

2001

The Love of Her Life: Female Identity and Erotic Love in Selected Workd by Anne Sexton and Joni Mitchell

Jennifer Giles

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

The Love of Her Life:
Female Identity and Erotic Love
in Selected Works by Anne Sexton and Joni Mitchell
Jennifer Giles

Under direction of Jean Rohloff, Professor
English Department of Louisiana State University
Thesis in partial completion of requirements of Honors College for Honors graduation

Table of Contents

Introduction		3
Chapter 1	Women in Love: Anne Sexton's "Food," "Housewife," And "Eighteen Days Without You" Joni Mitchell's "Lesson in Survival," "Help Me," and "Woman of Heart and Mind"	11
Chapter 2	Love Isn't What She Thought It Would Be: Anne Sexton's "Us" and "The Kiss" Joni Mitchell's "Carey," "Lesson In Survival," and "Help Me"	25
Chapter 3	Her One True Love: Her Life: Anne Sexton's Prologue to <u>45 Mercy Street</u> , "Wedding Ring Dance," and "In Celebration of My Uterus" Joni Mitchell's "River," "I Had A King," and "Hejira,"	37
Conclusion		47
Works Cited		50

Introduction

At first, an analysis of the works of poet Anne Sexton and songwriter Joni Mitchell would seem necessarily to contrast the artists and their poems and songs. Anne Sexton was a Pulitzer prize- winning poet; Joni Mitchell is the songwriter who played at Woodstock. However, I compare the two women's' poems and songs, and find that in their works, read or heard, narrators discover their identities in love relationships. Further, there is a process, or a set of stages of erotic love, through which the narrators journey to knowledge of the self. Though there are obvious differences between the two writers' reputations, one as a scholar and the other as a pop singer, Sexton and Mitchell treat the same subject matter: the development of women's identities throughout the evolution of the love relationship.

Anne Sexton was born in 1928 and died in Boston in 1974. She was married at age sixteen to Alfred Muller Sexton II and together they had two children; the couple divorced only one year before her suicide. In eighteen years of writing, Anne Sexton published fourteen books of poetry and in 1967 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Live or Die*. Though at first she wrote because her psychiatrist encouraged her to use it as a

form of therapy, soon poetry became central to her life. Sexton said "When I'm writing, I know I'm doing the thing I was born to do" (qtd. in Middlebrook 3). Importantly, she saw herself as a woman poet and wrote about her experiences as a woman.

Anne Sexton's poems are unfailingly honest and courageous accounts of women's experiences. As critic Linda Wagner-Martin reported in her book, *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, Sexton wrote about "nontraditional literary subjects," which were usually women's concerns, and often shocked readers (4). Many critics considered Sexton a confessional poet "...but [she] resisted the label" according to biographer Diane Middlebrook (72). Even so, Sexton admitted that her poetry was about her (Wagner-Martin 7). Robert Boyers claims that Sexton never strayed from "her one true subject—herself and her emotions" (156). Another critic, William Shurr, says she "had a talent for "pseudobiography," for the presentation of her poems as if they were raw emotional experiences" that convinced readers that she was confessing though every poem was not necessarily about Sexton's life (254). Women identify with Sexton's poems because of her ability to make them personal. As a woman poet, "Sexton saw how being female was a crucial condition to her life as artist" (Wagner-Martin 11). She discusses women's

concerns, in particular those dealing with identity and love relationships, and makes them commonplace in her poetry.

Artist Joni Mitchell began playing music for entertainment in coffee houses in Canada. Early in life she was married to Chuck Mitchell, but after only two years the couple divorced and she began and ended several subsequent relationships with other men. Mitchell's hobby blossomed into a career when she rose to popularity along with her first genre, folk, in the 1960's. As she matured as a musician, so did her style, and she experimented with jazz and rock and now "thrives on difference, on the unpredictable" (O'Brien 178). Mitchell had two major pop hits: "Big Yellow Taxi" in 1970 and "Help Me" in 1974; both these hits and much of her less popular music was about women's experiences. Some critics insist that her lyrics concern her personal life, but most importantly the songs concern the development of women's identities through the stages of erotic love.

Joni Mitchell performs a similar role to Anne Sexton, but as a musician, by bringing women's experience to the stage. Mitchell is also called "confessional" by critics. In fact, Simon Reynolds calls her part of "the female tradition of confessional singer-songwriters, whose soul-baring turns suffering into an affirmation: a kind of strength-through-vulnerability"

(249). Folk music has a tradition of authenticity, and perhaps Mitchell's folk roots influenced her confessional style (Gaar 184; O'Brien 178). When Mitchell entered the world of pop rock, critics hoped that she would add a "feminine touch" to make the genre more "personal" (Dickerson 122). Mitchell succeeded in popularizing confessional music and telling mass culture about women's experiences.

Despite the differences between Sexton and Mitchell, some characteristics are shared between the artists and their work. Though Sexton is a poet, she performed her poems with a rock band named "Anne Sexton and Her Kind." Mitchell performs music, but often her lyrics are more like poems than songs. Sexton may have a better reputation among academics, but it is Mitchell who is recognized by anyone with access to a radio. Both Sexton and Mitchell unabashedly present their own experiences in their work, which is characteristically relaxed and informal because of their confessional styles, contemporary diction, and willingness to be the first to discuss women and women's concerns so openly.

If, as Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, women see the world "through different eyes," then they must also view love from a different perspective (41). The term "difference," as used in this paper, is

not to be misunderstood as a biological distinction between males and females. As Elaine Showalter states, "it is. . .*society*, not *biology*, that shapes women's different literary perception of the world" (qtd. in Moi 52). Gender is "a social institution that establishes patterns of expectation for individuals. . .and is also an entity in and of itself" (Rogers 17). In fact, according to the logic of literary critic Elaine Showalter, the poems and songs by Sexton and Mitchell are necessarily from women's' perspectives because the authors are women. Showalter claims that nowhere can a woman's "sexual identity be split off from her literary energy" (4). Women's identities set them apart in love relationships and in literature.

