

## All Dolled Up: Anne Sexton's "Self in 1958" Drafts as a Tool for Exploring Eating Disorders in Mid-Century America & in Sexton's Personal Life

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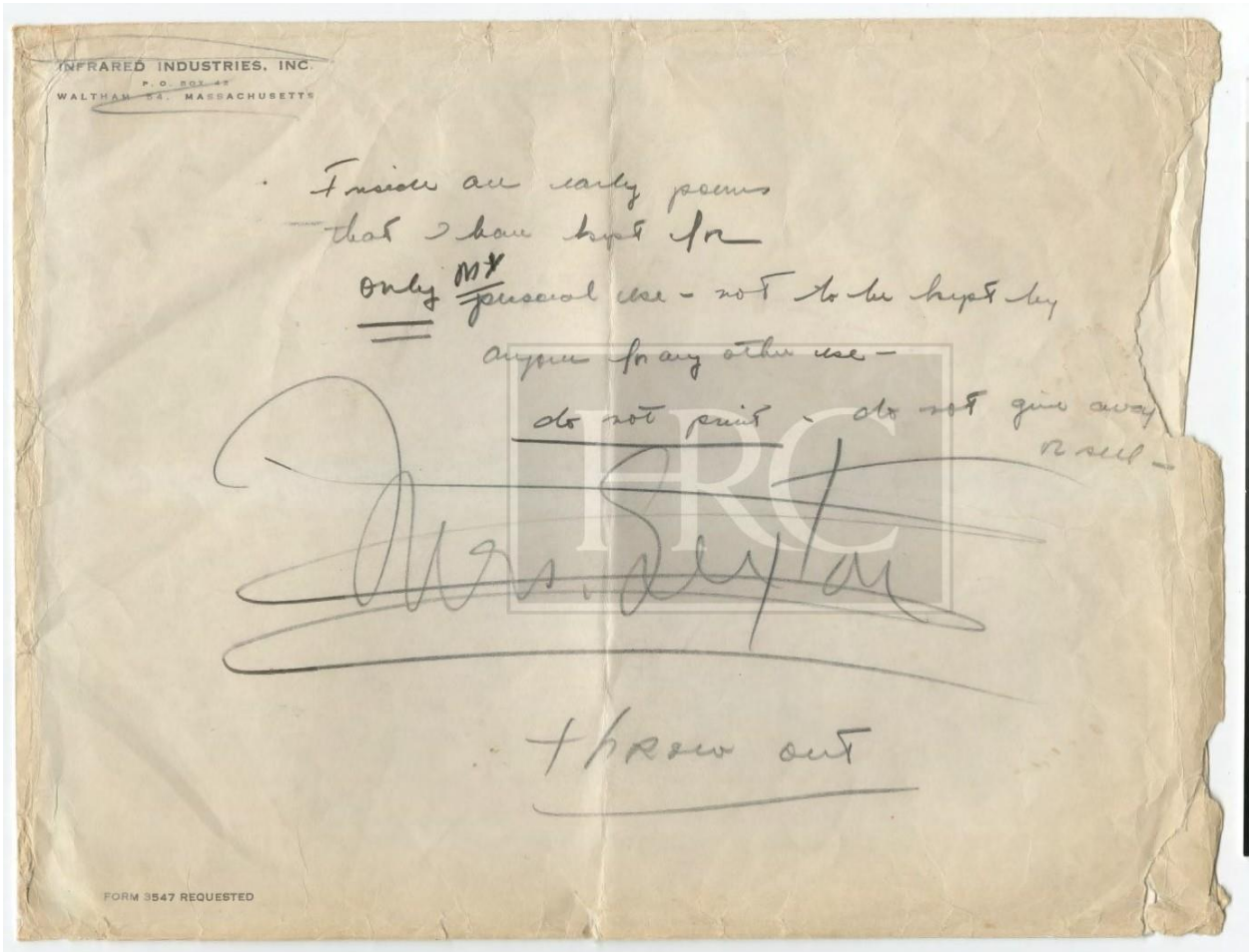
### Abstract

What does Anne Sexton's "Self In 1958" and the drafts of the poems reveal about eating disorders in mid-century America? This paper examines a poem collected in Sexton's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die* through the under-analysed lens of eating disorders and how they may inform a poet's work. Utilising four drafts of the poem held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, Texas along with medical texts and articles of the 1940s - 1950s, this paper offers a new way of approaching the poem considering the possibility of Sexton having an eating disorder and how such a disorder may have driven and revealed itself in her works.

**Keywords:** Anne Sexton, eating disorder, poetry, anorexia

Anne Sexton's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die* (*Live*) included a number of poems with surviving drafts that allow us to see the progression of the poems. Examining a poem's evolution, where the poet chose to add, delete, or modify, provides readers with a deeper understanding of the themes and underlying influences that informed the work. "Self in 1958" is often considered a reproach of mid-century American housewifery and pigeonholed gender roles, but I argue that it is one of Sexton's many poems that pushes at the notion of eating disorders (EDs) of the era. This paper analyses "Self in 1958" alongside its surviving drafts, and with the supporting medical texts that showcase of the knowledge and beliefs of the mid-century. By having another lens with which to explore the poem, readers are allowed a different, deeper glimpse into Sexton's life and experiences that may have been a driving force in her work.

Drafts of "Self in 1958" held at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas, Austin, are accompanied by an envelope with a handwritten plea by Sexton that reminds us of her sometimes desperate clamoring for privacy: "Inside are early poems / that I have kept for / only my personal use – not to be [illegible] by / anyone for any other use— / do not print do not give away / or sell – / ~~Mrs. Sexton~~ / throw out."



Sexton's note on an envelope (HRC 41.1).

The HRC holds four drafts of "Self in 1958" including one early iteration titled "The Lady Lives in a Dollhouse" ("The Lady") followed by three drafts titled "I Live in a Dollhouse" ("I Live" 1, 2, 3). We can see from the evolving titles alone that Sexton initially distanced herself from the poem via the third person "Lady" before transitioning to "I Live in a Dollhouse" and, finally, claiming a "Self in 1958." She was adept at making the key distinction between the "I" as subject and "I" as textual object according to Joanna Gill, in order to stress that the poem's "I" does not serve as proof of the "I" of the poet (*Confessional Poetics* 27). The first draft of the poem in the HRC, "The Lady," begins with the lines, "She asked ... / what is reality?" (HRC Box 41.1). All other iterations, including the three drafts of "I Live" and "Self in 1958," begin with the insistent query, "What is reality?" (HRC Box 41.1, *Live* 73).

