



Temporal Resistance And The Feminine Semiotic: Exploring Anne Sexton's "Menstruation At Forty" And "Housewife" Through Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time"(1981)

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Abstract:

This paper provides a reinterpretation of Anne Sexton's poems "Menstruation at Forty" and "Housewife" through the theoretical lens of Julia Kristeva's seminal essay "Women's Time" (1981), which distinguishes between cyclical, monumental, and generational modes of feminine temporality. Anne Sexton's poetic language transforms menstruation and domesticity, which are often portrayed as confinement into rhythmic, semiotic acts of resistance against the linear, teleological, masculine temporality of patriarchal culture. Sexton's verses use rhythm, repetition, and corporeal imagery to stage the female body and household as temporal and linguistic sites where the symbolic order of progress collapses into recurrence and endurance. This paper situates Sexton's confessional poetics within Kristeva's framework to show how her language enacts rather than merely reflects theory: her menstruating and domestic speakers embody cyclical recurrence and monumental stillness as forms of revolt. This study argues that by merging Kristeva's psychoanalytic temporality with Sexton's confessional form, feminine time survives within poetic rhythm itself, where bleeding, cleaning, and enduring become modes of linguistic and ontological creation.

Key Words: Anne Sexton, Confessional Poetry, Feminine Temporality, Julia Kristeva, Semiotic Resistance

Introduction:

Anne Sexton's poetry occupies a significant position within the history of confessional writing, not simply because her poems draw upon personal experience but because they transform that experience into a sustained inquiry into embodiment, domesticity, and the temporal structures that underwrite feminine life. Her work frequently approaches the ordinary rhythms of the body and the routines of domestic labour with a precision that gives these materials conceptual resonance beyond their seemingly private contexts. "Menstruation at Forty" and "Housewife" exemplify this tendency. Although concise, each poem opens a dense field of temporal and spatial associations that invite interpretation through later feminist theoretical frameworks. Critics such as Jo Gill have noted the extent to which readings of Sexton remain entangled in biography and pathology, often neglecting the structural and conceptual ambition that emerges in her handling of bodily and domestic imagery (Gill 14-18).

Julia Kristeva's theoretical reformulation of temporality in "Women's Time" offers a particularly generative lens through which to examine these poems. In this essay, Kristeva distinguishes historical linearity from two alternative temporal modalities she associates with feminine experience: cyclical time, grounded in biological rhythms, and monumental time, characterised by a sense of immobile duration linked to maternity (Kristeva 17-23). A third modality, generational time, concerns the transmission of identity and rhythm rather than genealogical succession. These temporal forms coexist with linear time, thereby introducing discontinuity into historical narratives. Kristeva's account of the semiotic in *Revolution in Poetic Language* complicates this model further by identifying rhythm, tone, and bodily impulse as forces that persist within and disturb the symbolic order of language (Kristeva 25-36). This dual structure of language provides a critical vocabulary for analysing the instability and repetition in Sexton's verse, where images of blood, domestic enclosure and bodily processes appear simultaneously as thematic content and rhythmic disturbance.

The study proposes that Sexton's poems do more than represent the material conditions of feminine life; they articulate temporal alternatives embedded in the organisation of poetic language. "Menstruation at Forty" binds imagined lineage to the recurrence of menstrual bleeding, allowing the poem to stage a temporality that resists patriarchal narratives of linear reproductive futurity (Sexton, "Menstruation at Forty"). The poem's recursive structure and oscillating metaphors disclose a rhythm that cannot be reduced to narrative progression. "Housewife," in turn, reimagines the domestic interior as an extension of the female body, where repetition becomes both labour and inheritance (Sexton, "Housewife"). Its imagery of walls endowed with organs and its portrayal of cleaning as a reflexive bodily act situate domesticity within a monumental temporality of endurance. These poetic structures resonate with the arguments advanced by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, who urges women to write through the body (Cixous 875-76), and Luce Irigaray, who articulates feminine subjectivity as fluid, multiple, and resistant to phallogocentric logic (Irigaray 23-32).

The hypothesis guiding this research is that Sexton's menstrual and domestic poetics enact cyclical, monumental, and generational temporalities not simply as themes but as linguistic operations. The poems' repetitions, shifts in metaphorical register, and sonic intensities function as semiotic pressures that unsettle symbolic coherence, aligning with Kristeva's argument that poetic language is a privileged site where the semiotic disrupts established structures of meaning (Kristeva 30). This hypothesis also reflects Emily Apter's observation that "Women's Time" relocates feminist critique into the terrain of temporal and semiotic processes (Apter 15-18).