In her book In a Different Voice, researcher Carol Gilligan presents her theory of difference. The aim of her research is "to provide, in the field of human development, a clearer representation of women's development..." (Gilligan 3). Women, argues Gilligan, are different because they approach morality and self in context. One of Gilligan's subjects in her study of the development of women's moral selves answers a question about responsibility with "Well, it really depends on the situation;" her response is an example of women's responses beyond the study (Gilligan 35). Gilligan defines women's experiences in terms of the image of the web, rather than

of hierarchy, and "the image of the web changes an order of inequality into a structure of interconnection" (62). In other words, men define their selves as separate from and equal to or lesser than other people. Women, however, define their selves by relationships to other people. Therefore, a woman's identity depends not upon differentiating her self from others, but by maintaining the web of connectivity with others.

Sexual identity is a common subject in Sexton's poems and Mitchell's songs. It is defined by author Maggie Humm as "A sense of one's own sexuality. Feminist theory argues that this identity is culturally rather than biologically determined, for example that it represents only the public presentation of sexual aims and objectives as integrated into the personality" (409). Many of Anne Sexton's poems are considered erotic. Janice Markey, a literary critic, claims that for the narrator of Sexton's poetry "...to experience a positive transformation of her life through sex, the only positive aspect of the relationship at all, [she] must forfeit her identity" (122). Some of Joni Mitchell's songs refer as well to erotic love and a woman's sexual self.

Mothering is a role that many women unfortunately feel compelled to adopt in love relationships. According to psychologist Nancy Chodorow,

"Girls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told that they ought to mother" (31). They are taught to mother not just children, but everyone—including lovers. Men may even expect women to nurture them in a love relationship because "...people's experience of their early relationship to their mother provides a foundation for expectations of women as mothers" (Chodorow 57). In the songs and poems there are metaphors and similes referring to the mother-child dynamic the narrators experience in love relationships. Most importantly, a woman's self suffers when she acts as a mother because she must ignore her own identity.

Closely related to the role of mother is the feminine ethic of care, which Carol Gilligan refers to as the "ethic of selflessness" (qtd. in Rogers 344). According to this ethic, women are expected to give up their needs in favor of satisfying someone else's. They give up "relationship for the sake of having relationships" states Gilligan (qtd. in Rogers 344). However, Gilligan points out there is also a *feminist* ethic of care, which "repudiates a feminine ethic of care on the grounds that a feminine ethic of care rests on a faulty notion of relationship" (qtd. in Rogers 344). The feminist ethic of care stresses the importance of women taking care of themselves and their needs.

In Sexton's poems and Mitchell's songs, narrators develop their identities during the stages of love relationships. First, the women are in love but troubled by dependency on their lovers. As music critic Sheila Whiteley points out, "the cost of dependency is self" (83). This dependency is manifested as need: for commitment, for attention. Also, the women adopt the role of mother in an attempt to experience love, but instead are caretakers and nurturers who still experience need. Then, the women become dissatisfied because they have lost their identities in the love relationship. Finally, the women turn inward. After a period of self-loathing and solitude they discover the self, love for the self, and the fact that only through relationship can they maintain a web of connectivity and their identities.

Chapter 1: Women in Love

"Wild is the Wind"

*Love me love me say you do,
For my love is like the wind
And wild is the wind.
Give me more than one caress
Satisfy this hungriness.
With your kiss my life begins
You're spring to me
All things to me.
Don't you know you're life itself?
Like a leaf clings to a tree,
Oh my darling cling to me.
--Nina Simone*

Both Anne Sexton and Joni Mitchell have written works with erotic love as the subject. The narrators, women in love, complain of unfulfilled needs, misplaced nurturing, and thwarted sexuality. These are more than just complaints in songs and poems; each, in fact, is merely a method through which women are attempting to build upon their identities. The love relationship presents a process: first, women excessively need attention and commitment from their lovers because they believe that the union will provide them identity. By depending on the love relationship for an identity, women pay the ultimate price, because as music critic Sheila Whiteley states, "the cost of dependency is self" (83). As these needs remain unfulfilled the women adopt the role of mother to their lovers as an

alternate method of maintaining the love relationship. This is inevitable, says psychologist Nancy Chodorow, because "Girls are taught to be mothers" (31). By identifying herself with a mother, the woman neglects her self. As well, preoccupation with unfulfilled need and the attempt to mother a lover both thwart a woman's sexuality. The narrators of the poems and songs persist in experimenting with sexuality in hopes of finding their selves. The result of feeling unfulfilled need, nurturing a lover, and exploring sexuality is, unfortunately, only a lost identity.

The narrators who express unfulfilled needs for attention or commitment in a love relationship are overly dependent upon their lovers both for love and for their identities. In Mitchell's song "Lesson in Survival," the narrator suffers the loss of her self because of this dependency. She describes her needs, which are left unfulfilled by her lover:

But I know my needs
My sweet tumbleweed
I need more quiet times
By a river flowing
You and me
Deep kisses
And the sun going down

The narrator is missing her lover's attention in "quiet times" or intimate situations. She refers to her lover as a "sweet tumbleweed," a transient

plant that drops its seed as it blows in the wind, never again to grow roots.

"Sweet" describes his charming personality that makes her forgive him for his transient nature, which the narrator juxtaposes against her stable position. She is "by a river flowing," indicating that the water will move, but she will not. The next line tells the reader that she wants him to be there too, so that he can fulfill her needs for passion, in the form of deep kisses, and long-lasting commitment, symbolized by the sun setting. The narrator's identity is eroded by her complete dependency on her lover.

Later in "Lesson in Survival" Mitchell opposes the narrator's needs to her lover's self-sufficiency:

I'm going to get a boat
And we can row it
If you ever get the notion
To be needed by me

The stanza suggests that the narrator is going to remain in the relationship and put all of her effort into it, if only her lover will reciprocate her need for love. She, not he, will take initiative to get the boat and do the rowing, as if love is a journey and a relationship is the vehicle. Mitchell presents the man's aloofness with the words "If" and "notion," suggesting that he can casually decide whether or not he wants to need, unlike the narrator who

clearly asserts her needs because she cannot ignore them. Because he does not need love, he does not need her, and so she is alone in her vulnerability.