THE LADY LIVES IN A DOLLHOUSE

She asked...

what is reality?

I am a straight doll

with eyes that click open, blue bell and close.

~~Curly~~, I <sup>have curls</sup> ~~to~~ comb,  
two nylon legs, <sup>two</sup> hinged arms and these miniature clothes.

I live in a doll's house,

with <sup>four</sup> basket chairs, a square table and a big front door.

There is a straight bed,

a cardboard floor, windows that open and little more.

Someone plays with me,

sticks me in the kitchen or upon that straight bed.

They pretend with me,

pry my mouth for their cups of tea and their stale bread.

She asked...

what is reality?

I am this make believe doll

who should smile watermelon pink and have no <sup>quenching</sup> ~~nervous~~ fears.

But I would cry,

if I could remember how... and if I had the tears.

"The Lady" (HRC Box 41.1).

I LIVE IN A DOLLHOUSE

What is reality?

I am a straight doll

with eyes that click open, blue stare and close.

I have curls to comb,

nylon legs, smooth arms and some doll dainty clothes.

I live in a doll's house

with four chairs, a square table and a big front door.

There is a straight bed,

a cardboard floor, windows that open and little more.

Someone plays with me,

sticks me in the kitchen or upon that straight bed.

They pretend with me,

pry my mouth for their cups of tea and their stale bread.

What is reality

to a make believe doll

who should smile watermelon pink and have no quickening fears?

But I would cry,

if I could remember how... and if I had the tears..

“I Live” 1 (HRC Box 41.1).

“The Lady” draft uses the third person as a crutch and a means of allowing the doll—the poem’s speaker—not only to have a voice, but to demand answers. Sexton was especially forthcoming about potential ownership in this poem. “Self in 1958” displays a particular consciousness of the “I” of the poem, allowing for a trying on of a guise. In her unpublished Colgate lecture notes

about the poem she writes, “we have me stopped as the perfect housewife, as the advertised woman in the perfect little ticky tack suburb ... Why do I call myself a plaster doll? Why do I live in a doll’s house? (because I feel unreal, because the furniture, the scenery is perfect but I am unreal” (qtd. in *Confessional Poetics* 70). Diane Middlebrook theorises that being “permitted” to communicate in the figurative language of poetry made Sexton feel real, whereas the “speech transactions of family life ... made her feel doll-like” (*Coming to Light* 108). The speaker in this poem may feel initially unreal, but one claimed reality is that she is not just a doll but a “straight” doll, a term much like “coat” that carries multiple meanings. A common definition of straight is a candid frankness, but other definitions imbue the doll with a myriad of characteristics. If we consider Merriam Webster’s many definitions of “straight,” the doll might also be free from irregularities (in other words, perfect), linear, orderly, not deviating from a set and expected pattern, lacking any excess matter, and finally honest and trustworthy, which might be of particular importance for the doll’s role as mouthpiece for the poem’s speaker.

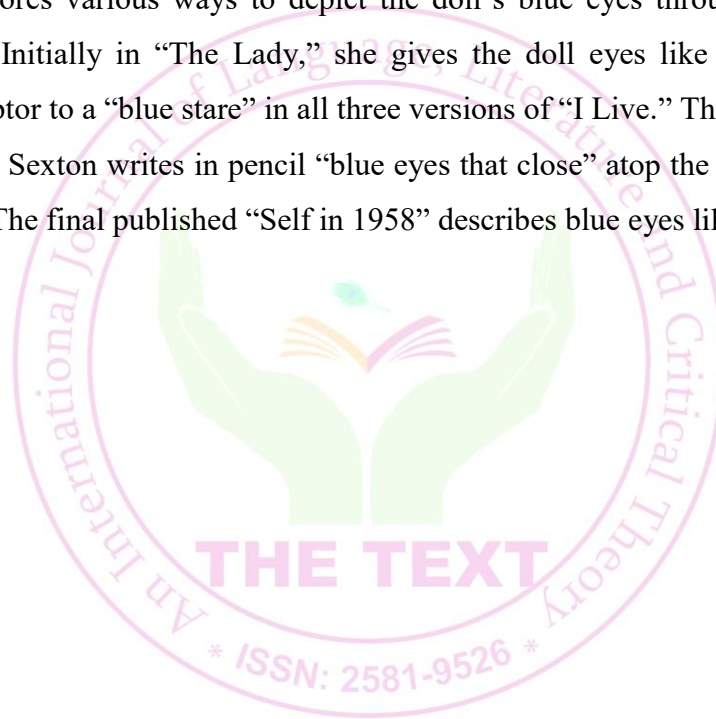
These qualities also often present in eating disorders (EDs,) with sufferers often on a quest to perceived perfection. This trait was described in a 1952 case study by Peter Sifneos in which he found an anorectic patient a “perfectionist, she was always neat and industrious” (358). Cobb’s 1950 case study on an anorectic patient described her as being on the honour roll, always going directly home after school to tend to her homework, and “extremely conscientious” (145). A doll is inherently perfect, or at least the maker’s idea of perfect. The 1959 hit single “Living Doll” by Cliff Richards captured what was expected of western women of the era with lyrics that included:

Got myself a cryin', talkin', sleepin', walkin', livin' doll  
Got to do my best to please her just 'cause she's a livin' doll  
Got a roamin' eye and that is why she satisfies my soul  
Got the one and only walkin', talkin', livin' doll  
(*Serious Charge*)

By turning herself into a doll who lives in (or, perhaps more aptly, is locked up in) what is described as a perfect dollhouse surrounded by perfect scenery, the poem’s speaker is finally able to also achieve perfection for herself—at the cost of reality. The first physical description of the doll in all HRC drafts tells of its eyes’ ability to “click open” and close. Dolls receive their

commands from their owner, usually a child, who dictates if and when the doll can see or if the doll is consigned to darkness. This power to control another's body and decide how much (or little) one sees (which can be inferred in one way as knowledge) is a role usually reserved for parents. It is, then, no wonder dolls have been a favourite toy for centuries. They give children the power of a parent, allowing for a fantasised role reversal. However, closed eyes do not always equate to blindness or lack of knowledge. Sexton's "Kind Sir" (1960) implies insight gained from gazing inward, introspection, with the lines "And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course / to look—this inward look that society scorns—" (*Bedlam* 5).