Within this framework, the study asks three central questions. First, how do "Menstruation at Forty" and "Housewife" transform bodily recurrence and domestic labour into temporal architectures? Second, in what ways do these architectures correspond to Kristeva's three modalities of feminine time? Third, how do the rhythmic, imagistic, and spatial features of these poems reveal moments where the semiotic exerts pressure on the symbolic order of patriarchal language? These questions are positioned within a broader dialogue with feminist phenomenology, particularly Iris Marion Young's reflections on how women's bodily comportment is shaped by constraint (Young 27-30), and Sara Ahmed's analysis of how repeated gestures create orientations that structure spatial experience (Ahmed 11-21). Elizabeth Grosz's conception of the body as a mediating surface between nature and culture further clarifies how Sexton's metaphors of skin, walls, and interior rooms articulate embodied spatiality (Grosz x-xii).

The study employs qualitative close reading and intertextual analysis. This method involves tracking the poems' patterns of rhythm, metaphor, and spatial construction, and situating them in relation to Kristeva's theoretical distinctions between symbolic and semiotic processes. The research conducted by Afef Sboui, which examines how Sexton's imagery destabilizes patriarchal speech (Sboui 4-8), and Areen Khalifeh, who elaborates on the role of semiotics in confessional poetry (Khalifeh 42-55), provides further grounding for this approach.

The theoretical framework thus integrates Kristeva's temporal and linguistic models with feminist theories of corporeal writing and phenomenological accounts of embodied spatiality. Together, these materials support a reading of Sexton that takes seriously the imaginative and temporal potency of bodily processes often relegated to the margins of poetic discourse. Approaching Sexton through this constellation of concepts

illuminates the extent to which her work generates the very possibilities later articulated by feminist theory, constructing a poetic field in which feminine temporality is lived, imagined, and inscribed at once.

Literature Review:

The criticism of Anne Sexton's works has undergone several shifts, moving from biographical explanation toward more theoretically oriented approaches that examine the structural and conceptual dimensions of her work. Early researchers focused primarily on the immediacy of her confessional mode, often interpreting her poems through the lens of psychiatric illness or therapeutic disclosure. Diane Middlebrook's influential biographical account, for instance, frames Sexton's poetic production as an extension of the therapeutic encounter, a space in which trauma and memory were shaped into performative utterances (Middlebrook 41-42). Jo Gill complicates this biographical framing by demonstrating how Sexton's poems employ fragmentation, repetition, and tonal dissonance as formal strategies that resist stable readings of the confessional subject (Gill 14-18). Such insights shift attention away from pathology toward the textual structure of her verses.

A parallel type of criticism has examined Sexton's persistent engagement with domestic architecture. Catherine Waters's analysis of domestic imagery identifies the house in Sexton's poems as both extension and limit of feminine identity, marked by ambivalence and spatial instability, a reading that illuminates the doubleness embedded in poems such as "Housewife." This spatial dimension resonates with the larger tradition of feminist literary criticism inaugurated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that the female figure within patriarchal literature is frequently inscribed within confined domestic interiors, spaces that externalize cultural anxieties surrounding female agency (Gilbert and Gubar 88). Their account helps clarify the architectural metaphors that recur in Sexton's writing, where domestic space becomes an embodied enclosure through which power, labour, and identity circulate.

Sexton's recurring focus on abjection and corporeality has also drawn the interest of critics working at the intersection of feminist theory and psychoanalysis. Scholars such as Catherine Waters and Afef Sboui argue that Sexton's explicit engagement with menstruation, sexuality, and bodily decay transforms culturally stigmatized materials into poetic agency. Sboui's study emphasizes Sexton's disruption of patriarchal linguistic norms, observing that her imagery often presses against the representational limits of conventional discourse (Sboui 4-8). These readings contribute to a critical recognition that Sexton's poems use corporeality not simply as content but as a mode of linguistic re-organisation.

Kristeva's theory has provided one of the most productive frameworks for interpreting such disturbances. "Women's Time" reconceptualises temporality by differentiating linear historical time from cyclical and monumental durations associated with feminine embodiment (Kristeva 17-23). Emily Apter's reading of this essay underscores Kristeva's shift of feminist inquiry away from institutional inclusion and toward the structures of temporality and signification that subtend cultural norms (Apter 15-22). Tyler Bennett extends this perspective by emphasising the methodological value of Kristeva's symbolic-semiotic distinction within contemporary semiotics, noting that her emphasis on rhythm, polylogue, and auto-critique provides tools for textual analysis that resist reductive interpretation (Bennett 83-88). These scholarly interventions situate Kristeva's temporal and linguistic categories as central to feminist analyses of literature.