Mitchell's song "Lesson in Survival" ends with the narrator professing eternal love, though her lover's attitude toward the relationship is different:

I will always love you
Hands alike
Magnet and iron
The souls

She tries to imply an emotional similarity with her lover by emphasizing a physical similarity in the line "Hands alike," as if she can convince him to reciprocate the intensity of her love. Then through the metaphor of magnet and iron Mitchell emphasizes the different levels on which the two lovers need each other. The narrator needs her lover profoundly, just as magnet necessarily attracts iron; he, however, needs her only superficially, and, like iron, will only respond if he is close enough. The aloofness of the male character in earlier stanzas of the song is because of emotional distance between him and the narrator. If he comes closer, she might be able to attract him. If not, they will stay separate and she will always need him but will never be satisfied.

Anne Sexton's poem "Food" also concerns the unsatisfactory dynamic of a woman who needs and a man who does not need her or fulfill her needs.

In Alicia Ostriker's essay "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience" she discusses the poem and finds that "the dependency on love is described as profoundly infantile, a need that continuously reproduces the infant's need for the breast...a need that can never be satisfied" (9). In fact, in the very first line the narrator describes her need for the breast. She demands "mother's milk, that good sour soup," which is wholesome but not sweet, and the nutrition she craves from an affectionate, nurturing figure:

I want nipples like shy strawberries
for I need to suck the sky.
I need to bite also
as in a carrot stick. . .
Further I need weeds to eat
for they are the spinach of the soul.

Sexton's narrator refers to the nipple as a soft, red fruit, which must be sought and encouraged because it is "shy." She wants to enjoy not just the physical comforts of another body, but to actively take it in by sucking and biting. Both "suck" and "bite" are aggressive verbs, implying pain and sacrifice for her feeder, who is the narrator's lover. The narrator's unrealistic approach to the love relationship indicates that her needs are unrealistic and not likely to be satisfied. She expects his love to take the form of a fruit and two vegetables, healthy foods to fill the narrator's

stomach. Though spinach is the proverbial nutritious food, her lover offers "weeds" as a substitute for spinach. The narrator is disappointed:

I am hungry and you give me
a dictionary to decipher.
I am a baby all wrapped up in its red howl
and you pour salt into my mouth.
Your nipples are stitched up like sutures
and although I suck
I suck air
and even the big fat sugar moves away.
Tell me! Tell me! Why is it?
I need food
and you walk away reading the paper.

The narrator's excessive needs are unfulfilled; her lover offers her a "dictionary," or some other occupation with words in place of "food" or affection. The words are abstract and difficult, they must be deciphered to be understood. The narrator desires concrete fulfillment instead. Then the images become cruel: her lover is a man who pours salt in a child's mouth, like an enemy rubbing salt in the narrator's open wound of need. Her lover's sutured nipples are also like wounds; it seems painful for him to fulfill her needs. She needs to "suck the sky" but from his stitched nipples she can only "suck air." The first metaphor conveys a need for freedom and power. The second connotes a person unable to even breathe but trying. The "big fat sugar" she cannot reach is his sexual attention, an unfulfilling sweet

snack in place of the wholesome meal of sour mother's milk. Though the narrator needs her lover to sustain her emotionally as food and air sustain her physically, he does not need her. He is more interested in the outside world, as evidenced by his occupation with the newspaper, which contains the abstract words from his dictionary, and his ability to "walk away" while she, like an infant, cries for attention. He is unable to satisfy her needs and he does not reciprocate them.

In Mitchell's song "Help Me" the narrator expresses unfulfilled needs, but specifically the excessive need for commitment. Though the narrator is happy to be falling in love, her feelings of infatuation are threatened by her experiences with lovers who were not willing to commit themselves to the relationship:

Help me I think I'm falling
In love too fast
It's got me hoping for the future
And worrying about the past
Because I've seen some hot hot places
Come down to smoke and ash

Even the term "falling in love" implies that the woman lacks control and will possibly be injured by the fall, which she says is "too fast." She is insecurely "hoping for the future," which suggests that she wants to commit to a future with her lover, possibly through marriage. The narrator is

"worrying about the past" because it was then that men possibly misled her and pretended to be in love. Her past relationships with men were "hot hot," extremely intense encounters that fell to "smoke and ash," emotionally cold remnants of the relationship. She is insecure about the future because the past has shown her that her needs will be unfulfilled and unreciprocated.

Though the narrators of Sexton's "Food" and Mitchell's "Help Me" are denying their own needs, they are willing to fulfill the needs of their lovers, much like mothers who make sacrifices to care for their children. But the role of mothering in the love relationships is detrimental to the self. A woman in love suffers when she becomes like a mother to her lover in

Sexton's poem "Housewife":

Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman *is* her mother.
That's the main thing.

Men are characterized in the poem as aggressive and adventurous people who "enter by force" or initiate intercourse. Like Jonah in the Bible, they are engulfed by a large, sheltering body, not a whale, but a woman—a mother—to whom they turn for erotic love and platonic comfort. Sexton complies with Freud in her characterization of the male lover; he desires his mother and any lover who resembles her (Coon 478).

In analyzing the next line of "Housewife," "A woman *is* her mother," it is helpful to draw upon Gilligan and Chodorow's theories of mothering. The line indicates that there are two aspects of motherhood: first, mothering oneself, and second, acting like one's mother. Gilligan states that to be mother to a child a woman "must first be able to care responsibly for oneself," or be able to act as her own mother (76). Women act like their mothers because they learn mothering from their mothers. "Feminine identification, then, can be based on the gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life, exemplified by the relationship with the person with whom a girl has been most involved" Chodorow claims in her book, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (175). When Sexton ends the poem with "That's the main thing," she states that at the center of the love relationship is a woman's nurturing role, not the role of her self.

