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“The fact is that every true New Englander is the last Puritan. He goes on and on, and his children take on his role. What he has done in the ruins of his original purity— his imperialism, exploitation, and capitalist cruelty— is neither wise nor pretty, but his redemption, if he has any, is that he knows it.”¹

-Hayden Carruth

“Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.

I wasn’t exactly forgiven.”²

-Anne Sexton

INTRODUCTION

As the U.S. population thrust westward, lured by the promise of fertile lands, of gentler climates, of earth laden with gold, they left the fallow fields of New England behind. Red barns rotted and wilted like the crops they once presided over. Long winters froze the soil, and gnarled branches of sour apple trees stood still in the orchards. Those who remained did so stubbornly, bound by a reluctant loyalty and “their Puritanical vision of fate” (Carruth 940). From these people came a lyric and story-telling tradition defined by elegy, resentment, survivorship, and devotion, characteristics steeped in and intertwined with a deep sense of place. Hayden Carruth’s chapter, “The New England Tradition,” explores a territory characterized by abandonment, hardship, and madness, attributed to those hard winters and barren fields. The New England

¹ Carruth, Hayden. “The New England Tradition.” *American Libraries*, vol. 2, no. 9, 1971, pp. 938–48.

² Sexton, Anne. “The Double Image.” *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*, Houghton Mifflin, 1981

Gothic as I seek to define it is not in Carruth's vocabulary, but his text clearly identifies elements of the aesthetic and the tone, as well as major contributors to its widely accepted literary canon. He writes of "old, caved in cellar holes" and "rose bushes and apple orchards [running] wild in the forests" (939), and identifies poets such as Longfellow and Frost as pillars of the New England lyric tradition. Longfellow, Frost, Poe, Dickinson, Hawthorne, Lovecraft— these figures of the New England Gothic have biographical and textual ties to New England, and their prose and poetry are concerned with the Gothic themes of guilt, decay, madness, and haunting.

Placing these attributes of the Gothic in the history, context, and physical setting of New England differentiates it from the European Gothic and the Southern Gothic, literary and aesthetic genres with a more fully developed scholarly and cultural presence. A genre in its own right, the New England Gothic can be understood as the convergence of the legacy of puritanical guilt with elements of the uncanny associated with literature of place. It reimagines haunting, interacting with ghosts that are supernatural, spiritual, historical, and emotional. I therefore propose that confessional poetics have a place within this evolving genre, an assertion that within the scope of this project focuses primarily on the work of Anne Sexton as an example of the convergence of the New England confessional mode and the New England Gothic. Moving from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to Anne Sexton's poem "The Double Image," I aim to evaluate the haunting status of hereditary and historical guilt, secrets, social critique, and madness within the framework of the New England Gothic. Situating the confessional mode within that framework likewise expands the scope of New England Gothic, disrupting its stoicism, opening the door to its haunted house with lyric examinations of place, emotion, and self.

"But I lie": Confession in the New England Gothic

Gothic literature figures guilt, fear, and madness as the ghosts which plague its pages and plots. This haunting transcends the personal and approaches the cultural and historical, requiring a reexamination of societal skeletons in the closet. Critic Faye Ringel examines the effect of situating the aesthetics and literary traditions of the Gothic in New England, writing that H.P. Lovecraft “revealed the region’s secrets as he both worshiped and feared his ancestors’ legacy. He replaced the haunted castle with the abandoned farmhouse, the Inquisition with the Puritans, and Europe’s decadent aristocracy with degenerate descendants of his own Anglo-Saxon stock” (Ringel, 142). This evaluation is likewise reflected in the work of Hawthorne, who grappled with the gruesome truths of his own ancestors’ legacy, a lineage which he traced back to his great-great-grandfather, John Hathorne, a judge in the Salem Witch Trials. Hawthorne added the “w” to his name to distance himself from this history, but his works never escape his feelings of hereditary guilt.

Texts such as “Young Goodman Brown,” *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Scarlet Letter* exemplify the New England Gothic, presenting the aesthetics and themes of the genre. Each text is set in Salem or Boston, Massachusetts, and draws upon the state’s historical darkness, with wild untamed forests, haunting doppelgängers, and elements of the supernatural and witchcraft. *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel deeply concerned with shame, sin, and guilt, following the affair between Puritan minister Arthur Dimmesdale and the married Hester Prynne. Hester, pregnant with Dimmesdale’s child, is publicly humiliated and shunned, forced to wear a scarlet “A” on her chest, visibly marking her as an adulterer. Dimmesdale’s identity as Hester’s lover is a secret until he confesses to the townspeople before dying in Hester’s arms. He is tortured by his sin, which manifests psychologically and physically as he deteriorates throughout the text, infected by his own guilt.