Sexton explores various ways to depict the doll's blue eyes throughout the drafts and published version. Initially in "The Lady," she gives the doll eyes like "blue bell" [sic] but changes that descriptor to a "blue stare" in all three versions of "I Live." The last HRC version of "I Live" shows that Sexton writes in pencil "blue eyes that close" atop the typed "blue stare and close" (Box 41.4). The final published "Self in 1958" describes blue eyes like steel (*Live* 73).



I LIVE IN A DOLLHOUSE

What is reality?

I am a straight doll

with eyes that click open, blue stare and close.

I have curls to comb,

nylon legs, smooth arms and some doll dainty clothes.

I live in a doll's house

with four chairs, a square table and a big front door.

There is a straight bed,

a cardboard floor, windows that open and little more.

Someone plays with me,

sticks me in the kitchen or upon that straight bed..

They pretend with me,

pry my mouth for their cups of tea and their stale bread.

What is reality

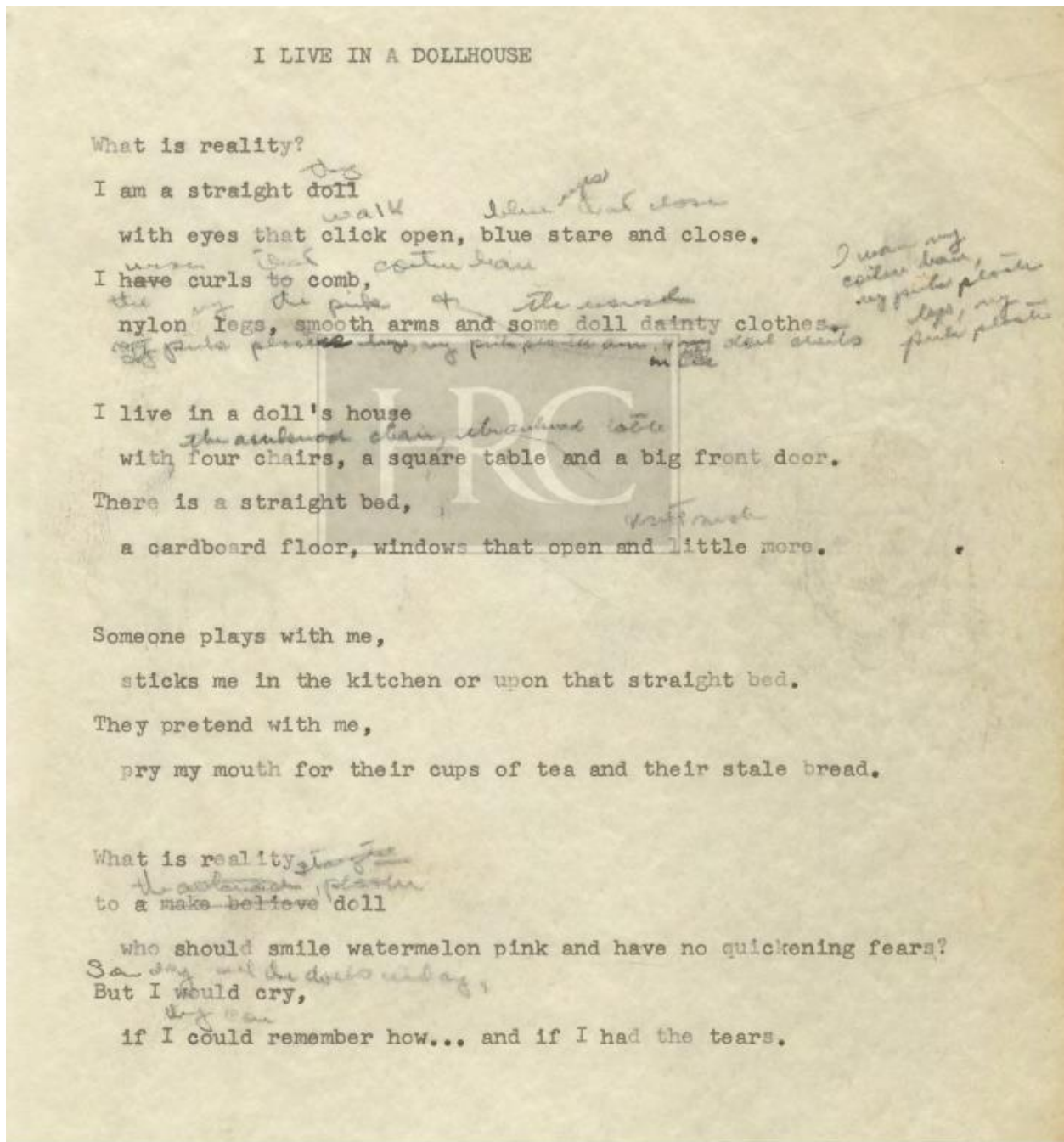
to a make believe doll

who should smile watermelon pink and have no quickening fears?

But I would cry,

if I could remember how... and if I had the tears..

"I Live" 2 (HRC Box 41.1).



“I Live” 3 (HRC Box 41.1).