Mitchell's "Woman of Heart and Mind" also tells of a woman's mother-like approach to erotic love. The title of the song indicates that the "heart," or emotions, and the "mind," or the intellect, of a woman cannot be separated from her gender. Literary critic Elaine Showalter supports this idea when she writes that a woman's "sexual identity" cannot "be split off from her

literary energy" (4). The first line of the song repeats the theory of gender-centered expression:

I am a woman of heart and mind
With time on her hands
No child to raise
You come to me like a little boy
And I give you my scorn and praise
You think I'm like your mother

A woman's feelings and her ways of thinking are both influenced by her gender and by one of her gender's most prominent roles: motherhood. The narrator refers to her lover like a mother refers to a child. However, the narrator has "no child to raise;" she is childless. Perhaps she wants an outlet for the energy that would be spent on a child, or she perhaps feels inadequate as a woman without a child. If, as Chodorow argues, women are "taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance" and they are expected to be mothers, then not having a child presents a problem for a woman's identity (31, 57). This is perhaps one reason the narrator's lover takes the place of a child in her life. However, his childlike behavior might also place him in the position of a child because he approaches the narrator "like a little boy" who must be cared for, reprimanded, and guided. Though she treats him like a child, he also acts like one and thinks of her as his mother.

The song continues by presenting the narrator's dissatisfaction with her maternal position in the relationship:

Don't it leave you on the empty side?
I'm looking for affection and respect
A little passion
And you want stimulation--nothing more
That's what I think
But you know I'll try to be there for you
When your spirits start to sink

Her rhetorical question is a plea for her lover to change their mother-child dynamic because she nurtures him but he does not care for her. Mitchell's narrator would rather treat her lover with "affection," "respect," and "passion," all elements of an adult relationship. Very immaturely her "little boy" wants only "stimulation," perhaps sexual stimulation. Though he ignores her needs, the narrator confesses that, like a self-sacrificing mother, she will attempt to fulfill his, when she admits "I'll try to be there for you."

Because of the frustration of unfulfilled needs and the selfless role of mothering a lover, the narrators, women in love, attempt to explore their sexuality in the love relationship. Judith Butler states that "'identity' is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality..." (17). However, a woman's sexual identity is socially constructed, and so she must reconcile her public needs for attention and commitment with her

private need for sexual satisfaction. The "woman of body," a woman with sexual desire, who seems omitted in "Woman of Heart and Mind," does appear in Mitchell's "Help Me":

Oh didn't it feel good
We were sitting there talking
And I was being naughty
But didn't it feel good
You danced with the lady
With the hole in her stocking
Didn't it feel good

The first line suggests that the narrator is seeking pleasure without her former concerns for commitment. With her lover she is "sitting there talking," or calmly getting to know him through conversation. Then she says she "was being naughty," a term which refers to her playful approach to being sexual. The narrator first calls herself a "lady," but admits that she has a "hole in her stocking," which would seem to be unfit clothing for a properly dressed woman. More significantly, there is a "hole" in her "lady," or respectable, persona through which her less inhibited sexual self escapes.

Anne Sexton's poem "Eighteen Days Without You" also addresses female sexuality, but from within the safer boundaries of marriage:

Kiss the package, Mr. Bind!
Yes? Would you consider hurling yourself
upon me, rigorous but somehow kind?
I am laid out like paper on your cabin kitchen shelf.

So draw me a breast. I like to be underlined.

The narrator presents herself to her lover like a package to be untied and enjoyed, implying that she wants him to undress her and have intercourse.

The next line states clearly her desire as she asks him to want her aggressively yet be gentle when they make love. According to Harold Wentworth, the verb "laid" refers to slang "lay," meaning "to have coitus" (313). The narrator then compares herself to paper and demands that her lover draw her, or touch her, and she tells him where and how firmly--the "breast" and "underlined."

The last stanza is more overtly sexual:

Lock in! Be alert, my acrobat
and I will be soft wood and you the nail
and we will make fiery ovens for Jack Sprat
and you will hurl yourself in my tiny jail
and we will make supper together and that
will be that.

The narrator demands "Lock in!" meaning "Make love to me!" She calls her lover an "acrobat," a physically capable, energetic athlete to entertain her.

With "wood" and a "nail" Sexton creates a metaphor for intercourse. The "nail" is the phallus and the "wood" is the female genitalia that will be split and entered by the phallus. In another metaphor an "oven" represents the uterus. The line makes the nursery rhyme "Jack Sprat" erotic; the

characters in the nursery rhyme cook and eat together, the narrator of the poem and her lover have sex. Tellingly, Sexton compares the narrator's uterus to a jail. Despite the narrator's freedom with sexuality in the poem, it ends negatively. Sexuality to her indicates confinement and force, not free expression of the self.

Unfulfilled needs, the misplaced role of mothering, and thwarted sexuality are prominent in the voices of women in the poems and songs. The overwhelming sense of need for another person, or what another person has to offer, in the works I analyze leads to a loss of identity because the women are not individuals, only dependents. The identity crisis continues when the women portrayed in the works nurture men, and portray themselves as mothers. This is inevitable because, according to Chodorow, women are trained to be mothers. It is harmful, though, because the women's lovers do not reciprocate the nurturing. Finally, the female narrators attempt to rebuild their identities by exploring their own sexuality. The women are hindered in this effort, too, by the conflict of their unfulfilled needs and misplaced mothering. Unfulfilled need, unreciprocated nurturing, and thwarted sexuality, manifestations of women in love, lead to the loss of identity.

Chapter 2: Love Isn't What She Thought It Would Be

"Be My Husband"

*Be my husband and I'll be your wife
Love and honor you the rest of your life
If you promise you'll be my man
I will love you the best I can
Please don't treat me so doggone mean
You the meanest man I ever seen
Oh Daddy love me good.
--Nina Simone*

In several works, Joni Mitchell and Anne Sexton present narrators who realize they have sacrificed their selves for their love relationships. Sometimes women lose their identities by adopting their lovers' or by changing their identities to better please their lovers. Regardless of the method, a lost identity leads only to unhappiness. In the songs and poems portraying narrators who have recognized the loss of their identities, there is a paradox: though the relationship has made her unhappy, she still loves her man.

