph to *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose (of Anne Sexton)*. It was first published in *Voices: A Journal of Poetry* 169 (1959): 34.

7. Although the manner of Sexton’s eventual suicide was asphyxiation, in the final two years of her life, she did attempt suicide by means of overdosing on her medication at least twice; for details of both attempts, see Middlebrook’s biography, pages 378 and 392.

After an attempted suicide in 1955, shortly after her first breakdown, she began referring to

Nembutal, which she continued to take throughout her life, as her “kill-me pills” (Middlebrook AS 34). Sexton’s abuse of medication and its detrimental effects on her life and her writing were well noted by friends and family members. Her daughter Linda’s memoir, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey to Find my Mother* includes graphic descriptions of her mother’s abuse of medication; see especially the chapter entitled “Afterward” (referring the period immediately following Sexton’s suicide), which describes finding the huge volumes of medication that Sexton kept at all times.

8. Interestingly, Gilchrist uses a phrase from this line of Sexton’s—“The Gauzy Edge of Paradise”—as the title of another short story in the section of Victory over Japan entitled “Crazy, Crazy, Now Showing Everywhere.” In “The Gauzy Edge of Paradise,” three characters, Diane, her cousin Sandor, and her friend Lanier, experiment with drugs and incest and nearly lose their lives in an armed robbery.

9. Gilchrist’s ending also suggests a third Sexton poem entitled “Torn Down From Glory Daily,” in which the speaker is watching a flock of gulls skirmish over breadcrumbs. If “Letter Written on a Ferry” is an overly optimistic poem, then “Town Down From Glory Daily” can be read as an overly pessimistic poem. Unlike the communion of the nuns who “open their mouths wider than a milk cup” as they celebrate by “drinking in the sky,” the gulls in “Torn Down From Glory Daily,” as is suggested by the title, routinely brutalize each other in their struggles to survive. In the poem, the speaker and his companion “climb down humps / of rock / with a bag of dinner rolls / left over / and spread them gently on a stone / leaving six crusts for an early king” (CP 5). Although an entire flock of gulls swoops down, “Just four scoop out the bread.” The speaker’s final description of these four emphasizes the often unfair struggle necessary for survival: “Oh see how / they cushion their fishy bellies / with a brother’s crumb” (CP 6). Although Sexton’s

“Letter” ends with the speaker’s sense of being blessed by the forces that surround her, “Torn Down From Glory Daily” suggests a very different, hostile universe. Such extremes are presented as irreconcilable throughout much of Sexton’s poetry. Gilchrist, however, in “Crazy, Crazy Now Showing Everywhere” presents these two extremes as complementary parts of a larger whole. Although Lilly’s family seems poised to devour her, Lilly is armed with an awareness of her situation (granted by Fanny) that will likely enable her to escape it. Through her relationship to Fanny, through her observation of Fanny’s experiences, Lilly seems to learn self preservation. At the end, the reader is left with the specific hope that Lilly will not be seduced by her husband’s family, whose methods for dealing with women, (i.e., declarations of madness and its attendant treatment) would most certainly render her as helpless as Fannie.

10. It seems worth noting here that both Sexton and Gilchrist each wrote one play. Sexton’s play was originally named *The Cure*, then *Tell Me Your Answer True*. The final version, entitled *Mercy Street*, ran off-Broadway at The American Place Theater for several weeks in 1969. Middlebrook devotes all of Chapter 16 of her biography to the play’s production. In 1985, Gilchrist’s play, *Invasions Incursions Intrusions, Acts of Love*, had two staging performances in New York . Unfortunately, no known copies of Gilchrist’s play now exist (McCay xvi).

11. It is worth noting here that Jim Jasper’s name recalls that of the Reverend Jim Jones. Jim Jasper’s erratic behavior and advocacy of death as the only way of taking responsibility for oneself recall the mass suicide led by the Reverend Jim Jones on November 18, 1978. As Jeffrey Berman has pointed out, Jim Jones’ “rambling speech” in which he exhorted his followers to commit suicide “recalls” Sexton’s poem “Suicide Note.” Berman provides a transcript of an excerpt from Jones’ speech: “Well, some, everybody dies. Some place that hope runs out; because everybody dies. I haven’t seen anybody yet didn’t die. And I like to choose my own

kind of death for a change. I'm tired of being tormented to hell, that's what I'm tired of. Tired of it" (195).

12. Barrett Clare also uses this quotation as an epigraph to one of her own poems in which she describes her therapy with her psychiatrist Gustave (*The Annunciation* 324). For a more complete discussion of this quotation and its relationship to psychotherapy, see Chapter Two of this dissertation.

13. At the time Sexton wrote this poem, she was being treated by Dr. Martin Orne, who did indeed live with his mother, Sexton's previous psychiatrist Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne.

14. This point is made clear in the first sentence of the novel when an unidentified speaker refers to "a dirty book about the church." Although he is referring to the novel that the fictional Amanda writes, his comments also apply to Gilchrist's novel itself. Throughout *The Annunciation*, Amanda's novel mirrors Gilchrist's own. For a more developed discussion of this phenomenon, see Chapter Two of this dissertation.

15. Sexton refers to herself as Ms. Dog in "Hurry Up Please It's Time" (*The Death Notebooks*, 1974) and "Is It True" (*The Awful Rowing Toward God*, 1975). Maxine Kumin's Introduction to Sexton's *Complete Poems* (entitled "How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton") offers insight into Sexton's adoption of this appellation, declaring that "There was a wonderful impudence in naming herself a kind of liberated female deity" (xxx). See also Karen Alkalay-Gut's recently published article "The Dream Life of Ms. Dog: Anne Sexton's Revolutionary Use of Pop Culture" (2005).

16. For a more complete discussion of Anna's drowning as a symbolic return to the prototypical mother, see Margaret Donovan Bauer's essay "Water and Women: Ellen Gilchrist Explores Two Life Sources."