Though essential, Carruth's understanding of the New England Tradition is often constricting, prone to emphasizing a sense of stoicism that is limiting when read in conjunction with even the most widely accepted texts of the New England Gothic canon, such as *The Scarlet Letter*. He writes that "[to] this day your New England farmer will prefer to shake his head and keep silent before any issue of complex feeling, and then say something about the weather" (945). He repeatedly praises this masculinized, stony image of the New Englander, relishing "the hard earth and the equally hard men" (941). In some regards, Hawthorne's portrayal of Dimmesdale fits Carruth's characterization of the New Englander. Dimmesdale's hesitancy to confess to the affair and his dismay at the idea of discussing any "issue of complex feeling" clearly fit into Carruth's definition. Yet in this assertion, Carruth neglects to accommodate the deeply emotional aspects of the same texts which he regards as foundational to the New England literary tradition. Hawthorne figures Dimmesdale's silence and emotional repression as responsible for his demise. When Hester refuses to reveal Dimmesdale as her lover, Hawthorne writes, "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin?" (Paragraph 77). For Hawthorne (and Dimmesdale) this New England stoicism and silence are stifling and suppressive, ultimately responsible for Dimmesdale's death. In his text "'In the Shadow of a Dream': The Metamorphic Influences of Guilt, Shame, and Confession in *The Scarlet Letter*"³, Richard Kovarovic asserts that for Hawthorne, "acknowledgement of guilt and shame is part of the process of alleviating its ruinous impact and achieving a true sense of self" (80).

³ Kovarovic, Richard. "'In the Shadow of a Dream': The Metamorphic Influences of Guilt, Shame, and Confession in *The Scarlet Letter*." *East-West Cultural Passage*, vol. 17, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 68–88.

This alleviation is a process mediated by confession, where acknowledgement and divulgence function as essential to survival. Kovarovic notes that “[it] is through public confession and an admission of her weakness as a human and her failings, that Hester emerges victorious and positively transformed from suffering, while the unconfessed pair of men crumble with their secrets” (82). Hawthorne therefore diverges from Carruth’s definitions of the essential New Englander, and in doing so makes room for complexity and emotion, establishing confession as both transformational and necessary. Hawthorne’s inclination to push back against his own Puritan ancestry by figuring confession as a means of combating condemnation is present not only in *The Scarlet Letter*, but in many of his texts and short stories such as *The House of Seven Gables* and “The Young Goodman Brown.” Hawthorne’s interaction with themes of love, selfishness, sin, and guilt abandon any sense of stoicism and instead function as a doorway for Sexton and the confessional mode into the haunted house of the New England Gothic.

“I had my portrait done instead”: Aesthetics of the New England Gothic

Essential to the traditions of the New England Gothic are aesthetic and literary elements which establish the texts as both saturated with a sense of place and instilled with elements of the uncanny and supernatural. Carruth describes crumbling farmhouses, wild and sour fruit, and caved-in cellars as examples of the aesthetics of the New England Tradition, drawing on images of decay and wildness which underscore the elegiac tone of many New England texts. Respectively, Hawthorne frequently uses images of overgrowth and a peculiar form of excess which does not indicate wealth or nourishment, but rather the absence of human control. In one passage, Hester and Pearl walk on a narrow footpath, its evidence of human presence shrinking in the face of the dark forest: “[it] straggled onward into the mystery of the primeval forest. This

hemmed it in so narrowly, and stood so black and dense on either side, and disclosed such imperfect glimpses of the sky above, that, to Hester's mind, it imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering" (Hawthorne, Paragraph 224). Hawthorne's description of the natural settings of Massachusetts instill the text with a sense of the uncanny. The description of the forest as "primeval," creates a sense of both awe and fear, and the footpath cowers at the ancient mystery of the forest. In one sense, the forest is familiar, recognizable to Hester and Pearl, and not untouched by man as evidenced by the footpath. Yet the forest escapes being known—it is full of mystery and representative of "moral wilderness" to Hester. This dance between the known and the unknown performed on an identifiable New England stage defines the aesthetics of the uncanny in the New England Gothic.