To understand the paradox of women staying in dissatisfactory love relationships it is helpful to understand a feminine ethic of care, what researcher Carol Gilligan calls "an ethic of selflessness" (qtd. in Rogers 344). According to the Gilligan's depiction of a feminine ethic of care, women should give up their needs to satisfy another person's needs. Gilligan claims

that women "are giving up relationship for the sake of having relationships," or, in other words, in love relationships women are denied "relationship," or love. Gilligan continues, stating that women are "missing themselves and missing relationship or feeling stranded in a confusing isolation which is often filled with self-condemnation" in unsatisfactory love relationships (qtd. in Rogers 344). This "self- condemnation" translates into a loss of identity and a loss of autonomy, which means that a woman will stay in a love relationship that does not make her happy.

The narrator in Mitchell's "Carey" is a woman who remains in an unsatisfactory love relationship. She realizes that by abandoning her way of life in favor of her lover's she is abandoning her self:

The wind is in from Africa
Last night I couldn't sleep
Oh, you know it sure is hard to leave here, Carey
But it's really not my home
My fingernails are filthy, I got beach tar on my feet
And I miss my clean white linen and my fancy French cologne

First, the African wind literally awakens the narrator by preventing sleep but it also awakens her senses to the fact that she is not being true to her self. Living with Carey, her lover, has made her unhappy. Mitchell juxtaposes Carey's home with the narrator's, and compares as well as their two lifestyles. In Carey's home the narrator's "fingernails are filthy" from

scratching for survival, and there is "beach tar" on her feet because she has been roaming without shoes. She is not accustomed to his lifestyle. She misses her home where she has a soft, clean, sweet-smelling bed, and where she would be both physically more comfortable and emotionally happier. The narrator wants to go home where she is true to her self.

Mitchell's song "Lesson in Survival" reveals that the narrator faces an identity crisis when she pretends to be someone else for her lover:

Maybe it's paranoia
Maybe it's sensitivity
Your friends protect you
Scrutinize me
I get so damn timid
Not at all the spirit
That's inside of me
Oh baby I can't seem to make it
With you socially
There's this reef around me
I'm looking way out at the ocean

At first the narrator blames herself for the negative feelings she has, and then she blames her lover's friends- but she does not blame her lover for making her hide her true identity. A further encroachment on her identity is the scrutiny of his friends. She expresses her dissatisfaction by cursing herself for being timid and not expressing her true self. Passively the narrator laments that socially she cannot get along with her lover. However,

this statement glosses over the truth, which is that she feels that her true self is too distant, is even surrounded by a massive body of water, symbolic of emotion, from her lover. Her wall of emotions also prevents her from being her self. Gilligan discusses the effect of unsatisfactory love relationships on women's identities and states that "in effect, the young woman becomes shut up within herself" and cannot connect with others (qtd. in Rogers 344). The narrator completes the song:

When you dig down deep
You lose good sleep
And it makes you
Heavy company

The digging metaphor suggests that the self who remains is deep within the narrator and must be forced out by expressing her emotions. But she becomes more difficult to talk to because she loses sleep and becomes even more distant. More importantly, she is not good company to her self because she cannot connect with her identity.

Sexton's poem "Us" describes a relationship in which a woman's identity is lost because she depends upon her lover to define her. She loses touch with the person she once was:

I was wrapped in black
fur and white fur and
you undid me and then

you placed me in gold light
and then you crowned me...
and at first I rubbed your
feet dry with a towel
because I was your slave
and then you called me princess.
Princess!

The "black and white fur" represents an uncolorful life that the narrator was "wrapped" in and claimed as her identity. Her lover "undoes" her, as if untying her to set her free. William Shurr suggests that the erotic quality of this poem is "lovely;" certainly in this line it is obvious because the woman is being undressed by her lover (250). When the narrator's lover puts her in "gold" light, he shares his favorable perspective so that she may appreciate herself as he "crowns" her, or, if one set of jewels may be exchanged for another, gives her a ring and marries her. Though at first she seemed more suited to serve him, he named her princess, though not queen, implying that he would rather serve her but that she cannot have power over him. This is a favorable dynamic for the narrator except for one problem: she does not think as highly of herself as he does. Instead, she adopts the identity of princess for him and forgets about the woman who once dressed in "black fur and white fur."

In the next stanza the narrator discovers her identity:

Oh then
I stood up in my gold skin
and I beat down the psalms
and I beat down the clothes
and you undid the bridle
and you undid the reins
and I undid the buttons,
the bones, the confusions,
the New England postcards,
the January ten o'clock night,
and we rose up like wheat,
acre after acre of gold,
and we harvested,
we harvested.

The narrator credits herself for standing, but still the "gold skin" is her lover's gift. Then the narrator "beat down the clothes," which are symbolic of the way women represent themselves culturally. The narrator also refers to herself as a horse whose master has undone her tack to set her free. Here Sexton draws a parallel between the controlling aspects of a horse's life, a bridle and reins, and those of the narrator's "Buttons," "bones," "confusions," "New England postcards," and "the January ten o'clock night" are restrictive. Finally, the "I" of the narrator and the "you" of her lover merge to form "we," an entity that harvests "acre after acre of gold," implying that only through her lover's favorable perspective could she discover her shining inner self.

In Sexton's poem "The Kiss," the narrator credits her lover for bringing her to life:

Once it was a boat, quite wooden
and with no business, no salt water under it
and in need of some paint. It was no more
than a group of boards. But you hoisted her, rigged her.
She's been elected.
My nerves are turned on. I hear them like
Musical instruments. Where there was silence
The drums, the strings are incurably playing. You did this.
Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped
Into fire.