Beyond temporality, Kristeva's exploration of abjection in *Powers of Horror* has shaped critical understanding of Sexton's darker imagery. Kristeva locates abjection at the boundary where the subject confronts bodily substances that disturb identity and order, such as blood or waste (Kristeva 1-6). The conceptual proximity between abjection and Sexton's recurring motifs of blood, suicidal imagining, and bodily dissolution has been noted by multiple scholars. These connections are elaborated further in Areen Khalifeh's dissertation, which applies Kristeva's semiotics to the work of Sexton and Sylvia Plath, suggesting that confessional poetry stages a persistent confrontation with, and partial disruption of, the symbolic law (Khalifeh 42-55). Sinem Oruç contributes to this line of inquiry by demonstrating how semiotic ruptures in literary texts interrupt patriarchal narrative coherence, a framework that aligns with the rhythmic and imagistic patterns in Sexton's poems (Oruç 6).

French feminist theory more broadly supplies additional conceptual tools for reading Sexton's work. Hélène Cixous's seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" articulates a theory of *écriture féminine* that urges women to write the body into language, producing textual forms marked by fluidity, multiplicity, and rhythmic intensity (Cixous 875-82). Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* similarly challenges the binary logic of phallogentric discourse, positing feminine subjectivity as plural and dynamic rather than singular or self-identical (Irigaray 23-32). These approaches provide a vocabulary for understanding the way Sexton's confessional idiom draws on the body not merely as a theme but as an organising principle of language.

Feminist phenomenology deepens this discussion by situating embodiment within spatial and affective contexts. Iris Marion Young's reflections on feminine bodily comportment highlight how women learn to inhabit their bodies as restricted space, shaped by social expectations that limit movement and gesture (Young 27-37). Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation examines how repeated bodily actions create spatial lines that direct attention, habit, and desire (Ahmed 11-21). Elizabeth Grosz's theorisation of the body as a mediating surface between biological materiality and cultural inscription further illuminates how domestic and bodily spaces in Sexton's poetry converge to produce specific forms of subjectivity (Grosz x-xii). These phenomenological frameworks clarify the spatial logic underlying Sexton's depiction of houses, rooms, and bodily interiors.

Despite all this research, certain gaps remain. While critics have explored Sexton's engagement with domesticity, corporeality, or psychological distress, there has been limited sustained attention to the conjunction of these themes with Kristeva's temporal theory and the symbolic-semiotic distinction. Existing scholarship tends to treat temporality and embodiment as separate analytic concerns rather than mutually constitutive phenomena. Moreover, while feminist theory is often invoked in discussions of Sexton, its insights are rarely fully integrated with phenomenological accounts of space and contemporary Kristevan readings. The present study intervenes in this gap by demonstrating how Sexton's treatment of menstruation and domestic labour creates a poetic field in which feminine temporality, spatial enclosure, and linguistic disruption operate together. Through this alignment, the Literature Review establishes the theoretical and critical foundation for the close readings and analytical arguments that follow.

Close Reading:

"Menstruation at Forty" begins with a gesture toward an imagined lineage, the opening statement "I was thinking of a son," placing the speaker within a temporality oriented not toward actual reproduction but toward a speculative future. This orientation quickly destabilises linear chronology when the speaker rejects mechanistic metaphors: "The womb is not a clock; nor a bell tolling" (Sexton, "Menstruation at Forty"). The disavowal echoes Julia Kristeva's insistence that women's bodies do not simply follow the linear time of history but participate in what she calls cyclical time, a rhythm grounded in biological recurrence rather than in measurable progression (Kristeva 17-18). Sexton's refusal of the womb as a "clock" thus aligns with Kristeva's claim that women's biological repetition disrupts the temporal logic upon which patriarchal narration depends.

The poem's own structure embodies this cyclical movement. The speaker's recurring speculations about the absent child, such as "Will I give you my eyes or his," create a rhythm based not on narrative advancement but on return (Sexton, "Menstruation at Forty"). Kristeva associates such repetition with the semiotic, a pre-symbolic field of rhythm and drive that surfaces in poetic discourse (Kristeva 25-30). The tonal oscillation between longing and resignation, especially in the line "All this without you; two days gone in blood," exemplifies this semiotic pulse. The enjambment suspends meaning between presence and loss, a structure consistent with Emily Apter's observation that Kristevan temporality transports meaning into the intervals between repetition and rupture (Apter 18).