17. For Thompson and Garner's argument, see "The Miracle of Realism: The Bid for Self-Knowledge in the Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist."
18. During the birth scene, Will Lyons, the father of Amanda's new son, dies in an automobile accident, making it clear that he will not be returning to usurp Amanda's new power.

CHAPTER 5

ANABASIS, AND TRANSFORMATIONS: RECLAIMING WOMEN'S LITERARY HISTORY

“A Woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.
The mentor
and the student
feed off each other.”

-- Anne Sexton, “Rapunzel,” (*CP* 244-45)

As the previous chapter points out, the traditions of Christianity were not empowering to Sexton or Gilchrist, nor was the psychiatric treatment they received especially suited to their needs as women. Nevertheless, by their own admission, their time spent in psychotherapy did facilitate their emergence as writers. And with their writing, both were able to fill, at least in part, the needs that could not be met—or even clearly addressed—by the patriarchal models of Christianity with which they grew up. For both Sexton and Gilchrist, as writers interested in their mythopoetic lineage, moving away from sacred myth to look instead toward their secular literary heritage seems to have been fruitful. Although this direction naturally involved considering a largely male tradition, both Sexton and Gilchrist approached the texts they took on with an eye and ear for feminist revision, or, as Sexton refers to it, for “transformation.”

In other chapters I argue that various works by Gilchrist were significantly and consciously influenced by Sexton's life and works. In this chapter, however, I want to examine an additional, more subtle, and indirect influence of Sexton on Gilchrist: Gilchrist's *Anabasis* (1994)¹ and Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) are literary projects based on similar impulses to reclaim literary history of and for women.

Sexton's publisher, Houghton Mifflin, originally expressed doubts about the potential success of a collection of fairy tales, but after its publication in 1971, most critics celebrated *Transformations* as "witty, ironic and acerbic," and sales were particularly strong; in fact, *Transformations* quickly became one of Sexton's best-selling collections, second only to *Love Poems* (Leventen 136).² In one of the earliest scholarly examinations of the collection, "The Excitable Gift: the Poetry of Anne Sexton" (1978), Suzanne Juhasz focuses on Sexton's "double bind," her struggle to resist making the choice between "being a 'woman' or a 'poet'" (333), commenting that Sexton's poetry "is a testament to her courage and ability to be both for as long as she could."³ Sexton's writing of *Transformations* seems to have been an odd but fortunate moment in her career when she was able to integrate these two roles. According to Middlebrook's biography, Sexton collaborated with her 16-year-old daughter Linda when Sexton began the project that would eventually become *Transformations*. After noticing Linda's ritual reading of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* each day after school, Sexton was one day struck with the inspiration, which she described as "magic in the head," to incorporate the tales into her own work. Noting that Linda's copy of the tales (The Modern Library Edition) included an introduction by W. H. Auden, Sexton asked Linda what her favorite tales were and then "wrote the titles down on a napkin" (Middlebrook 333). When the book, which included transformations of each of the tales

Linda had suggested, was published, Sexton dedicated it to Linda, a single gesture in which she acted as both mother and writer without internal conflict or self-sacrifice.⁴

According to Diane Middlebrook, *Transformations*, seems to have connected Sexton not only to her daughter, but perhaps to a motherly figure, her new psychiatrist, Doctor Constance Chase, who in the poem “The Frog Prince” appears as Frau Doktor / Frau Brundig.” Middlebrook interprets Sexton’s creation of this poem as “in part a courtship offering” to Chase, noting that the time in which Sexton wrote *Transformations* was “a moment ripe with possibility in Sexton’s life, with a new ‘mama’ [Dr. Chase] and two adolescent daughters battling toward womanhood to inspire her” (336).

Despite Middlebrook’s claims, however, with the single exception of “Rapunzel,” the collection avoids any significant treatment of the difficult subject of mother-daughter relationships. As Juhasz points out in her analysis of the collection, “There are no mothers and daughters in these tales, only daughters and lecherous fathers or evil stepmothers.” Juhasz further notes in her discussion of “Rapunzel” that “both the questions and the answers” posed in the poem “are fraught with ambiguity, as Sexton treads on dangerous ground in postulating any possible kind of salvation for women in the real world” (347). Furthermore, in her autobiography *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*, Linda Gray Sexton emphasizes that Sexton’s relationship with Dr. Chase soon grew strained and that “Dr. Chase, was not, in Mother’s opinion, nearly sympathetic enough” (148).⁵

Other critics in the late 1970s, including Jane McCabe, made similarly equivocal assessments of *Transformations*. Responding to the tensions between Juhasz’ definitions of “feminine” and “feminist” writing—the former being writing in which the “feminine experience contributes more directly to the themes and forms,” and the latter being writing in which “the

poet realizes and analyzes the political implications of being both female and poet”—McCabe declares, “Although I would not suggest that Anne Sexton is a feminist poet, I think that her poetry catches the feminist’s eye and ear in a special way” (qtd. in McCabe 219, 218).⁶

A decade later, Carol Leventen, in “*Transformations’s* Silencings,” also employs Juhasz’ concepts of feminine and feminist writing to discuss Sexton’s collection. Unlike earlier critics, however, Leventen reads *Transformations* as a demonstration of Sexton’s inability to reconcile, or work outside of, this double bind. Leventen argues that although Sexton’s poems represent both feminine and feminist writing, these forms remain separated throughout the collection; the feminine sensibility that informs the tales remains deeply at odds with the feminist sensibility with which Sexton writes the prefatory verses to each revised tale. Although Leventen emphasizes that “one effect of” Sexton’s failure to integrate the feminine with the feminist voice is to “perpetuate the mutually exclusive female roles—active vocal ‘witch’ who breaks free/manipulated, passive girl who stays trapped,” she declares that Sexton’s “achievement” is not to be “denigrated.” In fact, Leventen lauds “the tenacity with which [Sexton] pursues her controlling vision of the sociocultural patterns that diminish women” (146). Moreover, Leventen suggests that female readers in the late 1980s can readily appreciate the “pioneering radicalism” of Sexton’s effort, and can use their awareness of the obvious split in female consciousness that it reveals as a tool to free themselves from the “sociocultural patterns that diminish [them].”