In "The Kiss," the metaphor is a boat, an object designed to float on water, a symbol of emotion. However, the boat, or the woman, decayed on land, without emotion, until a sailor, a man, found her and put her to use on water. Like Pygmalion who brought life to Galatea, the narrator's lover brings her to life. A transitional sentence, "She's been elected," implies that from all other women, the man chose her deliberately. The narrator's senses are awakened, states Shurr: both her physical senses and her sense of self (247). Immediately Sexton switches to simile to describe the awakening of sense as the sounding of musical instruments, dormant without someone to play them. The narrator's lover is completely credited for the action in the line "You did this." He not only plays the instruments, but he, as composer, dictates what music will be played. This is a comparison that shows the

extent of the man's power over the narrator's life; he not only makes her feel, but he determines what she will feel.

Paradoxically, though women are unhappy when their identities are lost to unsatisfactory love relationships, many women still have feelings for their lovers. Author Miriam Schneir states that "men often feel threatened by intimacy, while women require it" (429). Perhaps women remain in the love relationship because they require intimacy and seek it at the cost of identity. Many of Mitchell's songs concern this paradox and seesaw between love for a lover and hate for a relationship. According to music critic Arthur Schmidt, "The love-hate song is probably Mitchell's invention" (340). The last stanza of "Carey" introduces the paradox of the unhappy woman in love:

Oh Carey get out your cane
I'll put on my finest silver
We'll go to the Mermaid Café
Have fun tonight
I said, Oh, you're a mean old Daddy, but you're out of sight.

Even though with him the narrator and her happiness are tainted, she wishes to pretend, just for one night, to live the way she wants with him. They will dress like rich people with a cane and nice jewelry. She isn't asking only for nice clothes, but also for a 'nice' relationship so that she can be herself and be content for one night. Finally, she admits that he is "mean," but in a

in Mitchell's "Help Me" when the narrator describes first falling in love and then the delinquency of her lover :

Help me I think I'm falling
in love again
when I get that crazy feeling
I know I'm in trouble again
I'm in trouble
Because you're a rambler and a gambler
And a sweet talking ladies' man
And you love your lovin'
Not like you love your freedom

Though falling in love is stereotypically a pleasant experience, the narrator asks for help, as if she wants to prevent it because she thinks she is "in trouble again." She may be feeling love, but she is also feeling trepidation about the reputation of the man she loves. He is more concerned with adventure, fun, and other women, rambling and gambling, than with the narrator. She realizes that he values his freedom more than he values her love, but she is still in love with him. The last stanza completes the paradox:

Help me I think I'm falling
In love with you
Are you going to let me go there by myself
That's such a lonely thing to do
Both of us flirting around
Flirting and flirting
Hurting too

Again she asks for help because she is falling in love with him and she knows her love is unrequited. Because he does not return her feelings, she will be lonely and always trying to get his attention by "flirting." Despite the painful consequences, she continues to seek his love.

Mitchell's song "Lesson in Survival" also portrays a woman realizing the pain of loving a man, though she continues to subject herself to it. The song begins with a grim portrayal of love:

Lesson in survival
Spinning out on turns
That gets you tough
Guru books- the Bible
Only a reminder
That you're just not good enough
You need to believe in something
Once I could in our love

To this narrator, love has lost its charm and is only a lesson. She is "spinning out on turns" like a zealous racer going too fast around a turn. This is an echo of the feeling in "Help Me," in which the narrator has gotten involved with a man and suddenly feels that she has lost control. The Bible, which the narrator refers to as a book of guidance, reminds her of her shortcomings, failures she once could ignore because she was in love with a man. But when the love no longer sustains her, she cannot "believe" in the

identity shared by two people in love, and discovers that she has no identity of her own.

The narrators of the poems and songs are unhappy because they have lost their identities, but they remain in love relationships. According to Gilligan, women forgo "relationship for the sake of having relationships" (qtd. in Rogers 344). In other words, women exchange relationship, what they really want, for a relationship, what they think they need. Because of the feminine ethic of care, the women sacrifice their selves. Paradoxically, the women choose to stay in relationships even though the love is doomed by the oppression of the woman's identity.

Chapter 3: Her One True Love: Her Life

"You've Got to Learn"

*Sometimes face humiliation
while you are burning up inside
You've got to learn to hide your tears
And tell your heart life must go on
Sometimes your head must rule your heart
--Nina Simone*

There is a *feminist* ethic of care that encourages care of the self through connectivity. The first step to the feminist ethic of care is to withdraw and connect to the private self, and this is the next step in the development of a woman's identity. In previous chapters I have examined works by Joni Mitchell and Anne Sexton that describe either women's feelings of love or their feelings of dissatisfaction with love. There is a third category of the poems and songs: those that portray women who end their love relationships. After the dissolution of love relationships the narrators react with pain and sometimes self-loathing. They then seek solitude in which they can enjoy independence. Though this step is crucial, it is also only temporary because, as Carol Gilligan argues, women define themselves by a web of interconnectivity and must return to relationships. After a period of solitude follows a discovery of self-love. Turning inward to the self does not contradict Gilligan's theory; instead, it signals "a new

responsiveness to the self, an expansion of care rather than the failure of relationship" (Gilligan 39). Finally, women make the decision not to repeat the process of love chronicled in the works analyzed in the first chapter, which includes unfulfilled needs, excessive nurturing, thwarted sexuality and loss of self. Instead, the narrators of these songs and poems view the loss of the love relationship as a chance to gain a strong sense of identity. With a strengthened sense of self, the women are equipped to re-enter love relationships.

The first step in the process between a break-up and a return to love is pain and self-loathing. Mitchell's "River" is a portrayal of a sad and reproachful woman who has just ended a relationship:

He tried hard to help me
you know, he put me at ease
and he loved me so naughty
made me weak in the knees
oh I wish I had a river
I could skate away on
I'm so hard to handle
I'm selfish and I'm sad
Now I've gone and lost the best baby
That I ever had
Oh I wish I had a river
I could skate away on
I wish I had a river so long
I would teach my feet to fly
Oh I wish I had a river
I made my baby say goodbye

The narrator is angry with herself, not at her lover, whose good qualities she describes first. In the first line the use of the word "tried" implies that though he did not succeed at comforting her, she still credits him for the effort. Also, he was passionate and "naughty," or playfully sexual. He made her feel young and happy by making her "weak in the knees" like someone first experiencing love. Ironically, she expresses repeatedly a desire to leave in the line "I wish I had a river I could skate away on." According to music critic Sheila Whiteley, she "does not talk of returning to her lover. Rather there is the implication of skating even further away" (90). But it is not her lover she wants to leave; it is her self. The narrator describes her own character negatively, claiming that she is "selfish," "sad," and at fault for the loss of the love relationship. The river is symbolic of her hard, cold identity that she despises. She cannot, however, leave her inner self.