Sexton engages with the same images of wildness in "The Double Image," referencing specific sites in Massachusetts and the untamable aspects of New England's natural world. She situates the poem unequivocally in Massachusetts, often moving between Boston and the seaside town of Gloucester: "Past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's Hill." She writes of "sea blizzards," conjuring images of a wild and consuming coldness. Sexton draws on Carruth's references to long winters, prone to driving New Englanders to madness: "The time I did not love myself / I visited your shoveled walks" (42-43). The image of the narrow channel of cleared sidewalk in a wash of white snow mirrors Hawthorne's "straggling" footpath. Both images depict man as small, struggling to make a place for himself in the face of New England's nature, which is at once beautiful and harsh, a dynamic which reflects elements of Romanticism present in all iterations of the Gothic.

Further aligning Sexton and Hawthorne with the Gothic tradition and the aesthetics of decay, is the trope of the portrait. The image of a haunting portrait of an austere subject with eyes

that seem to follow you across the room is a common symbol in Gothic texts. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's interactions with the portrait are more referential than Sexton's figuring of the portrait in "The Double Image." Hawthorne uses the portrait in simile, alighting upon it, yet clear about the intent of the symbol: "He looked like the darkly engraved portraits which we see prefixed to old volumes of sermons; and had no more right than one of those portraits would have, to step forth, as he now did, and meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish" (Paragraph 74). Here, Hawthorne is describing the minister, John Wilson, who humiliates Hester on the meeting house balcony, yet has no ethical entitlement to do so. Describing the portrait as "darkly engraved" is reflective of the gloomy, sinister tones of the Gothic, while the reference to portraits in books of sermons ascribes a moral scrupulousness to the image. Hawthorne effectively defines the portrait as a symbol of moral surveillance, a symbolism most famously figured in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Sexton draws upon this reference in "The Double Image," but unlike Hester, Sexton's speaker is surveilled by her own portrait: "I rot on the wall / my own Dorian Gray" (176-177). The portrait renders the speaker's moral deterioration physical, blurring the line between the painting and the speaker herself. In this line, she *is* the portrait, looking down upon herself from the wall, and the portrait and speaker become the one, rotting together. The portrait as a recurring symbol in "The Double Image" not only represents the aesthetic of decay, but also functions as another device of the uncanny, the Doppelgänger. Translated from German, Doppelgänger means "double-goer." This motif is often present in fantastic literature, offering an unsettling reflection of a character, as interactions with the double force an inspection and evaluation of the self. Sexton combines the Doppelgänger and the portrait motif as the speaker repeats the line "I had my portrait done," throughout the poem, then finds herself surveilled by this more perfect

rendition of herself which hangs over the speaker, described as “that double woman who stares” (179). As the speaker wrestles with feelings of wrongness and guilt, intensified by the portrait’s surveillance, both the speaker and the portrait begin to rot, an instance of intertextuality alluding again to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and further aligning the poem with the Gothic literary tradition. The position of the portrait as physically above the speaker heightens its position of superiority and surveillance, as it looks down upon her.

In Gothic literature, Doppelgängers are often evil, lending physical form to the darkness that lurks within characters; however, Sexton’s combination of the portrait and the Doppelgänger establish the *speaker* as the darker half of the double. The two-dimensional image of the speaker becomes a point of aspiration. Unlike the speaker, who refers to herself as a “graduate of the mental cases” (126), the portrait has no mind, and therefore cannot be tortured by it. Instead, the portrait captures the speaker in one moment of visible happiness: “and in the morning I had my portrait done, / holding my smile in place, till it grew formal” (79-80). The speaker describes sitting for her portrait and holding a smile, a moment which is then immortalized by the painting which soon hangs on the wall above her, mocking her from above. “They hung my portrait in the chill / north light, matching / me to keep me well” (85-87). The speaker’s parents first force her to have the portrait made, then hang it in the house above her, hoping that sitting beneath this more perfect version of herself will make the speaker well again. Just as the speaker switches between “I,” “You,” and “We,” in the opening lines of the poem, and confuses herself with her daughter, she becomes uncertain whether she is the woman living in the house and being surveilled, or if she is the one hanging on the wall, watching herself rot.

“Part way back from Bedlam”: Reevaluating the Confessional Mode

The trope of obscured female insanity, made famous by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, is a common feature among Gothic literature, regardless of region or origin, yet it is especially present in the New England Gothic. In her text *The Gothic Literature and History of New England: Secrets of the Restless Dead*, Faye Ringel writes that "New England and indeed the United States can be figured as a haunted house, with madwomen screaming in the attic" (3). Carruth mirrors this perspective, noting that "...unmarried women, the ill and crippled, formed a lonely, inward-looking society, from whose winter-long broodings arose violence, insanity, and fanaticism" (939). Read in tandem, Ringel and Carruth present a positive feedback loop in which New England and its women drive one another to madness. New England, which historically and presently prides itself on its progressive institutions (psychiatric and otherwise), is not immune to the traditions, structures, and repressions of a patriarchal society. Indeed, it was built upon these structures, and its puritanical origins only further feminize guilt and shame. Ringel expands upon this concept of female madness in the New England Gothic, and identifies a subcategory which she calls the Domestic Gothic, where "the stories often provide no resolution as to whether the female protagonist is haunted, insane, or reacting to the intolerable conditions of real life under the patriarchy" (42). This reading of women ascribed to the fictional characters of the New England Gothic is likewise imposed upon Sexton herself in the cultural and critical reception of her poetry.