In retrospect, it is quite clear that Sexton did indeed, have her finger on the pulse of the feminist literary culture in which she wrote *Transformations*. Beginning with Alison Lurie’s publication of “Fairy Tale Liberation” in the *New York Review of Books* in 1970, and its sequel “Witches and Fairies” in 1971, fairy tales quickly became highly visible disputed literary terrain for feminist writers. Lurie argues that the fairy tale is one of the few traditional literary

forms that depict “competent, resourceful, and powerful female characters” and should therefore be “one of the few sorts of classic children’s literature of which a radical feminist would approve” (qtd. in Haase 1). Lurie’s position, however, was quickly challenged by Marcia Leiberman’s “forceful rebuttal” published in 1972, entitled “Some Day My Prince Will Come” (Haase 1). The fairy tales that have been popularized by the male-dominated process of “selecting, editing and [publishing],” Leiberman argues, present passive, victimized women; she cites Disney’s popularization of such tales as “Cinderella,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “Snow White” as examples of this phenomenon (383). According to Leiberman, the tales Lurie uses as examples are so obscure as to be irrelevant to what Donald Haase refers to as the “contemporary process of female acculturation” through fairy tales (Haase 1). The debate between the positions taken by Lurie and Leiberman continued heatedly throughout the 1970s. In perhaps the most virulent rejection of the notion of fairy tales’ inherent feminist values, Mary Daly, in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, declares: “The child who is fed tales such as Snow White is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother/teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime (death-time), is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot” (44). Alicia Ostriker, in her 1982 essay “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” which was subsequently published as a chapter in Ostriker’s *Stealing The Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* (1986), presents a more moderate view of the possibilities and usefulness of fairy tales in women’s acculturation and creative work. Although she agrees that fairy tales have traditionally been used to prescribe male-dictated “normative” female roles, she also suggests that feminist writers can indeed use the form of fairy tales to subvert this tradition. Specifically, she cites Sexton’s *Transformations* as an example of such subversion in which the subject and the

narrative voice are split, thereby undermining any monolithic, patriarchally determined definitions for the “I,” or the female self. Unlike Leventen, who laments Sexton’s failure to integrate the “feminine” and the “feminist” voices in *Transformations*, Ostriker sees this phenomenon as the collection’s greatest strength. Ironically, Ostriker’s ultimate argument is that any one of the given voices in the tales is not actually an “I,” but is, in fact a “we,” and that the female “self in its innermost reaches is plural” (235).⁷

In the opening poem of *Transformations*, “The Golden Key,” the speaker introduces herself, “a middle-aged witch, me.” In later poems, she is “Dame Sexton,” and she is “ready to tell you a story or two. / I have come to remind you, / all of you” of the mysteries of childhood, the magic of metaphor. Her audience is a group of adults—including Alice, aged fifty-six, and Samuel, aged twenty-two—who seem to have outgrown their curiosity and their imaginations, who seem to have “forgotten the ten P.M. dreams / where the wicked king / went up in smoke” (*Complete Poems* 223). To help remind those in her audience that they are not “comatose,” not “undersea” (imaginatively dead), she introduces a young boy who holds a golden key; he “is sixteen and he wants some answers. / He is in each of us. / I mean you. / I mean me. . . . We must have the answers.”

In her novel, *Net of Jewels* (1992), Gilchrist’s autobiographical character Rhoda Manning makes a similar point. For a final-exam essay in her freshman English class at Vanderbilt University, Rhoda selects simile and metaphor as her topic. After two-and-a-half hours of writing, in which she discusses everything from the Old Testament to Don Quixote, she concludes: “Anything *can stand for something else*. . . . Any key will turn the lock into the secrets of our brains. Everything is like everything else and everything is hooked up to everything else and everyone is included” (*NOJ* 18). In the final line of the essay, Rhoda quotes William Butler

Yeats' "Under Ben Bulbin": "Cast a cold eye on life, on death. Horseman, pass by!" to emphasize the ongoing nature of the human imagination, of our collective literary history. Like Sexton's "golden key," the key about which Rhoda writes her essay is the imagination's ability to process metaphor, to "get the answers" by interpreting myth, including fairy tales.

In a later novel, *Anabasis: A Journey to the Interior*, Gilchrist demonstrates what the youthful Rhoda suggests in her essay: that the literary imagination creates by interpreting and integrating the old with the new, by continuously tapping into the "secrets" of our brains, including our collective literary history, and recreating our oldest stories, informing and infusing them with our new ones. Gilchrist's historical novel set in Ancient Greece, *Anabasis: A Journey to the Interior* has been referred to as "A fairy tale by Ellen Gilchrist, acclaimed writer of novels for adults" (Rev. of *Anabasis*). The novel tells the story of a young Thracian slave girl named Auria who has been raised by the wise healer Philokrates and trained as his apprentice. After Philokrates' death, Auria escapes from a master who allowed her to be sexually abused, then rescues an infant who has been left to die, and finally fights against a regiment of the Spartan Army when it invades her community during the Peloponnesian war. As an historical novel, *Anabasis* mixes elements of fact with fiction. It also includes many of the elements of the fairy tale as they are catalogued by W. H. Auden in his "Introduction" to the 1952 Modern Library Edition of *The Tales of Grimm and Anderson*, the edition that Sexton consulted as she wrote *Transformations* (Middlebrook 333). In his introduction, Auden includes a concise sketch of the genre.