Once pain and self-loathing have subsided, some narrators of Mitchell's songs and Sexton's poems seem to favor solitude and perhaps withdrawal from love relationships. In Mitchell's song "I Had a King," the narrator, a queen, describes the peace she finds in being alone:

I had a king in a salt-rusted carriage
Who carried me off to his country for marriage too soon
Beware of the power of moons

There's no one to blame
No there's no one to blame as traitor here
The king's on the road
And the queen's in the grove till the end of the year.

Her king may have been royalty, but his carriage was rusted from misuse; he has neglected it and left it in the rain to rust. This indicates that her lover is not responsible. Still, his carriage was working well enough to take her away from her home, or identity, "too soon," indicating that she did not yet want to get married. The narrator warns other women of a "power" that will force them, too, into marriages, but the power is of the moon, not the man. The moon may refer to the monthly cycle of menstruation, meaning that either pregnancy or sexual desire trapped her into the union. This warning may come directly from Mitchell; "I Had a King" obviously uses Mitchell's early marriage as subject matter (Whiteley 79). The narrator does not blame either the king or herself. The king is traveling, perhaps because he is also dissatisfied with the relationship, which leaves her alone "in the grove till the end of the year," or hidden in the branches of her own thinking.

Because the narrator seeks solitude she claims that she will return from the grove only at the end of the year, when the trees, and the marriage, are frozen. The narrator continues:

I can't go back there anymore

you know my keys won't fit the door
you now my thoughts don't fit the man
they never can they never can

She believes she cannot return from the grove of her solitude because her "keys," or beliefs, don't "fit the door," or his beliefs. The home is symbolic of the relationship between husband and wife, and so the wife who does not obey her husband cannot enter the home. The analogy becomes more abstract when the narrator claims that her "thoughts don't fit the man," as if her beliefs are a key to unlock the love of her husband. For emphasis, the narrator repeats, "they never can." The narrator has realized that relationship to her self is more important than the unsatisfactory love relationship.

The narrators of the poems and songs seem to free themselves from love relationships and escape to solitude. The concept of freedom connects Mitchell's "Hejira" to a definition in Sexton's book 45 Mercy Street. The epigraph of 45 Mercy Street is the definition of the word hejira: "Noun. 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 connects love relationships and solitude; women are "escaping" unfulfilled needs, the role of mothering, and

thwarted sexuality. The "highly desirable destination" is connectivity to the self. Further, critic Linda Wagner-Martin states that the hegira of Sexton's book of poems "is, tellingly, a female hegira" (158). Though the spelling is different, the meaning of "hejira" and "hegira" is the same, and, interestingly, the definition in Sexton's book describes the plot of Mitchell's song. The narrator of the song, "Hejira," says:

But you know I'm so glad to be on my own...
But how can I have that point of view
When I'm always bound and tied to someone...

The narrator is journeying from a relationship to freedom. She is happy to be alone, but feels ashamed of that viewpoint because she has "always" been in love relationships. She refers to love relationships as being "bound and tied to someone;" she feels that within relationships her identity is restrained by the connection to another person. The narrator continues, further negatively portraying love relationships:

In our possessive coupling
so much could not be expressed
so now I'm returning to myself
these things that you and I suppressed
I see something of myself in everyone
Just at this moment of the world
As snow gathers like bolts of lace
Waltzing on a ballroom girl

The love relationship is "possessive coupling" that does not permit her to express her self. But she is regaining her identity by "returning" to herself, as if being in a relationship were like being on vacation from one's identity. She blames both herself and her lover for suppressing her identity. Now, however, she recognizes a common bond between herself and other people because she has returned to being a woman instead of a role in a relationship. Though the end of the relationship resulted in frozen emotions, like "snow," "Hejira" ends with the joyous imagery of a woman dancing alone because she is happy to have found her self.

The narrator of Sexton's "Wedding Ring Dance" tells of her dance of solitude and independence after her divorce:

The finger is scared
but it keeps its long numb place.
And I keep dancing,
A sort of waltz,
Clicking the two rings,
All of life at its last cough,
As I swim through the air of the kitchen,
And the same radio plays its songs
And I make a small path through them
With my bare finger and funny feet,
Doing the undoing dance,
On April 14th, 1973,
Letting my history rip itself off me
And stepping into
Something unknown

And transparent...

Sexton is using the narrator's finger as a symbol of the woman. Relieved of wedding rings, the finger is exposed, just as the narrator newly divorced has uncovered the woman who was obscured by marriage. She dances, an action associated with joy, and clicks the rings like canastas in a celebration. But her dance is only "a sort of waltz;" it is not the real dance because that would require a partner. The narrator refers to the divorce as the end of an ailing life that leaves her unattached even to reality as she "swims through the air of the kitchen." Though the marriage is over, she dances to the songs of the same radio, which means that she dances to the same beat, even without her partner. Her "small path" indicates that she keeps to herself as she emphasizes the bareness of her finger and the quirkiness of her body. Recognizing her quirks is a step toward accepting her self. The imagery of undoing creates a feeling of opening, like undoing a present to find something wonderful in the same way the narrator has undone her marriage, a social institution, to uncover her self, her personal identity. To this narrator, meeting the self is a grand occasion to be celebrated with dancing--alone. She admits that she does not know this self, and that exploring it will be an adventure.

There is a sense of adventure and awakening to identity in Sexton's poem "In Celebration of My Uterus" states Shurr (249). In fact, the narrator is the first woman of the analyzed poems to reconcile her private and public identities. Critic Alicia Ostriker claims that the poem "finds unity where the culture propagates division: between a woman's sexuality and her spirituality,...her private and her public self" (qtd. in Schneir 329). The narrator celebrates both the physical attributes of being female and the emotional attributes of being a woman. She "shows loving acceptance of herself as a woman," states literary critic Margaret Honton, in this "love poem to womanhood" (115):

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.