Sexton’s initial choice of “blue bell” deserves a closer examination. Bluebell flowers are often portrayed as dainty, such as in the popular nineteenth-century song “Where the Great Peace River Flows” that echoes the “doll dainty clothes” Sexton describes the doll wearing in “I Live”



1–3. Bluebells are precious in some ways, taking years to recover if they are stepped on since the leaves cannot photosynthesise if they are crushed, resulting in the flower’s starvation. Bluebells can also be injurious, which is possibly how they earned the colloquial name Witches’ Thimbles. All types of bluebells have glycosides that are poisonous to humans and a handful of other mammals, causing stomach upset in small doses and fatalities in larger quantities. Bluebell leaves look a lot like garlic or spring onions, drawing hungry foragers to them like a siren. There have been reported cases of bluebell overdoses and fatalities in herds of cattle (Cutler 44). An 1888 series of field flower poems by Karl Gerock includes “Bluebell” which described a suitor gifting a maiden a plucked bluebell that somehow resulted in her death: “her long sleep is sleeping / ’Neath the churchyard flowers unseen!” (168). Bluebells’ links to witches, their protected status, propensity to starve in response to trauma, and of course their potential to kill are all qualities that might have initially attracted Sexton as both a poet and probable anorectic. However, the flower is more than a metaphor, and as Linda Sexton has said of her mother’s work, “A poem wasn’t really a poem, it seemed to her, unless it was full of metaphors” (*Searching* 159). Sexton removes the simile of bluebells in “The Lady,” but instills the qualities of the flower into the doll. She gives the doll a balance of delicacy and strength even after the bluebells are discarded in later drafts in favour of a “blue stare and close” (HRC Box 41.1). Gone are the intricacies and subtleties of the flower as Sexton allows the doll full seeing, full knowledge, with an open stare.

Those blue eyes harden by the published version with “eyes that open, blue, steel, and close” (*Live* 73). There is also a homophone at work here with steel and steal, which suggests the doll steals something from what she sees—be it understanding or maybe a piece of the person who picked her up, further co-mingling doll, owner, and (perhaps) poet. However, in publication, the doll is no longer characterised first by her eyes but by the fact that she is made seemingly entirely of plaster. Most hard dolls of the twentieth century were made of porcelain or plastic, not plaster.<sup>1</sup> They sometimes had a soft body made of cloth or leather. Plaster was often used to repair porcelain, which implies brokenness and repair to such a degree that the entirety of the doll had been shattered and patched back together. The process echoes Sexton’s Colgate lecture

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<sup>1</sup> Many American dolls in the 1950s were made of bisque, an unglazed white porcelain.

where it seems like she is comparing poetry to putting together herself in a process similar to that of a hard doll's manufacturing:

When writing you make a new reality and become whole. It is as if I were operating on myself and suturing on the arms and legs, placing the heart, settling the intestines. Much of my poetry is the poetry of a cripple, and yet the act of creation cures for a time (qtd. in *Confessional Poetics* 99).

Many dolls of the 1950s had glass eyes, hard and cold by design. Through the draft iterations of the poem to publication, perhaps the doll's callousness and steel stare were developed beyond bluebells not only by seeing, experience, and knowledge, but through physical use and (given the plaster) abuse or carelessness. Comparing the HRC drafts to the published version of "Self in 1958" provides a montage of not only the poem's evolution, but the doll's evolution. By the time the poem is published, the eyes no longer click open but "cut open" in a seemingly vicious action (*Live* 73). What the doll sees is not a young and innocent child, but "some shellacked and grinning person" which suggests she is gazing at another stiff, painted ("shellacked") doll—a mirror image of herself. The doll, assuming she is some kind of a baby doll as is likely, is experiencing the Lacanian mirror stage where she is beginning to understand her identity. It is, then, no wonder that the final version of the poem also begins with the question "What is reality?" (*Live* 73).

Reality, while relative, is not a state in which the anorectic routinely resides. Hilde Bruch's 1962 article "Perceptual and Conceptual Disturbances in Anorexia Nervosa" found that initial reality testing of anorectic patients showed intactness but further testing found disordered thinking, and thus a distorted reality (189). All HRC drafts of the poem state that the doll sports "curls to comb," evoking a sweet image of a child affectionately grooming her beloved toy (HRC Box 41.1). Such curls can also be found in "Cripples and Other Stories," a poem also collected in *Live or Die*, with the lines: "I covered them with pancake. / I wound my hair in curls" (*Live* 73). The "pancake" here is akin to a shellacked, superficial covering, a mask for protection or disguise. Studies have found that women today use makeup for two key reasons: to camouflage or to seduce (Korichi 127). Gill considers the curls a reference to a "Shirley Temple-like performance, an overly sexualized attempt by a child to appeal to an adult authority figure" while

also likening the curls to Medusa with the power to stun and petrify (*Confessional Poetics* 33).<sup>2</sup> She points to the allegorical connection between poetry and hair, with hair care requiring rituals and routines to the point of devotion (119). Richards's own "Living Doll" had hair so beautiful he could not help but urge others to touch and play with it. However, like any child with their toy, jealousy also immediately set in at the thought of others enjoy his toy:

Take a look at her hair, it's real  
If you don't believe what I say, just feel  
I'm gonna lock her up in a trunk so no big hunk  
Can steal her away from me  
(*Serious Charge*)

The doll—and her hair—in the published "Self in 1958" is vastly different than in draft form. Sexton ultimately likens her to a demon by describing the doll as a black angel:

I have hair, black angel,  
black-angel-stuffing to comb,  
nylon legs, luminous arms  
and some advertised clothes.  
(*Live* 73)

The "black angel" may be a reference to Shakespeare's "King Lear" in which Edgar says, "Croak not, black angel, I have no food for thee" (Act 3 Scene 6). "Croaking guts" was an Elizabethan term for a stomach rumbling from hunger, and in some cases such croaking was said to be the voice of the devil (Shakespeare 259).

Of course, a doll's stomach does not rumble and she has no need or want for food. Instead, Sexton's "black angel" is sustained on newfound ownership and autonomy over her body—the doll *has* hair, and not darling curls but black and wild like stuffing. Still, regardless of a doll's lack of hunger, stomach, or digestive system, it is not uncommon for a doll's owner to make them join in play cooking and eating. All four of the poem drafts held by the HRC include identical third stanzas (with some indentation changes in "I Live" 2 and 3):

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<sup>2</sup> The Ideal Novelty and Toy company created a Shirley Temple doll in the 1930s that was sculpted by Bernard Lipfert and approved by the Temple family (Kasson 121).

Someone plays with me,  
sticks me in the kitchen or on that straight bed.  
They pretend with me  
pry my mouth for their cups of tea or stale bread.