A fairy story. . . is a serious tale with a human hero and a happy ending. The progression of its hero is the reverse of the tragic hero's: at the beginning [the hero] is either socially obscure or despised as being stupid or untalented, lacking in

the heroic virtues, but at the end, he [sic] has surprised everyone by demonstrating his heroism and winning fame, riches and love. Though ultimately he succeeds, he does not do so without a struggle in which his success is in doubt, for opposed to him are not only natural difficulties like glass mountains, or barriers of flame, but also hostile wicked powers, stepmothers, jealous brothers and witches. In many cases, indeed, he would fail if he were not assisted by friendly powers who give him instructions or perform tasks for him which he cannot do himself; that is, in addition to his own powers, he needs luck, but this luck is not fortuitous but dependent upon his character and his actions. The tale ends with the establishment of justice; not only are the good rewarded but also the evil are punished. (xv-xvi)

As a review of the plot reveals, Gilchrist's novel clearly qualifies as an extended fairy tale. The novel's heroine is not only "socially obscure"; she is both an orphan and a slave, whose original name, "Tissapher," which means "uncouth, uncivilized, untamed" (she later renames herself Auria), suggests the similarly descriptive names of such fairy-tale characters as Cinderella (17). In her journey to freedom, Auria rescues the doomed infant Kleis from a brutal death and later heroically engages in hand-to-hand combat to defend a band of escaped slaves against the encroaching Spartan army. Auria's journey begins when she encounters what Auden would describe as two specific "hostile wicked powers." On the advice of his jealous wife Eleuria, who is clearly a "wicked stepmother" figure, Auria's master Meldrus trades the young virgin Auria to his business partner, the slave trader Polymion, who brutally rapes her. In order to make Auria more attractive to Polymion, and thus to make the transaction more lucrative for her husband, Eleuria gives Auria grand new clothing, including "a pin shaped in the likeness of two butterflies" (18). These gifts, like the poisoned comb, lace, and apple that Snow White's wicked stepmother

gives her, dupe Auria, leading her to a nearly fatal encounter with Polymion. Eleuria's sending her own infant daughter into the forest to die—the baby Auria later rescues—also suggests her similarities to the queen in “Snow White” who banishes her stepdaughter, sending her into the snowy winter forest to die.⁸

At many points throughout the novel, Auria's success, and even her survival, is, as Auden describes such situations, deeply “in doubt.” She begins her quest when she is in her early teens, leaving the safety of her home on the coast, where she is a part of a closely-knit slave community, just as winter is approaching, to journey with a newborn high into the Peloponnesian Mountains. Without a definite destination and without the proper provisions—she has only a few days' worth of food and no map or knowledge of the terrain—her plans seem to be doomed. She is further burdened with a newborn for whom she must provide care. She would indeed fail “were [she] not assisted by friendly powers who give [her] instructions [and] perform tasks for [her] which [she could not] do [herself].” Two such friendly powers are Phoebe, the goat, and Metis,⁹ the dog, both of whom she takes with her when she escapes. Although Auria tries to breast-feed Kleis, chewing thistle to facilitate lactation, her efforts are not successful. Instead, Auria has the nanny goat Phoebe nurse Kleis until she is old enough for Auria to feed her solid foods such as boiled and mashed roots. Metis also acts as a “friendly power” as he provides security and physical warmth for Auria and Kleis as they sleep in the cold mountain nights. Further, Auria, in a bit of magical thinking, believes that her mentor Philokrates has been reincarnated in Kleis, and relies on the child as an embodied connection to him to sustain her courage. Although Auria has the healing knowledge that Philokrates has taught her, she often doubts herself and must be reassured of her own powers by believing that Philokrates, through his presence in the child, is still with her.

Clarius, the leader of the band of rebel slaves that Auria eventually joins, also acts as a “friendly power” for Auria. Just before the snows of winter begin, Auria discovers and takes shelter in a sanctuary high in the mountains that Clarius built several years earlier. Much like the seven dwarves’ cottage in “Snow White,” the sanctuary is complete with the domestic accouterments, including vast stores of grain and other foods, necessary for Auria and Kleis to survive their first winter together. A few weeks after finding the sanctuary, however, Auria injures her ankle while looking for honey and herbs to cure Kleis’ pneumonia and is stranded in the snow until a character named Meion arrives and carries her back to the safety and warmth of the sanctuary. Meion is, coincidentally, a friend of Clarius and a fugitive slave who had, like the dwarves, been working in the gold and silver mines until his escape. Like the prince in “Snow White,” Meion takes Auria (and her menagerie) to his “kingdom,” an encampment of rebel slaves who welcome Auria.

At this point in the novel, Auria begins to rely on “her own powers” as well as her “luck,” which is “not fortuitous but dependent upon [her] own character and [her] actions.” As one of the only educated, literate escaped slaves, Auria becomes a leader, establishing a lyceum and working as a healer. When the Spartan army approaches the encampment, Auria, trained in the sciences of botany and anatomy, blends a lethal potion from the local plants to poison the arrows the camp will use to defend itself. She also uses her knowledge of anatomy to massage the paralyzed arms of the camp’s leader Leucippius so that he can lead his people in the battle. Despite her efforts, however, the renegade slaves are vastly outnumbered. When the Spartans finally attack, Auria and Meion are saved by a fortuitous lunar eclipse, which stuns their attackers and allows Auria and Meion to escape unharmed. Thus the “tale ends with justice.” “The good are rewarded but the evil are punished”: The corrupt Spartan General who led the battle against

the renegade slaves dies after drinking wine that was deliberately poisoned by one of his own men, and Meldrus and Eleuria are slaughtered when a Spartan General leads a march through their villa

In an epilogue equivalent to the standard “and-they-lived-happily-ever-after” ending of fairy tales, the reader learns that Auria and Meion, now married, have settled very near Clarius sanctuary where Auria writes poetry in the tradition of Essapho. Together, Meion and Auria are raising their many children, most of whom they rescued and adopted after the children were orphaned in the battle against the Spartans. Clearly, Gilchrist’s plot adheres to the conventions of the fairy tale that Auden describes.

In the final scene of the novel, Auria goes to the bank of a stream and imagines Philokrates’ face “shining up at her” (297). Gilchrist’s tale concludes without the bitterness with which many of Sexton’s tales end. Specifically, Auria escapes the fate of Sexton’s “Snow White” who, in the final lines, seems poised to assume the role of the aging, evil queen, “rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut / and sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do” (229).