To situate Sexton and her work within the context of the New England Gothic therefore requires a reevaluation of the confessional mode, as well as the limitations of that mode, particularly within a feminist framework. Like many of her contemporaries, Sexton was repeatedly institutionalized, attempting suicide twice before killing herself in 1974 by carbon monoxide poisoning. Her collection published in 1960 is titled *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, a

nod to the infamous British asylum. The deeply personal subjects of the confessional mode and its largely autobiographical nature makes it vulnerable to dismissals of the writer as a passive figure in their own work, functioning not as poets and artists, but as mouthpieces for their unregulated compulsions, traumas, and hysterics. Central to my understanding of Sexton's interaction with the confines of the confessional mode is Jo Gill's text, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics." According to Gill, "confession is not an unpredictable symptom of unbearable emotions, it is a 'ritual.' The confession is generated and sustained not by the profundity of need or strength of compulsion of the author, but by the discursive relationship between speaker, text, and reader— penitent, confession, and confessor" (433). Gill admonishes critics who define the confessional mode as some form of compulsive release, a reading which she argues reduces the poet to a victim of their poetry instead of the agent of it. That is not to say that the topics of confessional poetry are not deeply personal. This is a mode where female poets are not only present, but integral, and much of their content is inescapably female, handling adultery, maternal guilt, postpartum depression, marital violence, and sexual shame. Regarding the confessional mode as unpolished emotional ramblings and a vulgar display of intimacy effectively positions female poets as submissive and subservient to their own emotions, and is therefore an explicitly patriarchal reading.

Sexton interacts with these difficult themes in an artfully measured way, with a command of language, imagery, and emotion that creates a sense of connection and transitivity among "penitent, confession, and confessor." "The Double Image" exemplifies this ability, as Sexton interacts with her own diagnosis as "madwoman." The poem demonstrates Sexton's lyric agency and control, portraying an admission of maternal guilt with a careful hand and a speaker who creates an illusory intimacy with the reader. The facade of intimacy and the strong presence of

setting as Sexton refers to witches, Puritans, and sites in Boston and Gloucester further align it with the sense of New England culture and lyric tradition as outlined by Carruth. Opening with “I am thirty this November,” Sexton immediately establishes the strength of the speaker’s voice, grounding the reader visually and temporally in the fall of her thirtieth year, when her daughter is in her “fourth year,” as noted by the second line of the stanza. Sexton begins each of the first three lines with a new person, opening with the first-person singular “I,” following it with the second-person “You,” and finally with the first-person plural “we,” referring to her daughter and herself. In doing so, Sexton establishes the speaker/herself as one entity, separate from her daughter, who is the “you,” but also draws them back together with the first-person plural. As the rest of the poem reflects, Sexton sees herself and her daughter as two parts of the same whole, again playing with the uncanny trope of the Doppelgänger and confessing to using her daughter as a means by which to understand herself: “And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure / nor soothe it. I made you to find me” (210-211).

Sexton’s seasonal imagery as she observes the changing of seasons with her daughter is saturated with feelings of loss and absence, continuing to draw on elements of the New England Gothic aesthetic as she writes of winter rain turning “flapping” leaves “falling flat and washed.” “Flapping” and “falling” conjure the image of a dead leaf, no longer green and lush with life and spring. These yellow leaves are not bright and crisp, reminiscent of touristy New England leaf-peeping. This is a season of decay, reminiscent of Carruth’s portrayal of New England, as leaves dangle, trying desperately to cling to the sturdy limb of the tree. Their clinging is futile, and they fall, washed limp and helpless by cold rain. This image, though being observed by the speaker and her daughter, makes the speaker think of the time she spent apart from the child she is addressing: “And I remember / mostly the three autumns you did not live here. They said I’d

never get you back again” (7). Here, the speaker is confessing something heavy. Not only that she was apart from her daughter for three of her four autumns, but also someone else, some outsider of the double image, a “they,” had separated them— those progressive New England institutions. In the closing lines of the stanza, “all the medical hypothesis / that explained my brain will never be as true as these / struck leaves letting go” (9-11). Sexton alludes to her extensive struggles with mania, depression, suicide attempts, and hysteria as attempts to explain her mind, yet insists to her daughter that these diagnoses cannot portray her brain as completely and as honestly as this leaf resigning itself to another unforgiving New England winter. Through solely this image shared between mother and daughter of the struck leaf surrendering to the cold, Sexton shares with the reader her overwhelming feelings of guilt in motherhood and her personal struggles with her own mental health. Yet in that great New England tradition, she appears to disclose so much but holds the reader at an arm's length, leaving us with the illusion of intimacy, and many more questions.