(HRC Box 41.1)

The image of force-feeding aligns with a common (albeit fruitless) technique amongst families of anorectics. By the 1940s, some researchers were beginning to advise against force-feeding for anorectic patients for “psychotherapeutic reasons” but it was still a common approach (Small 681). The visual of a child having a tea party with her doll is a familiar one, save for one detail. It makes sense for such a feeding to happen in a kitchen, but not on a “straight bed.” The “straight” echoes from the “straight doll” in the first stanza, marrying the doll and bed as similar or complementary objects that are rigid, flat, and unmoving. The straight bed, which turns into “their straight bed” made of iron in published form, could also refer to narrow hospital beds—or a coffin (*Live* 73). A 1945 Appropriation Bill specified “the addition of straight beds” at a neuropsychiatric hospital in Wadsworth, Kansas, but simply listed “beds” at other, non-psychiatric hospitals (*Independent Offices* 242). Sexton describes the doll as being stuck in the kitchen or bed, which suggests neither are places the doll wants to be but regularly finds herself. The kitchen, of course, is a prison of sorts for both anorectics and women of Sexton’s era. As Laura Shapiro put it bluntly, “Not all home cooks in the postwar years were talented and imaginative; on the contrary, many were ordinary, resentful, or inept” (43).

Gill cites the suburbs as a source for Sexton’s voice, and has described the suburban influence of Sexton’s experience, particularly in “Self in 1958,” as resulting in the mid-century suburban female being “dislocated, fragmented, and split” (*Confessional Poetics* 60). Such a description sounds much like a broken doll. Sexton was not the only housewife-cum-poet in mid-century America who focussed on a doll’s house to convey a perspective on who the new idealized woman was (or should be). She was inspired by the works of Phyllis McGinley, and in particular McGinley’s “The Doll’s House” (1954). McGinley, the “Poet Laureate of Suburbia” as John Deedy dubbed her, may have seemed like a far cry from Sexton’s confessionalism with her so-called light verse that seemed to suggest the suburbs (or, more specifically, her personal suburb) was not a trap but in fact a rich place full of opportunities (Deedy22). Look closer and it is evident that McGinley, like Sexton, was actually multi-faceted and multi-layered, deploying what Gill calls the “Trojan horse of light verse” as she “knowingly questions the origins and

values of the suburban ideal” (*Poetics of the American Suburbs* 105). Would Sexton really have admired a poet like McGinley if she perceived her as the *Guardian* did in a 1961 review in which McGinley’s “world is largely the daily round of domestic triviality; [writing] like a housewife who has gone on noticing her surroundings” (qtd. *Poetics of the American Suburbs* 79)? It is highly unlikely. Rather, Gill claims that Sexton took the sad suburban housewife figure from McGinley’s “The Doll House” along with her predecessor’s “tight rhyme schemes” to inform “Self in 1958” (*Poetics of the American Suburbs* 79). For example, consider McGinley’s line “The windows opened and closed. The knocker was gilt” (*New Yorker* 30). Sexton’s “windows that open and little more” or “windows that flash open” in various “Self in 1958” iterations are quite similar. The tone of McGinley’s poem is melancholic while Sexton’s is steeped in rage, but both are also rooted in fear and make use of regression as a form of escapism. Whether we find ourselves in McGinley’s doll house or Sexton’s, the fate of the inhabitants—the dolls as well as the typical mid-century American housewife—are the same. In an unpublished letter to McGinley dated 2 April 1922, Sexton wrote: “I wonder if I’ve said how much I admire and relate to your poems and many other pieces of prose, etc. In many ways we are quite close. There are few women, of course, who write deeply of their womanhood” (qtd. *Poetics of the American Suburbs* 79).

The bed of Sexton’s poem shifts in description throughout the drafts, but always serves both as a reminder of sickness and of the anorectic’s preference to eat in her room away from probing eyes—as Sexton did as a child (*Anne Sexton* 9). Some anorectic patients hospitalised in the 1950s were known for “refusing to get out of bed” (Cobb 155). “Self in 1958” expands upon the draft’s stanza, describing the kitchen as “ell-electric” and swapping the tea for gin (*Live* 73). The modern electronic appliances of the era promised to help liberate women, which is highlighted in the 1959 “Kitchen Debate” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, but usually did the opposite as women were expected to know exactly how to operate these machines without any help (Nixon 263–267). Ruth Schwartz Cowan notes that women of the postwar era did initially see these modern tools as “liberating, rather, than as oppressive, agents,” but that quickly changed (191). Unlike their ancestors, most mid-century American women did not (and, financially, could not) regularly employ servants. Men began to work farther away from the family home, which meant they were not available to help with some of the more demanding

household tasks as they did in the past. Many women found themselves working either just as hard as their mothers had or harder, even with the latest appliances (Cowan 193). Beginning in the 1950s, more women began to join the workforce, but were still tasked with all of the housework. In 1960, Sexton listed her occupation as “poet” for the first time on her tax return rather than “housewife” which cemented her “unprecedented metamorphosis from suburban housewife into major poet” (*Coming to Light* 195). Sexton claimed this title 14 years after McGinley’s poem “Occupation: Housewife” (1946) appeared in *The New Yorker*, but perhaps the seemingly big strides made by women in the post-war era were not quite as broad as they appeared.

Elaine Tyler May claimed that Nixon’s vision of “appliance-laden houses” was really meant to keep two “disruptive forces” in check: women and workers (156). The idea was that if the latest appliances made housework burdens easier for women, they would be content. The home quickly became the most demanding of bosses where women felt the pressure to evolve into impossible superwomen. Cowan described tools as “not passive instruments, confined to doing our bidding, but [having] a life of their own ... tools also define and constrain the ways in which it is possible and likely that people will behave” (9). The Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) of 1955 found that women “identified stress at home, or resentment against one’s spouse or domestic situation, as pathological” (May 178). In the reality of the “Self in 1958” and the reality for many American housewives of the 1950s, the kitchen had become a dangerous captor—virtually alive with electricity and issuing non-stop demands. Regardless of how convenient foods had become or how many gadgets women had, the pressures kept pace. By the time “Self in 1958” reached publication stage, Sexton had shown that the doll and the doll’s owner had grown up and into their own kitchen imprisonment using gin as an overt signifier.