While it is obvious that Sexton’s tales are satire, and Gilchrist’s novel is not, I believe that other differences are far more complex. Sexton and Gilchrist seem to differ in their goals as writers, and these different goals, I believe, are directly related to the different cultural milieu in which each woman wrote. While Sexton’s collection seems clearly focused on exposing the misogyny of the fairy tale tradition, thus limiting its power to perpetuate the harmful socialization of passive females, it doesn’t present alternatives to the values presented in the original tales. In fact, “Rapunzel,” the poem’s most direct treatment of women’s relationships to each other, presents a bleak portrait of betrayal in which Rapunzel, despite her affection for her female companion Mother Gothel, cruelly abandons her to flee with the prince. Gilchrist’s novel, in

contrast, presents powerful relationships between women—most notably between Auria and Kleis and between Auria and Keffalinia—that suggest a revision to the fairy-tale tradition.¹⁰ Further, in blending the fairy tale with an historical narrative, Gilchrist rehabilitates both literary forms to present images of powerful women and to rewrite them into a history from which they have frequently been erased. It must be remembered, however, that Sexton was writing well before the pioneering work of Ostriker and others who made it clear that female writers could “steal” the language of men, as well as the myths that they have historically used against women, in order to establish women’s own literary authority. In contrast, Gilchrist wrote *Anabasis* well after such thinking had become commonplace.

Ostriker’s premise that women can and should “steal” language and literary forms and rewrite them to create multiple voices within a single text in order to destabilize male concepts of normative female identity seems to inform Gilchrist’s literary vision for *Anabasis*. The novel does indeed employ a multivocal female identity; the voice telling the tale is made up of Gilchrist’s own, as well as those voices of her foremothers. To discuss this phenomenon in *Anabasis*, it is first necessary to return to Gilchrist’s first novel, *The Annunciation*, which thoroughly foregrounds the issue of rewriting and rehabilitating history, as it chronicles Amanda McCamey’s translations and subsequent “transformations” of Helene Renoir’s poetry. In her own transformations, Amanda re-writes Renoir’s experiences, allowing her the freedom to reclaim her stolen child as well as her own life. Presumably, in Amanda’s historical novel, Helene reclaims her infant from the nuns and, in the process, saves herself from suicide. As I argue in Chapter Two, Helene Renoir is, in many ways, a literary reference or representation of Anne Sexton. The result of Amanda’s revision or transformation of the composite Renoir/Sexton character, is, of

course, the “dirty book about the church” that the anonymous commentator mentions in the opening passage of *The Annunciation* (3).

In her writing of *Anabasis*, Gilchrist seems to be performing a similar rite of transformation for the collective identity of her literary foremothers, including, among many others, both her own mother and, once again, Anne Sexton. By integrating the fairy-tale motif, Gilchrist pays homage to Sexton’s own appropriation of that genre; specifically, Gilchrist takes the first tale in Sexton’s collection, “Snow White” and reworks it, weaving it into the stories she had been told by her own mother, Aurora Alford Gilchrist. Having graduated from The University of Mississippi with a bachelor’s degree in Classics, Aurora Gilchrist raised her daughter Ellen on the tales of ancient Greece and Rome. In the preface to the novel, Gilchrist points out that *Anabasis* is a literary endeavor to save the infants from her mother’s stories that have haunted her since she was a child. In her discussion of writing the novel, however, Gilchrist points out that, in the process of writing, she came to realize that she was not only writing about saving the infant, but was also writing about “saving, of course, who else, myself”—that is, the woman-who-writes (*Falling Through Space* 135). Based on Ostriker’s theory of the collective female self, I argue that Gilchrist is also saving her female literary forebears as well.

With the preface to the novel, which transitions seamlessly into the novel’s opening scene, Gilchrist begins to blur at least one of the lines that separate her from other women (eg, her literary forebears and her female characters). The preface concludes with the statement that “This book begins where my childhood fantasy always began. The girl is sitting beside a marble column copying out a lesson on a wax tablet. The brilliant Greek light is shining over the shoulder of her short white garment. She is very intent on her work.” Chapter One opens: “Four hundred and thirty-one years before the birth of Christ a girl named Auria was bending over a wax tabled

copying out a lesson. She was in a sunny courtyard, in a villa near Thisbe on the road to Delphi” (4). Much like Dame Sexton, who introduces each of the poems in *Transformations*, and occasionally appears in the poems themselves as a character, Gilchrist introduces herself as both storyteller and character; the “young girl” is, of course, Gilchrist’s “childhood fantasy” of herself.

Although Gilchrist was fascinated by many of the stories that her mother shared with her as she was growing up, she was also, like Amanda reading Helene Renoir’s manuscript, horrified. The stories are, for both women, like the “forgotten” nightmares, or “ten P. M. dreams” that Dame Sexton, in “The Gold Key” (the introductory poem of *Transformations*) declares she will conjure, and thereby dispel. The lost child motif, which pervades Sexton’s tales also, links them thematically with both *The Annunciation* and *Anabasis*. Like Gilchrist herself, both Amanda and Auria recoil at their society’s treatment of mothers and infants. In *The Annunciation*, Helene’s child is taken from her by the nuns who also imprisoned her. Many of the tales of ancient Greece that Gilchrist grew up with included similar atrocities. In her Preface to *Anabasis*, Gilchrist describes her impulse to re-write, or revise, such history, even as a child.

My mother was a student of the classics and filled my head with tales of Ancient Greece, a world where babies were sometimes thrown away and where only some of the people learned to read. This bothered me greatly, as I was already very much in love with books, and I began to make up a story about a girl who was raised by a wise man who taught her to read. Later, the girl would grow up and save one of the babies.