This deceptively furtive tone appears open but is withholding, an attribute which Carruth recognizes as “characteristic New England speech, at once [ambiguous and understated],” (941). He attributes this phenomenon to the Puritan belief that “ultimate meaning is concealed and that all external reality or observable phenomena are paraphrastic of God’s will. In short, appearances are deceptive and things, including words, do not mean what they seem to mean” (941). Indeed, Sexton is elusive even when she appears open. The honesty of her speaker leaves one with more questions: Who are “they”? When she remembers the three autumns without her daughter, does she do so fondly? Absent of children and therefore absent of guilt? When she writes in section five of “The Double Image,” “And you came each / weekend. But I lie. / You seldom came” (136-137), Sexton forces the reader to reevaluate their perceptions of truth and credibility,

pushing them to question whether the speaker is dishonest for having lied, or more honest for having admitted to it. The result is a speaker who is simultaneously unreliable and the ultimate authority on her emotional truth. Sexton defines her own elusive confessional tone best when the speaker tells her daughter, “I’ll tell you what you’ll never really know” (8).

Carruth’s recognition of ambiguity in the language and character of the New Englander is further reflected in Sexton’s refusal to be strictly confined to the autobiographical, even within confessionalism. In *Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics*, Gill writes that “Sexton’s manipulation of the persona ‘I’ raises crucial questions about the authenticity and credibility typically regarded as characteristic of confessionalism... we must acknowledge that just as there are many ‘I’s’ there are multiple truths” (29). Sexton toys with the many “I’s” in “The Double Image” when she uses “I,” “You,” and “We” to refer to herself, her daughter, and her own mother. As Gill puts it, there is a distinction between “the ‘I’ who is speaking and the ‘I’ who is being spoken about” (27). Sexton’s “I” is therefore not operating as self, or else not *solely* as self. Misreadings of Sexton interpret her verse as innately and wholly biographical, a reading which then undermines the intricacies and subtleties of her craft. This conflation of emotional truth with biographical fact discredits Sexton’s exploration of self and identity, her interaction with the performance of poetry, and her prodding at social constructions of womanhood and “madness.”

“With witches at my side”: Sexton & the Tradition of Persecuted Womanhood

As Hawthorne uses the Gothic to confront the ghosts of his Puritan ancestors, Sexton uses the genre to align herself with the ostracized women of New England, confronting these historical persecutors and her own contemporary critics in the same stroke. Gill outlines “many of the misgivings which characterize contemporary readings of confessional poetry: the sense of shame, the fear of becoming voyeuristic, the anxiety about taboo, the nervousness about being

contaminated by the object of the gaze,” (430). These are misreadings often inflicted upon Sexton, and the confessional mode makes her vulnerable to an indiscriminate conflation of her work and her biography. In her text “‘Like an Island I Had Not Rowed to’: God-Talk in the Poetry of Anne Sexton,” Bonnie Thurston presents a critical misreading of Sexton, writing that “she lashes out, revealing intimate details of her private bodily and emotional life— details which, frankly, I could sometimes do without” (38). While this reading is massively reductive, it works to exemplify the limited critical readings and perceptions as outlined by Gill, as Thurston clearly reads the confessional mode as too revealing and an outburst so emotional as to evoke feelings of disgust and voyeurism.

In her condemnation of Sexton, Thurston touches upon one of the key attributes of Sexton’s writing, which strengthens her presence in the New England Gothic. Thurston writes that “Sexton images her inner darkness, her demons, as ‘creepy things’ (rats, crabs) living inside her, and she seems to think her deliverance will come from outside herself,” (41). Sexton figures her “inner darkness” as green witches and ugly angels which needle her with guilt, and tell her that she is “not exactly forgiven” (71). Reflecting on her separation from her daughter, she writes that she was a “childless bride / nothing sweet to spare / with witches at my side” (116-118). Many of Sexton’s poems feature witches. Sometimes the speaker is empowered by the witches, sometimes she is plagued by them. In “The Double Image,” the witches are symbolic of the speaker’s wrongs, reminding her of her failures. They reprimand her for having to live with her own mother, “Too late, / too late, to live with your mother, the witches said” (48-49). In “The Double Image,” the witches function as Sexton’s self-criticism and relay her thoughts of self-hatred. In contrast, in “Her Kind,” Sexton’s allusions to witches places her in a position of strength and defiance as she interacts with the ghosts of New England’s past with empathy,

forcing the reader to consider the long tradition of female persecution as Sexton draws upon images of torture, ostracization, and social shunning and humiliation.