The doll wonders at this new reality and sense of identity in “Self in 1958.” Sexton demonstrated an expert manipulation of punctuation and meaning with the line “Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?” (*Live* 73). I. Magnin & Company was a luxury department store sold to Bullock’s in 1944. The company’s use of an initial allowed Sexton to make good use of the “I.” The sentence reads grammatically correct as it stands, but also lets Sexton create an additional, meta query/statement inside of it: “Am I approximately an I.” The doll cannot quite ascertain if she is a real person or “approximately” a person—a word by

definition meaning almost, but not completely, accurate. This self-directed pondering is revisited and seemingly boldly answered in the third stanza of “Self in 1958” with the declaration “They think I am me!” (*Live* 73). No such revelation appears in the HRC drafts, which suggests the doll-speaker feels she has found and is satisfied with this realisation.

The direct reference to a department store is also a commentary on mid-century American consumerism, which is further stressed by the doll in “Self in 1958” wearing “some advertised clothes” (*Live* 73). This consumer-driven reference was not present in the HRC drafts where the doll wore “miniature clothes” (“The Lady”) or “doll dainty clothes” (“I Live” 1–3). Sexton’s preoccupation with merchandising has been explored by critics including Gill and Karen Alkalay-Gut, with Gill comparing the so-called American dream in other Sexton poems (“Hurry Up Please”) to nightmares in which America is aligned with “consumption and thus inevitably with expulsion” (“My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot” 42). Consumption and consumerism of course stem from the same root word—consume. Consumption and consumerism also lead, by definition, to using up resources in increasingly large amounts. Early origins of the word “consume,” such as the Latin *consumere*, were defined as destruction via using up or wasting. According to Gill, consumption (and, in turn, consumerism) can only last for so long until an “expulsion” is necessary. Expulsion in the world of EDs is, of course, often achieved through a purging. Such a feat is not available to a doll.

The last stanzas in all HRC drafts as well as “Self in 1958” are similar with changes that appear minor but upon closer inspection are quite revealing. Consider these lines in the last stanzas of the varying HRC drafts:

She asked  
what is reality?  
I am this make believe [sic] doll  
who should smile watermelon pink and have no nervous quickening fears.  
(“The Lady”)

What is reality  
to a make believe doll  
who should smile watermelon pink and have no quickening fears?  
(“I Live” 1 – 3)

Sexton's speaker stepped forward in "The Lady" with the statement "I am this make believe [sic] doll" and although the misspelling is likely a typo, Sexton embedded the conjoined words "be live" into the poem. It almost forces the doll into existence, making her a living doll, Richards's song come alive. The other change between these two versions is the shift from "nervous fears" to "quickenings fears." Sexton scratches out "nervous" by hand and writes "quickenings" beside it in "The Lady." "Quickenings" is sustained throughout the three "I Live" drafts but disappears in "Self in 1958."

Nervous breakdowns and hysteria used to be tightly intertwined, particularly in mid-century America, and hysteria was not voided from the medical world entirely until its removal from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980. Since the moment anorexia was named "anorexia hystérique" by French neuropsychiatrist Ernest Charles Lasègue in 1868, Bruch claims it has been closely identified as a uniquely women's disease (*Eating Disorders* 78). In fact, "hysteria" is derived from the Greek "hyster," meaning "womb." Hysteria is defined as a female disease. Later, in 1873, it was re-named "anorexia nervosa" by British physician William Whitney Gull, but its strong ties to women have persisted through the decades (*Eating Disorders* 212). In 1965, Eliot Slater's "Diagnosis of 'Hysteria'" claimed that "no one has yet framed a satisfactory definition of 'hysteria'" but he ultimately dubbed it a morbid state of the nervous system (1395). Slater supported the decades-old nineteenth century work of Charles Bastian, who claimed disorders of the nervous system could cause "hysterical paralysis" (Bastian 2). Sexton opted to erase the doll's "nervous fears" in "The Lady" but her replacement with "quickenings fears" did not offer much relief for the doll. Instead, the evolution of the drafts suggests that the doll's fears were initially based in a nervous condition, which in mid-century America was considered to be only experienced by women. This is followed by "quickenings" fears that were accumulating at an electrifying speed. Worse, the doll "should not" have such fears, but it seems she does. "Quickenings" also describes the moment when a pregnant woman first feels the baby move in the womb, which instills the doll with the reality and pain of a real woman—and mother. Perhaps her condition (being a doll) is even a "hysterical paralysis" of sorts. Such a state is a fitting description of the typical mid-century American housewife paralysed by the fears and demands placed upon her, trapped like a (barely) living doll in the family home. What was dubbed the "most marrying generation on record" with 96.4 percent of



women married in 1960, the women of this era “sealed the psychological boundaries around the family, [but] they also sealed their fate” (May 23, 38).

Throughout the various HRC drafts, the doll’s smile is described as “watermelon pink” which suggests that she has no teeth (and, in turn, no means of chewing the “stale bread” or being able to have a full voice). Hertel, Schwab, & Company (Hertel and Schwab) were dollmakers (1910–1930) that created a “Watermelon Mouth Jubilee Googly” doll described by collectors as having a “perfect bisque [porcelain] head with glass side-glancing eyes, watermelon mouth, molded hat” (Foulke 208). The unique mouth of this doll does resemble a slice of watermelon held upside down with no visible teeth and a slightly open grin. The “Self in 1958” version does not include the watermelon simile, but the stanza is expanded upon and overtly named a “wholesome disorder” (*Live* 74). A substantial amount of details were added to this stanza, including a possible homage to “The Double Image” with a mother:

What is reality  
to this synthetic doll  
who should smile, who should shift gears,  
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,  
and have no evidence of ruin or fears?  
But I would cry,  
rooted into the wall that  
was once my mother,  
if I could remember how  
and if I had the tears.

(*Live* 74)

The “wall that / was once my mother” echoes Sexton’s “The Double Image” (1959, 1960), particularly since the two poems were written during the same period. Both feature a mother, or image of a mother, located on or in a wall. However, in “Self in 1958” the wall does not just hold the image of the speaker’s mother but actually once was her mother. This description takes the role of a house meant “to cradle” a child to another level, and also joins one inanimate object to another—house and doll. Plaster, along with drywall, is one of the most common materials of an interior wall. These lines suggest that the doll was not just born in this house, but born of the house. However, for the doll the wall is no longer her mother. It is unclear where the mother

went, but this naming of a familial relationship shows that the doll is not just a doll, or at least did not used to be, but a living, natural being or woman.