For Gilchrist, the issue of literacy (and by extension of literary creation) is inextricably bound with the concept of survival. For the young Gilchrist, the idea that “only some of the people learned to read” seems to have been as disturbing as the fact that “babies were sometimes thrown

away.” Thus, as she makes clear in her comments about writing the novel, Auria’s saving of the baby, and Gilchrist’s writing of the text, are complementary acts. Amanda’s experience in *The Annunciation* is similar; shortly after she begins translating Renoir’s poems, Amanda commits to write her own historical novel, a revision of the story of Renoir’s sonnets, in which Amanda the writer saves Renoir (a literary surrogate for Sexton) and Renoir’s infant. In a moment of extreme frustration with Helene’s sonnets, Amanda speculates about the plot of this as-yet unwritten novel: “The part I’m going to like writing is when Helene and her maid start planning to murder all of the nuns. I’m going to dream up some really gruesome ways to kill them. I think I’ll kill off at least five or six. Historically, all she did was poison a couple” (270). Although we, as readers, cannot know whether Amanda actually included this particular textual detail—given that her novel exists only outside of the pages of Gilchrist’s own—we do know that the publication of her novel was, indeed, “scandalous,” just as Amanda had predicted and even intended it to be (285). The scandal with which her book was received, presumably, works cathartically for Amanda, allowing her to dispel the outrage she has carried with her since the birth of her own first child, which had been, like Helene’s child, “stolen” from her by the Roman Catholic church.

Based on Gilchrist’s comments on the preface to *Anabasis*, readers can assume that her writing of the novel had a similarly cathartic effect. Although Gilchrist omits any direct discussion of Amanda’s process in re-writing of Helen’s story in *The Annunciation*, she does, in her published journals, *Falling Through Space*, provide a vivid account of her own writing of *Anabasis*. By examining Gilchrist’s process in creating *Anabasis*, readers can make informed speculations about Amanda’s creative process in *The Annunciation*.¹¹ Gilchrist’s journals offer what *The Annunciation* does not: the intimate details of the creative process of a woman

transforming herself, and the world around her, including her own literary histories and literary mothers, through becoming a writer.

Like Sexton's sources, which included conversations with her daughter as well as the New Library Edition of the tales, Gilchrist's sources included the oral versions of stories from her mother, as well as published materials that, like the published tales of the Grimms, had been transcribed, selected, and published by men.

Given her description of the extensive research she conducted before writing *Anabasis: A Journey to the Interior*, I think it is likely that Gilchrist draws from, and re-imagines, at least two published source texts, both of which are also entitled *Anabasis*. The first of these is Xenophon's third-person narrative historical account of his experiences traveling with the Spartan Army during the Peloponnesian Wars. The second is T. S. Eliot's translation of the epic prose poem of war and migration in ancient East Asia, also entitled *Anabasis*, by the French modernist poet St. John Perse. Not only does Gilchrist's work share a title with these two texts; it also shares key elements of setting and plot. However, in Gilchrist's rendering, the voices and perspectives of the earlier texts are radically revised. Xenophon's tome speaks from the point-of-view of a personally detached "embedded historian" in the Spartan Army. Perse's *Anabasis* lacks a coherent persona or narrative voice altogether, and is instead made up of a series of brief, fragmentary ideas and images broken into ten sections. Based on the extensive research Gilchrist put into her novel, as well as her broad knowledge and abiding interest in both Modernist and Classical literature, I assume that these two texts must have, in some ways, informed her own. In her version of *Anabasis*, however, Gilchrist re-imagines these earlier works by the male Classical historian and the male Modernist poet, and figuratively translates them into her own idiom—the same

technique that won Sexton critical praise for her *Transformations*. As reviewer Vernon Young says of *Transformations*,

In *Transformations*, while her impatience with biology and destiny remains, she pursues another beast. She undermines the fairy tale with deadly address and a merciless employment of city-American idioms: occasionally vulgar, often brilliant, nearly always hilarious, to my cruel mind! . . . Anne Sexton is out to get the brothers Grimm, armed with illuminations supplied by Freud but as much by the wised-up modern's experience . . . there are . . . [passages] where, sustained by her fine art of inflection and an uncanny choice of impertinent simile, she achieves a truly diabolical lyricism. (150)

Although Gilchrist's novel is full of historical and cultural detail and includes a straightforward narrative of a young slave girl who emerges as a competent, free woman and artist, it is also strongly infused with humanistic sensibility and even elements of magical realism. The latter textual elements mark Gilchrist's radical departure from her two published source texts, and thus her return to her literary foremothers. In this return, Gilchrist renounces the role of scholar that she had claimed for herself when she began her research for the novel. Like Amanda, who genuinely wants to be a serious translator and scholar, so does Gilchrist, in taking on the project of her own historical novel, aspire to such "lofty" pursuits. In her journals, Gilchrist self-mockingly describes her initial approach to such a project:

I will write a novel set in ancient Greece, I told myself. Anyone can do anything, and I am going down the hill and go to the library and take out every book ever written about ancient Greece and read them and then I'm going over to Daniel Levine's office and borrow all his books and then I'll sign up for Greek classes

and I will spend as many years as it takes. I want to be a great and honored writer, a scholar, a serious and noble person. (*Falling Through Space* 134)

Her story here mirrors Amanda McCamey's story in *The Annunciation*. Although Amanda initially aspires to build a life for herself based on the abstract concept of order—that is, a life dictated by the “masculine” values of logic and linearity—she ultimately realizes that she is better suited for a less rigid existence and for more fluid and creative pursuits. For Amanda, the craft of translation seems, at first, to offer this order, the structure she thinks she wants and needs; however, she ultimately rejects its “rule-riddled” inflexibility. Similarly, Gilchrist is initially motivated by the allure of literary “legitimacy,” which she assumes will come through her production of a scholarly historical novel. However, as any reader of *Anabasis* can attest, the novel, although full of accurate and interesting historical detail, is clearly a work of fantasy, and Auria, its heroine, fits perfectly into Gilchrist's cycle of evolving female characters.¹²

Gilchrist's journals track the radical shift in her artistic vision and process as she moved from conception to execution of *Anabasis*. Gilchrist's description of her initial strategy is quite revealing. She describes herself at the beginning of the project, donning a decidedly masculine uniform and “marching” [her word] into the University of Arkansas library. She describes her discipline.