Sexton's ability to align herself with the ostracized and persecuted women of New England's cultural past references the haunting regional history, a central component of New England Gothic texts, but Sexton's toying with persona within the confessional mode allows her to interact with these historical ghosts in a deeply personalized way, using this historical reference as a figurative device and effectively closing the gap between her postmodern work and earlier works of the New England Gothic. In "Her Kind" she actively makes such comparisons, referring to herself as a "possessed witch," clearly referencing the persecution of women during the Salem Witch Crisis. Sexton is conscious of the role of "witch" or "madwoman" in New England and reflects that "a woman like that is misunderstood. / I have been her kind" (13-14) The mode allows Sexton a closeness with her own condemnation, and establishes a connection between New England's past and her own. Sexton's consciousness of madness as a social construct paired with her agency over the lyric "I" enables her to align herself with the spurned women of New England's past, and she uses these personas like masks, enabling her to interact with her perceptions of self, performance, and womanhood.

Such scenes are likewise present in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hester must stand before the townspeople upon her "pedestal of shame" (Paragraph 74). Both the speaker of "Her Kind" and Hester experience a sort of figurative elevation defined not by virtue but by ostracization. They stand above and separate from their communities, with Hester figured physically above but socially below the jeering townspeople, the speaker in "Her Kind" flying "over the plain houses," and the portrait in "The Double Image" surveying its own subject. These images are often painfully corporeal, as in "Her Kind," where Sexton speaks back to her prosecutors, and

the prosecutors of the accused witches before her: “your flames still bite my thigh / and my ribs crack where your wheels wind” (18-19). The “New England Tradition” takes a dark turn here, where Sexton’s use of “still” ensures that the reader understands that female suffering and alienation at the hands of New England society and institutions is an institution in itself, a central component of the region’s history.

Furthermore, Sexton’s reference to cracking “ribs” in the context of female persecution ties the speaker to the original sin and female guilt, as Eve was made from Adam’s rib. Sexton therefore not only recognizes her own designation as ostracized or as “madwoman,” but reclaims it, using it as a literary device as she references the victims of the Salem Witch Crisis. The effect is twofold. Firstly, Sexton pushes against the bounds of the confessional mode, turning the vulnerability of a largely autobiographical form on its head as she uses her own condemnation as a piece of imagery and a means of communication with her condemners. Secondly, her interaction with witches, possession, and the original sin work to situate her text within the framework of the New England Gothic, drawing on New England Gothic aesthetics and ghosts ultimately creating texts which use the region’s historical guilt and puritanical past as a cultural legacy, a language, and context to evaluate and understand her own position within that culture.

“I made you to find me”: Inherited Guilt in the New England Gothic

Sexton is conscious of the idea of contamination, that a woman’s madness or “sin” is a disease or a contagion. In the “The Double Image” Sexton refers to her own mother’s response to her suicide attempt, writing that “she turned from me, as if death were catching, / as if death transferred, / as if my dying had eaten inside of her” (89-91). In this instance, the speaker’s mother physically alienates her, turning away and again putting the speaker physically and interpersonally in the position of the shunned woman, marked as diseased by her “sin,” which in

this case is her suicide attempt as well as her social designation as “mad.” The image of the speaker’s dying as having “eaten inside her” further figures the greatest female sin as consumption, which connotes Eve consuming the forbidden fruit. Later in the poem, the speaker’s mother verbalizes this contagion: “On the first of September she looked at me / and said I gave her cancer” (93-94). When the speaker’s mother wished to be safe from the speaker’s infectious sin, she turned away, physically isolating the speaker. When she is sick, she turns back to the speaker and looks at her, as now both are diseased women: one sick with her own sin, and one infected by her proximity.