In the “Self in 1958” version’s fourth stanza, the doll is described for the first time (at least when comparing the draft versions available at the HRC) as “synthetic” rather than a “make believe” doll found in the drafts or a “plaster” doll earlier in the published poem. This can be either an evolution or a devolution of the doll’s existence from draft to published form, depending on perspective. On one hand, perhaps the doll was originally a doll, and was truly forced into some form of reality by virtue of its owner’s belief. On the other hand, “synthetic” is by definition false or fake. What happened to the plaster doll of the published version’s first stanza? Plaster is commonly made with natural ingredients like lime, sand, and water, but this synthetic version of the doll seems wholly manmade. “Self in 1958” follows the progression of an initially plaster doll into a realisation of acute falsehood.

This synthetic doll “should smile” and “should shift gears” to cover up her own feelings and align with her owner’s demands and whims—who, in this new reality, is more likely a husband than a child, considering what is expected of her (*Live* 74). She “should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder” which contradicts the very meaning of the term “disorder” (*Live* 74). These “doors” seem detached from her and her body, named as “the doors” and not the metaphorical “her doors.” By design, doors are openings and can also be closed or even locked. The doors could be referring to her arms (affection), legs (sexuality), or mouth (satiation and voice). However, just because she “should” does not mean that she does, and as readers we are never told of the doll’s next moves (if any). The doll, in this new reality, understands her roles but seems resistant to them. The “wholesome disorder” she is supposed to adopt while showing “no evidence of ruin or fears” could represent a host of issues prevalent in mid-century America and commonly suffered by the average housewife—including Sexton. In the 1950s, anxiety was the primary diagnosed mental health disorder in the United States, while depression was considered rare. Stress and neuroses were regularly tied to anxiety at the time until diagnostic specificity was demanded in later years (Horwitz 112). EDs were a rare diagnosis during this period, but of course did exist. If there were there to be any “wholesome disorder” expected and encouraged of women, the results of EDs (slimness) would be much preferred over a depressed or anxious woman and mother.

If we consider the layout of the doll's home, it is no wonder affection, sex, eating, and voicing one's opinion are unlikely to happen here. The second stanza in all HRC drafts and the published "Self in 1958" describe the dollhouse as precarious and temporary. Consider the HRC drafts of the second stanza:

I live in a doll's house  
with ~~basket~~ four chairs, a square table and a big front door.  
There is a straight bed,  
a cardboard floor, windows that open and little more.  
(*"The Lady"*)

I live in a doll's house  
with four chairs, a square table and a big front door.  
There is a straight bed,  
a cardboard floor, windows that open and little more.  
(*"I Live" 1 – 3*)

In this stanza in all HRC drafts and in the published poem, the doll does not live in her house or even a house, but specifically "a doll's house" as if she is a begrudgingly accepted guest who is aware that the house is inappropriately miniscule and shrunken. A doll should not infer (if dolls were able to infer) that a "doll's house" is different from just a house—it is one and the same to them. This awareness of the house's proportions suggests that the doll has come to life and has outsized her surroundings. These lines also contradict the later notion (in the fourth stanza) that the doll was born in and of the house with a wall for a mother. This mirrors the natural adolescent/teenaged process of creating distance between herself and her parents. Here, in the second stanza, the doll tries to separate herself from the house we are later told that she was born of and in, and one way of doing so is to describe the house as an observer and not an occupant. Initially, Sexton does allow a touch of finery to make its way into the house's description, but that detail is quickly removed.

The sole difference between these drafts is the change from "basket chairs" to "four chairs," with Sexton scratching out "basket" in pencil in the "The Lady" draft and writing in "four" by hand. Basket chairs in some form date back to the Roman period and are made with natural materials, but the basket chairs of the poem are more likely referring to the namesake basket chairs popularised in the 1950s by Danish designers Nanna and Jørgen Ditzel. These

luxury items were made of oak and hand-braided wicker, cushioned with pure new wool. The designers also created the hanging egg chair and were awarded a flurry of accolades for their innovative, chic designs throughout the 1950s. The initial detail of basket chairs might have been another nod to consumerism, but it may have also been an allusion to keeping the doll in a state of stunted maturity—the forever baby in a basket. Cobb’s work in the 1950s found that with anorectics, “their behavior was frequently infantile” and “some had the baby-doll appearance of the typical hysterical girl” (177). There is also the possibility that Sexton was making a reference to the term basket case, which surged in popularity at the end of the Second World War. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defined a “basket case” in 1948 as being an “ineffective or powerless person or organisation.” However, in 1953 the OED further defined a “basket case” as a person “emotionally or mentally unable to cope, esp. because of overwhelming stress of anxiety” and offered the synonym of “nutcase.” Regardless of Sexton’s intention, which may have included all three, she quickly changed the more descriptive chairs to simply “four chairs” to align with the less ornate, more uniform description of the rest of the doll house. The table is described as simply square in all HRC versions of the draft. The “Self in 1958” version changed the square table to a “counterfeit table” which further stressed the precariousness and fakeness of the house (*Live* 73). A “big front door” can be found in all HRC drafts and “Self in 1958” but (unlike the doll’s arms, legs, and mouth) never seems to open, instead acting as a reminder of a big world outside that is not available to the doll.

The second stanza switches suddenly from describing a kitchen or dining room (where a table and chairs are found) to a bedroom in all the poem’s versions where “There is a straight bed.” It seems as if the doll’s house is comprised of just two rooms, lacking a toilet, bathroom, or living room—all necessary areas to perform basic human functions. There are no rooms dedicated to cleansing oneself, enjoying hobbies, entertaining guests, or simply living. However, the “Self in 1958” version does provide a single line as a bridge between the kitchen/dining room and bedroom:

I live in a doll’s house  
with four chairs,  
a counterfeit table, a flat roof  
and a big front door.

Many have come to such a small crossroad.  
There is an iron bed,  
(Life enlarges, life takes aim)  
a cardboard floor,  
(*Live 73*)

The line “Many have come to such a small crossroad” ushers the poem’s speaker and the reader from the kitchen/dining room to the bedroom in a rush. The HRC drafts describe a “straight bed” but “Self in 1958” changes it to an iron bed which denotes an even more cage-like, imprisoned image. The “straight bed” does make an appearance later in the third stanza of “Self in 1958” when an unnamed “someone” puts the speaker “upon their straight bed” (*Live 73*). However, before the poem’s speaker reveals that the bed is someone else’s “straight bed” and not hers, we are told in parenthesis that “Life enlarges, life takes aim” as the doll’s world comes dangerously to life. It is a life that targets the poem’s speaker and either grows before the doll’s eyes or adopts a deimatic behaviour, either of which are meant to scare and subdue the doll.