That first month [in the library] was wonderful. No more unstructured life of a fiction writer. No more ego. No more taking real life and twisting it into plot and character and scenes and devising plots and opening lines. All I had to do now was sit all day in a little cubby at the university library and read and take notes. I was wearing an old tweed skirt and an oxford cloth shirt and brown brogans and knee socks. My horn-rimmed glasses. (134)

Her “uniform” here, from the tweed to the horn-rims, parodies a stereotypical academic costume—suggesting that she understands the artifice of her role here.¹³ And, like a character in a play, she does eventually discard the script and strike the set, as her more creative self renounces the role of scholar. Gilchrist the creative writer, the novelist, instead, takes hold of the pen, altering the story, and giving voice and image to her primal writerly memories. After all of her research, her serious scholarly work, she is compelled to tell her own tale—a story based not on academic research, but on history as it had been passed down to her from her mother, the Classics scholar. Gilchrist describes her epiphany. After many months of library research, of “covering yellow legal pads with knowledge of the past. Plants and herbs, ancient weapons, walled cities, how to mix mortar, how to make cloth, the clothes people wore, their music and sculpture and plays,” one morning Gilchrist opted to work at home. She points to the events of that morning as a significant turning point in her vision for the novel:

I stayed at home and sat at a sunlit table in the dining room overlooking the mountains and began to read my notes. I was in the dining room. I wasn't in my crowded messy workroom where I am a writer. I was in a sunlit dining room being a scholar. Suddenly an old story I had made up when I was a child began to appear on the page. A story about a young Greek girl who saves an abandoned infant. Suddenly, that old unconscious story, about saving, of course, who else, myself, came rising up and I was writing and writing all day.

I wrote for three or four days. That writing is still the best part of the novel. I may never again write such pages as good as those. (*FTS* 134-35)

Despite her best efforts to work as a “scholar,” Gilchrist’s identity as a creative artist re-emerges; her earliest stories, her imaginings based on the tales she heard as a child from her mother, assert themselves, establishing their ultimate primacy over her research.

Based on her own description, then, we know that Gilchrist’s *Anabasis* began as a work of scholarship, similar to Amanda’s painstaking translations in *The Annunciation*. However, like Amanda’s project, it ultimately becomes a work of imagination inspired by the words of the women who came before her, including her mother and Anne Sexton. Through her novel, Gilchrist is able to tell her own story, and the stories of her mothers, while also engaging—and filling in the gaps left by—the texts written by her literary fathers. This revision of the literary fathers’ texts reinvigorates, much like Sexton’s *Transformations* do, the literary inheritance that she thought she knew, revealing stories that have been hidden from her. That is, by re-centering the story around the experience of a young slave girl, Gilchrist comes to know the past—and helps the reader to know the past—in an entirely new way. In creating her own *Anabasis*, by making her own journey inward, Gilchrist makes clear the richness and wisdom of Adrienne Rich’s admonishment that women writing “know the writing of the past, [but] know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (“When We Dead Awaken” 167-68).

Throughout all of her work Gilchrist powerfully demonstrates the value of establishing and relying on our own traditions of women’s writing so that we truly can know the past “differently” (“When We Dead Awaken” 168). In the case of *Anabasis*, Gilchrist turns to the model provided by her actual mother. In much of her other work, however, she turns to Sexton’s life and poetry. Gilchrist makes her claim on Sexton as a literary mother quite clear to readers of her early novels *The Annunciation*, *The Anna Papers* and *A Summer in Maine*. In these novels,

Gilchrist creates characters and crafts plots to emphasize Sexton's historical milieu and its impact on Sexton's life and writing, as well as to express her own sympathy, and cultivate that of her readers, for the limitations Sexton suffered. This emphasis on cultural limitations also underscores the remarkable achievement of Sexton's pioneering work. As Gilchrist points out, as a poet, she works "in the shadow of Sexton, primarily Sexton" ("The Place of Women Writers in the Literary Tradition" 17). A close reading of both women's poetry, which focuses on the experiences of women throughout their life-cycles within a patriarchal culture, supports Gilchrist's claim. Throughout her poems, as well as in her fiction, Gilchrist focuses on two patriarchal institutions under which Sexton suffered but from which Gilchrist successfully extricated herself: patriarchal models of psychotherapy/psychoanalysis and patriarchal religion. Sexton, who published her first collection of poetry in 1960 (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), lived and worked in the years leading up to the second wave of the American Women's Movement. As a result, she became a victim of the methods of her psychiatric doctors as well as victim of her own internalized model of the Christian God as a father. In contrast, according to her own reports, Gilchrist's career as a writer began in 1975, at the height of the second wave of the American Women's Movement, which provided her own ideology with the cultural support necessary to sustain it. Rather than writing against the cultural grain, as Sexton had, Gilchrist wrote (and continues to write) within the space provided by the widespread feminist critiques of patriarchal models of both psychiatric medicine and religion. Gilchrist's makes her recognition of these advantages that she enjoys clear in her treatment of Sexton, in her emphasis on Sexton's disadvantages.

Gilchrist's focus on Sexton and her work seems to have at least two specific motivations, the first of which is keeping Sexton alive in the popular imagination by paying homage to her

work. Gilchrist's work also facilitates a fantasy that many writers of her generation have of Sexton: that Sexton had survived to experience the significant cultural shifts brought about by the American Women's Movement in the middle 1970s and beyond. Perhaps most notable among the writers who share such a fantasy is Sexton's closest friend, Maxine Kumin, who, in June 2006, published a poem expressing such desire entitled "Revisionist Dream."

Well, she didn't kill herself that afternoon.

It was a mild day in October, we sat outside
over sandwiches. She said she had begun

to practice yoga, take piano lessons,
rewrite her drama rife with lust and pride
and so she didn't kill herself that afternoon,
[.]