The infectious and hereditary nature of female sin and female immorality are likewise central in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hester’s shunning functions as a form of quarantine, and Hester worries that she has passed her own sinfulness on to her daughter, Pearl. As Hawthorne dealt with his own fears of hereditary guilt, so too did his protagonists. Hester fears that the wickedness of her affair with Dimmesdale would become incarnate in Pearl: “She knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be good. Day after day, she looked fearfully into the child’s expanding nature, ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity, that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being” (Paragraph 105). Hester’s consciousness of her sin infects her perception of her daughter, as she waits for the day that she sees the symptoms of her own “evil” reflected in Pearl. In this Puritan context, the idea that Pearl owes her being to her mother’s guilt also aligns her with the Original Sin, as all women are descendants of Eve and therefore inheritors of her first guilt. Hester’s fear that Pearl experiences this guilt doubly is not a fear informed solely by religion, but also by society.

The use of the Doppelgänger emphasizes this anxiety for both Hester and Sexton, as the mothers in their texts fear the image of themselves present in their daughters: “And you resembled me; unacquainted / with my face, you wore it” (112-113). Pearl is born as a result of Hester’s adultery, in her daughter’s face Hester sees herself as well as her own sin. In “The Double Image” there is a distance between the speaker and her daughter, as they are separated by the speaker’s institutionalization and inability to care for her child: “why did I let you grow / in another place. You did not know my voice / when I came back to call” (38-39). Despite this distance, not knowing her mother's face nor her mother's voice, the daughter looks like the speaker, fulfilling the role of Doppelgänger just as the portrait does. In this instance, the daughter wears her mother’s face, emphasizing the hereditary and demonstrating that despite distance or separation, mother and daughter are bound to one another. The daughter bears what the mother passes on to her, and the mother looks upon her daughter only to see her own face staring back, as Sexton writes “my mocking mirror, my overthrown / love, my first image” (167-168).

Furthermore, she figures this doom as a broken faucet (20), leaking, spilling the mother into the daughter, a constant and unstoppable drip. The speaker addresses her daughter, Joyce: “Doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet / an old debt I must assume” (21-22). Just as Hester fears that she has infected her child with something “dark and wild,” the speaker figures her own daughter as drowning in doom as if passed through the umbilical cord, filling first the womb and then the bassinet. Sexton’s speaker is therefore not only conscious of the sin and doom which she gives to her daughter, but also that it is “an old debt,” passed down matrilineally, a debt inherited from the speaker’s mother and passed on to the speaker’s daughter. Hawthorne further reflects this concept in his description of the people at the marketplace in Boston as “born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom” (Paragraph 282). This phenomenon of

inherited guilt and gloom allows us to return to Carruth's sense of the New England Tradition and his assertion that "... every true New Englander is the last Puritan. He goes on and on, and his children take up the role" (948), as Pearl takes up her mother's sin and Joyce puts on her mother's face.

"Pilgrim's Blues": Robert Lowell and A Conclusion

On my pilgrimage to Northampton,
I found no relic,
Except the round slice of an oak,
You are said to have planted
- *Robert Lowell*⁴

Confessional poet Robert Lowell stands as a bridge between Hawthorne and Sexton, presenting a perhaps more obvious addition to the New England Gothic. It was in M.L. Rosenthal's review of Lowell's *Life Studies* that the phrase "confessional poetry" first appeared, and Sexton studied under Lowell at Boston University. In turn, Lowell is connected to Hawthorne by both gender and legacy. Both Lowell and Hawthorne were connected to the Boston Brahmin, the New England elite families who could trace their ancestry to the Mayflower and New England's first colonizers. As such, their texts are heavily concerned with lineage, pulling at the family tapestry and following the loose threads. As Hawthorne dug at his familial ties to the Salem judges through *The Scarlet Letter*, as Lowell did with poems such as "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts." Lowell was a descendant of Edwards, a prominent Calvinist theologian and preacher, and in this poem he explores his ancestor's legacy in a lyric retelling of his life, addressing Edwards directly in the second person. The speaker returns to the foundations of the house that Edwards left behind in Northampton, reflecting on the ruins.

⁴ Lowell, Robert. "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts." *Poetry*, vol. 101, no. 1/2, 1962, pp. 68–71. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20589007>. Accessed 3 Dec. 2023.

Lowell calls this journey a “pilgrimage,” referencing the family’s puritanical origins, reflecting Edwards’ position as a theologian, and defining this interaction with the past as a religious experience.