As life takes on the role of predator, the doll notices that the floor is made of cardboard, a delicate material that would not sustain an iron bed for long. The windows “open and little more” in the HRC drafts and “open on someone’s city / and little more” in the published version (*Live 73*). Noticing these details are a prey’s automatic reaction to an immediate threat as the doll searches for an escape, of which there is none. The windows cannot be opened wide enough in the HRC drafts to offer freedom it seems, and they simply “flash open” in “Self in 1958” to provide glimpses of a city that does not belong to the doll—and might be even more dangerous than the house. The third stanza in all versions of the poem is the first time an actual interaction occurs with the doll and “someone.” Consider the HRC drafts of the third stanza (all of which are identical save for some indentation modifications) and the published version:

Someone plays with me,  
sticks me in that kitchen or upon their straight bed.  
They pretend with me,  
pry my mouth for their cups of tea and their stale bread.  
(“The Lady,” “I Live” 1–3)

Someone plays with me,  
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,

Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?  
Someone pretends with me—  
I am walled in solid by their noise—  
or puts me upon their straight bed.  
They think I am me!  
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!  
They pry my mouth for their cups of gin  
and their stale bread.  
(*Live* 73–74)

From draft stage to publication, the doll moves from being stuck in the kitchen to being planted. The latter is indicative of life, but also of paralysis and, as an indoor “plant,” something that is wholly dependent on others to stay alive. Sexton also specifies in “Self in 1958” that it is not just any kitchen, but an “all-electric kitchen.” Quenched with gin instead of tea in the “Self in 1958” version, the now adult-doll comes face to face with her new owner and boss, the electric kitchen. It is a relationship meant to last the rest of her life. After all, the technological kitchen systems of the 1950s were considered an investment as they were “built to last a lifetime” (Cowan 213).

The “Mrs. Rombauer” in the poem was Irma Rombauer, creator of *The Joy of Cooking*. However, there was little “joy” in the story behind this staple cookbook. Rombauer’s husband suffered what was diagnosed as nervous breakdowns his entire life and committed suicide when she was 53 (Mendelson 80). She moved to a small apartment and wrote *The Joy of Cooking* as a desperate means to try to make money but ended up having to pay for the initial publication herself when publishers showed no interest. It took years of Rombauer marketing the book herself to catch the eyes of publishers, and her health declined along the way. She suffered a series of strokes from 1955 until her death in 1962. The first stroke paralysed the left side of her body and each following stroke further depleted her speech and ability to move or control her body, though she remained mentally sharp and thus trapped in a cage of sorts (Mendelson 319). Slowly, “Mrs. Rombauer” embodied not only a physical paralysis, but also the paralysis of the mid-century housewife stuck in the role of family cook—all with a “joyful” (perhaps watermelon) smile on the surface. Sexton’s choice of the word “plants” immediately before referencing Mrs. Rombauer reflects this embodiment. The term “vegetative state” had already been around for centuries in some form, and Aldous Huxley used the term “vegetable” to

describe someone with a boring, monotonous life with little mental stimulation in a 1933 letter: “It will be a weary business for a bit ... sitting and being a vegetable” (Brukamp 11).

Someone in a vegetative state is also at the mercy of others. Within the same (third) stanza, the doll shifts from describing someone playing with her to someone pretending with her. She is “walled in by their noise” but considering that the only companion appears to be the appliances in the kitchen, one can assume that noise is the steady hum of a room alive with electricity. It is ultimately the kitchen itself and its smattering of gleaming appliances that is the “someone” playing and pretending with the doll. Alternatively, instead of planting the doll in the kitchen, the someone might choose to put her “upon their straight bed.” It is here, in the straight bed so often found in psychiatric hospitals of the 1950s, that the speaker’s mouth is prised open so that tea-cum-gin and old bread can be forced inside. Such force-feedings would be deemed necessary both for the anorectic and a paralysed “vegetable.” It is in this moment in the published poem, when the doll and the kitchen interact in a violent manner, that the poem’s speaker declares “They think I am me!” and a tangling between the doll and the kitchen begins to take hold. This is perhaps the instance when a young woman in mid-century America also realises what her role as housewife entails: that of quiet, smiling, submissive servant to the family. However, the doll also understands: “Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!” This shows a cognisance that the “all-electric” kitchen is not meant to make her life and role as a doll (or woman) easier. Warmth does not necessarily equate to love and comfort. These appliances are the enemy, or a tool of the enemy, since “there is more work for a mother to do in a modern home because there is no one left to help her with it” (Cowan 201). The kitchen feeds the doll, whether she wants food not, because that is a facet of both the fates of women and kitchens in 1950s America:

Women have the babies, women feed the babies, women feed everyone else while they’re at it; hence women cook. Men cook, too, of course, especially now; but, traditionally, they went to the stove as a job or a profession, to show off for an admiring crowd, or simply for the pleasure of it. Women cook because they’re expected to and because the people around them have to eat; happy is she who also enjoys the work.” (Shapiro xv)

The doll, in the “Self in 1958” poem and all drafts in the HRC, submits to her destiny because she has no other choice. The only hint of a rejection of her role is in the final lines that read in all HRC drafts: “But I would cry, / if I could remember how ... and if I had the tears.” These two

lines are interjected with the added detail of the crying taking place in the “wall that / was once my mother” in the published version (*Live* 74). There are two issues here: the doll cannot remember how to cry, and even if she could she had no tears. She is incapable of her desired, necessary expulsion, unable to purge in any capacity after the kitchen’s force-feeding and suppression of the doll with alcohol.

Through the image of a doll, Sexton explores in this poem and its drafts various facets of womanhood in mid-century America including, as I argue, a disordered relationship with food and image. Whether or not Sexton herself had an ED we will never know—nor does it matter in regards to viewing “Self in 1958” through the lens of EDs in 1950s America. What this approach does offer is a new and deeper means of relating to the poem and examining its various roots and revelations in a medical manner that is often overlooked by readers and scholars.

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