We ate our sandwiches. The dream blew up at dawn . . . ¹⁴

Kumin's fantasy, as well as her continuing distress, remains vivid 32 years after Sexton's suicide. Unlike Kumin, however, Gilchrist is not burdened by an intensely personal grief at an intimate friend's suicide. Instead, Gilchrist focuses on Sexton's suicide as a cultural loss that, in retrospect, signifies the urgent need of Sexton, as well as that of all women of her generation, for the changes brought about by the second wave of the American Women's Movement.

NOTES

1. The subtitle of Gilchrist's novel, "*A Journey to the Interior*," is strikingly similar to the subtitle of "Part I" of Sexton's *45 Mercy Street*, "Beginning the Hegira." Sexton's text includes a definition of the term *hegira*: "A journey or trip especially when undertaken as a means of escaping from an undesirable or dangerous environment; or as a means of arriving at a highly desirable destination." This definition clearly describes the plot of Gilchrist's *Anabasis*.
2. Middlebrook includes in her biography a discussion of Houghton Mifflin's diffidence about the manuscript. Unsure herself about the appeal her collection might have for audiences, Sexton solicited a foreword to the book from Kurt Vonnegut in hopes of establishing the work's literary legitimacy (338).
3. Although Juhasz wrote the article before Sexton's suicide, this comment was added in a preface written shortly afterwards, before the article's publication.
4. For Linda Gray Sexton's own account of this episode, see her autobiography, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*, where recalls that she named "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," "The Little Peasant," "Godfather Death," "Rapunzel," "Briar Rose," "The White Snake" and "Iron Hans" as her favorites (128). *Transformations* includes revisions of each of these tales.
5. Linda Sexton also notes in her autobiography that "Constance Chase" is a pseudonym (137).
6. For the purposes of my analysis of both Sexton and Gilchrist's works, I argue that Juhasz' ideas can be extended to prose.
7. For an impressive overview of the study of the connections between fairy tales and feminism up through 2004, see Donald Haase's "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship" in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*.

8. The novel also addresses an issue presented in one of Sexton's lesser-known poems entitled "Hutch," which is not included in *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton* and is not discussed by critics. "Hutch" was originally published in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), Sexton's collection that also includes "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," which I discuss in Chapter Two as a significant intertext of *The Annunciation*. Like "Unknown Girl," this short poem addresses the issue of the unwanted, but reluctantly-abandoned child. In "Hutch," however, Sexton employs a far more horrific image of giving up a child than the one in "Unknown Girl." "Hutch" suggests that a mother is leaving a newborn to be devoured by a wild pig:

Hutch
of her arms, this was her sin:
where the wood berries bin
of forest was new and full,
she crept out by its tall
posts, those wooden legs,
and heard the sound of wild pigs
calling and did not wait nor care.
The leaves wept in her hair
as she sand to a pit of needles
and twisted out of the ivyless
gate, where the wood berries bin
was full and a pig came in. (*Complete Poems* 27)

Like the infant in "Hutch," the infant in *Anabasis* is also her mother's "sin," the product of an

adulterous affair between Auria's mistress Eleuria and a traveling musician. Although the infant in *Anabasis* is rescued when Auria finds her "in a bed of rushes," the novel includes gruesome details about similarly abandoned infants who were not rescued. Early in the novel, while out hunting for herbs in a cave with Philokrates, Auria finds the remains of a newborn baby that had been left in the cave a week earlier (7). Later, as she frantically attempts to find Eleuria's baby, Auria imagines "a wild creature eating into that flesh, a bird or a bat or a dog" (34).

The abandoned infants also suggest any number of fairy tales in which children are abandoned in the forest to die. Sexton includes transformations of several such tales, including, most notably, "Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel."

9. Metis' name seems particularly interesting in the context of this novel. Metis, the Greek goddess of Wisdom, is, of course, the parthenogenetic mother of Athena. Before Athena's birth, Metis was swallowed by Zeus, thereby allowing him to "birth" Athena from his head. According to myth, Zeus was counseled by Metis even as she was in his belly (Daly 13).

10. Also a former slave from Meldrus' villa, Keffalinia has known Auria since she was a very young child. In a type of coincidence that is so common in the fairy tale genre, Keffalinia eventually travels to the encampment where Auria is living. One of the few adults who is not killed in the battle with the Spartans, Keffalinia remains close friends with Auria well into their old age.

11. In November 2002, I presented a guest lecture on *The Annunciation* in Professor Mary Ann Wilson's Feminist Theory seminar at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. In her discussion of the novel with the class after the lecture, Professor Wilson pointed out that Gilchrist's failure to include a narrative description of Amanda's process of writing the historical novel seems to be a serious flaw in the novel.

12. For a more complete discussion of this phenomenon, see Chapter Two of this dissertation, which discusses Margaret Donovan Bauer's theory that Gilchrist's characters are all interrelated, each representing differing stages of a few key character types who, throughout Gilchrist's works, evolve and mature. See also Bauer's *The Fiction of Ellen Gilchrist*.

13. Although Gilchrist's parody here seems playful, Sexton's insecurity about her own lack of academic credentials caused her great anxiety. As Maxine Kumin succinctly states, "She was grim about her lost years, her lack of college degree." To make up for these shortcomings, "she read omnivorously But above all else, she was attracted to the fairy tales of Anderson and Grimm, which her beloved Nana had read to her when she was a child. They were for her, perhaps, what Bible stories and Greek myths had been for other writers" ("How It Was" xxvii). Furthermore, critic Greg Johnson argues that Sexton was a "Primitive, an extraordinarily intense artist who confronts her experience with unsettling directness, largely innocent of 'tradition' and privately developing an idiom exactly suited to that experience" he further states that when "Anne Sexton herself later succumbed to the 'weariness of literature'—her later work, on the whole, [became] distinctly inferior to her early poetry" (82).

14. A few hours after having lunch with Maxine Kumin on 4 October 1974, Sexton went home and asphyxiated herself in her own garage (*Anne Sexton: A Biography* 395).

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