Like the works of Sexton and Hawthorne, Lowell’s poem is particularly concerned with place, as he looks out over Northampton, imagining Edward’s life on the land which the speaker looks out upon, where “the square / white houses of his flock / stand in the open air” (2-4). He compares the white houses to sheep, reflecting on the congregants who followed Edwards to Northampton during the Great Awakening, figuring Edwards as their shepherd. Lowell notes that for Edwards, the world ended in Massachusetts. He writes, “In Western Massachusetts, / I could almost feel the frontier / crack and disappear” (9-11). At the ruins of his ancestor’s homestead, Lowell, too, felt the rest of the world fall away. His observation that “Edwards great millstone and / rock of hope has crumbled” (1-2) reminds one of Carruth’s descriptions of the crumbling cellar, returning to the New England aesthetics of decay. Hawthorne, Lowell, and Sexton all use images of ruin and decay in their figuration of New England, as seen in Dimmesdale’s decline, Sexton’s rotting portrait, Edwards’ crumbling rock of hope. Yet despite this ruin and deterioration, something prompts these authors of the New England Gothic to stay, something ties them to it. Something implores them to seek out the transcendent thread which binds them to New England, to its past, to its present, and to each other.

Hayden Carruth wrote of the New Englander’s refusal to leave the region, despite the promise that elsewhere, anywhere, would be better. He asserts that New Englanders became a people who were most comfortable in their own hardship, ascribing their willingness to suffer in the region to a diluted version of Puritanism:

New Englanders became addicted to failure, as in a sense they had been from the beginning, with their Puritanical vision of fate. The bitch goddess

had seldom smiled on them, but always elsewhere— the gold fields, Broadway, Timbuktu. They cultivated the virtues of failure: ‘spiritual sturdiness’ and simple survivorship. (940)

Perhaps Hawthorne, Lowell, and Sexton’s dedication to the region can be understood as some offshoot of a Puritanical belief in predetermination, the idea that they are bound to this place that bore them and that to resist it by going elsewhere was futile. Yet ascribing this regional loyalty entirely to predetermination denies the underlying sense of devotion in the New England Gothic. Each of these authors regards the region with the unwavering honesty and the reluctant yet intimate affection we can only muster up for the places we truly know. Hawthorne writes of the consuming and formidable beauty of the New England landscape, fearing and admiring its haunting majesty. Sexton speaks fondly of Boston when she writes “I learned life / back into my own / seven rooms, visited the swan boats” (130-132). Sexton’s memories of Boston are not entirely joyful, she identifies it as the city she lived in as a childless bride, the place where her mother died, and where she twice attempted suicide. Yet she also learned to live there, establishing a loving sense of familiarity and belonging when she writes of her own seven rooms, and references the beloved swan boats which are peddled around the pond in the Public Garden.

Lowell meditates nostalgically on a New England boyhood and life that was not his, but Edwards’ addressing him as he writes “As a boy, you built a booth / in a swamp for prayer; / lying on your back” (32-34). He imagines Edwards as a child laying in the wetlands, praying, watching bugs fly above him in the buzz of summer. Lowell’s use of the second person further demonstrates his desire to close the gap of time between himself and his ancestor, allowing him a proximity much like that which Sexton creates between herself and the witches. He is searching for some tangible connection to the past, as he writes “I found no relic / except the round slice of

an oak / you are said to have planted” (72-74). His use of the word relic reinforces the reverent tone instilled in this work, as he searches for something touched by Edwards. He finds it in the stump of an oak tree that legend says Edwards planted, the “round slice” revealing the rings of time between Edwards and Lowell, the gaps of generation separating them from one another. In his book *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*, Paul Mariani writes that

[Lowell] turned inward ... settling finally on elegy and heartbreak and an extended meditation on the weight of time and history, particularly ... on the weight of his native New England, and to the particular landscapes which had shaped him for better and worse. (10)

Mariani’s inclination to define this as a “mediation on the weight of time and history” is particularly apt, as Lowell, like the other authors of the New England Gothic, cast his vision both outward and backward in order to understand himself. New England authors are differentiated by their fascination with the inherited, both from lineage and from landscape. Hawthorne’s concern with Hester’s guilt manifesting itself in Pearl is informed by his own concerns with the evils of his ancestry. Sexton fears the version of herself that looks back at her when she sees the portrait or her daughter’s face, yet cannot deny that she made this image in order to find herself. Lowell’s poems about his various predecessors indicate a desire to understand what came before him, in order to better know himself. In her chapter “Anne Sexton and the Gender of Poethood,” Jane Hedley writes of confessional poetry that “at its most powerful, it will have an uncanny transitivity” (34). This is the thread which pulls together the texts of the confessionals and the New England Gothic: the search for the uncannily transitive. The New England Gothic gives structure, setting, and a name to this web of transitivity which connects Hawthorne, Lowell, and Sexton, and uncovers their shared desire to understand both

society and the self through the ghosts which haunt the same land they walked on, the same houses they lived in, the same lineage they carried.

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