The poem "explode[s] taboos" because the narrator acknowledges the burden of womanhood and bears it gladly, which was not a common perspective at the time (Markey 120). The verbs of the last line, "sing" and "dare," indicate the risqué nature of such a poem and of such a poet. Sexton uses the term "uterus" both literally and figuratively: the narrator can nourish her newfound self, the "soul of a woman," just as she can nourish new

life within her uterus. The woman's "central creature" is her private identity, carried within and protected like a baby from the public world.

Now, with their identities intact, the women can love others unencumbered by their previous concerns. The narrators leave behind unfulfilled needs, unreciprocated nurturing, thwarted sexuality, and loss of self, and turn instead to love relationships in which the women no longer must forego relationship to be in a relationship. The process, though painful, was necessary, because the women had to discover the value of connectivity to the self before they could participate in relationship to others. In Joni Mitchell's own words, "For all the pain and disillusionment, we still can't do without [love]" (*National Women's Review* 55). In other words, women are not expected to abstain from relationships, but rather encouraged to return to them. Gilligan also explains the return to relationship: "The truths of relationship, however, return in the rediscovery of connection, in the realization that self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships" (Gilligan 127). Relationship to the self, then, leads to happiness in relationship with others.

Conclusion

Anne Sexton's poems and Joni Mitchell's songs portray narrators who, through the process of love relationships, develop their identities. First, the women fall in love. However, the relationships and the women are troubled by unfulfilled needs, unreciprocated nurturing, and thwarted sexuality. The result is the loss of the women's identities. Then the women end the love relationship and turn inward. Though at first they may experience self-loathing, eventually they recover their selves and experience self-love. Finally, the women return to relationships because only through the web of connectivity can they define themselves.

Women in love are troubled by unfulfilled needs, unreciprocated nurturing, and thwarted sexuality because of their dependency on the love relationship. Women ignore their needs and instead seek to fulfill their lover's needs. However, no one nurtures the women. Also, they are unable to express their sexual selves because of their concern with needing and nurturing. Dependency on love relationships leaves women lacking the web of connectivity.

Because, as researcher Carol Gilligan says, women define themselves according to relationship, dependency on love relationships that lack

connectivity causes women to lose their identities. The love relationship is doomed because without a connection to the self the women cannot connect to others. Paradoxically, women tend not to abandon the doomed love relationship, but instead remain selflessly in love and suffering without identity.

Finally, women recognize the loss of self and turn inward. Though women must withdraw to solitude before fully embracing the web of connectivity, the web is crucial in the development of women's identities. There is a difference between "relationships" and connectivity, or "relationship." Gilligan says women give up "relationship for the sake of having relationships" (qtd. in Rogers 344). In the first chapter the poems and songs portray narrators who are dependent on love "relationships" that lack connectivity. The third chapter concerns works with independent narrators who choose to return to connectivity, or "relationship," by connecting first to themselves.

Anne Sexton and Joni Mitchell, women writers and contributors to the female tradition of literature, have created a body of work concerning the development of women's identities in the love relationship. Women can access their shared experiences and, most importantly, relate to them.

Through this connection women learn that connectivity to the self is the path to true relationship. Women find happiness when the strongest strands of the web connect to the self.

Anne Sexton and Joni Mitchell both have written many poems and songs portraying narrators happily in love. Further study would involve these poems and songs and continue the discussion of the web of connectivity.

Works Cited

- Boyers, Robert. "Live or Die: The Achievement of Anne Sexton." Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale. Ed. Steven E. Colburn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Breese, Wally. Joni Mitchell. com. 29 Aug. 1995.
<<http://www.jonimitchell.com>>.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Chodorow, Nancy. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Coon, Dennis. Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application. St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1977.
- Dickerson, James. Women On Top: The Quiet Revolution That's Rocking the American Music Industry. New York: Billboard Books, 1998.
- Gaar, Gillian G. She's a Rebel: the History of Women in Rock and Roll. Seattle: Seal Press, 1992.
- Gilligan, Carol. In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Horton, Margaret. "The Double Image and the Division of Parts: A Study of

- Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Poetry of Anne Sexton."
- Sexton: Selected Criticism. Ed. Diana Hume George. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Humm, Maggie, ed. Feminisms: A Reader. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.
- Markey, Janice. A New Tradition? The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich: a Study of Feminism and Poetry. New York: Peter Lang, 1985.
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. Anne Sexton: A Biography. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.
- - -. "Poet of Weird Abundance." Critical Essays on Anne Sexton. Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989.
- Moi, Toril. Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory. New York: Methuen & Co., 1985.
- O'Brien, Lucy. She Bop. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience." Sexton: Selected Criticism. Ed. Diana Hume George. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Reynolds, Simon and Joy Press. The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and

- Rock'n'Roll. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Rogers, Mary. Contemporary Feminist Theory : a Text/Reader. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998.
- Schmidt, Arthur. "Our Lady of the Canyon." Journal of Popular Music and Society. 2.4 (1973): 340-345.
- Schneir, Miriam, Ed. Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Sexton, Anne. The Complete Poems. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.
- Showalter, Elaine. Speaking of Gender. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1989.
- Shurr, William. "Anne Sexton's Love Poems: The Genre and the Difference." Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale. Ed. Steven E. Colburn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. Critical Essays on Anne Sexton. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989.
- Wentworth, Harold, and Stuart Berg Flexner, eds. Dictionary of American Slang: Second Supplemented Edition. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975.

"What Joni Mitchell Has Done on "Both Sides Now" Is Both a Tribute to the
Enduring Power of Great Songs and a Testament to Her Singular
Ability to Make Every Note and Each Word Her Own." National
Women's Review. 8.1 (2000): 55-56.

Whiteley, Sheila. Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and
Subjectivity. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company,
1929.