Sexton's representation of blood introduces abjection into the poem's temporal field. When the speaker imagines "My death from the wrists" and envisions blood "worn like a corsage," the imagery blends violence with ceremonial display (Sexton, "Menstruation at Forty"). Julia Kristeva defines abjection as the psychic crisis that occurs when bodily boundaries fail, particularly through substances such as blood that destabilize identity (Kristeva 1-6). Sexton's corsage of blood becomes an emblem of this collapse, transforming a bodily

expulsion into an ornament. Afef Sboui notes that Sexton's handling of such bodily material disrupts patriarchal speech precisely because it brings the abject into linguistic visibility (Sboui 4-8). The poem's final image of the imagined son "never growing old" suspends him within what Kristeva terms monumental time, a temporality marked by immobility and eternity rather than by transformation (Kristeva 20-21). The child's stasis contrasts sharply with the mother's cyclical bleeding, creating a tense coexistence of monumental and cyclical durations.

"Housewife," while considerably shorter, is equally dense in its temporal and spatial implications. The opening assertion, "Some women marry houses," immediately fuses bodily identity with domestic architecture (Sexton, "Housewife"). This unusual verb choice produces what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the entrapment of female figures within domestic interiors, spaces in which patriarchal culture secures and regulates feminine subjectivity (Gilbert and Gubar 88). Sexton intensifies this entanglement by granting the house corporeal features: "a heart, a mouth, a liver and bowel movements." The attribution of organs to walls collapses the division between body and dwelling, a move consistent with Elizabeth Grosz's account of the body as an interface between the material and the symbolic (Grosz x-xii).

The poem's temporality resides in the repetition of domestic labour. The woman "sits on her knees all day, faithfully washing herself down" (Sexton, "Housewife"). The reflexive "herself" blurs the distinction between caring for the house and caring for the body, transforming housework into a self-directed ritual. Iris Marion Young's analysis of feminine bodily comportment explains how women's gestures often reflect social conditioning toward containment and repetition (Young 27-30), and here Sexton renders that containment spatially and temporally. The cleaning is not a task aimed at completion; it is a perpetual return, a maintenance cycle akin to Kristeva's cyclical time.

Sexton's reconfiguration of masculine movement further complicates the domestic setting. Men "enter by force, drawn back like Jonah; into their fleshy mothers," a comparison that recasts male entry as a return to a maternal interior (Sexton, "Housewife"). Sinem Oruç argues that semiotic rupture often occurs at precisely these points where symbolic order is destabilized by bodily metaphors that refuse hierarchical meaning (Oruç 6). In this poem, the house becomes a site of engulfment rather than a regulated domestic boundary. Masculine agency is absorbed by a maternal spatial logic, reversing the hierarchical direction typically found in patriarchal domestic narratives.

The poem culminates with the line "A woman is her mother; That's the main thing," introducing a dimension of generational time (Sexton, "Housewife"). Kristeva identifies generational temporality as the transmission of identity not through linear succession but through rhythmic inheritance (Kristeva 22-23). Catherine Waters likewise recognises this in Sexton's domestic imagery, noting that domestic structures often bind female figures to inherited patterns of labour and identity. The poem collapses mother and daughter into a single temporal loop, not as repetition of roles but as persistence of rhythm. In this formulation, identity emerges through recursive patterns rather than developmental arcs.

Taken together, these poems reveal how Sexton uses menstruation, domesticity, and bodily thresholds to produce temporal and spatial architectures that resonate with Kristeva's categories of cyclical, monumental, and generational time. The imagery of bleeding, engulfing interiors, and maternal inheritance operates not merely as metaphor but as a linguistic enactment of semiotic pressure within symbolic constraints. As Areen Khalifeh observes, confessional poetry often stages this tension by allowing corporeal rhythm to break through regulated discourse (Khalifeh 42-55). Sexton's poems exemplify this dynamic: the rhythms of her language, its returns, interruptions, and visceral textures, become the very means through which feminine temporality asserts itself.

Discussion and Analysis

Sexton's two poems articulate a temporal and linguistic logic that becomes legible only when read through the theoretical constellation articulated by Kristeva and expanded by later feminist thinkers. What emerges is a poetics in which the body's recurring rhythms and the unending circuit of domestic labour generate their own forms of temporal insistence. These temporal forms function not as deviations from historical time but as alternatives that coexist with and undermine the linear narrative structures that sustain patriarchal discourse.

Kristeva's concept of cyclical time provides a crucial lens through which to interpret the temporal organisation of "Menstruation at Forty." The poem's refusal of the womb as "a clock" aligns with Kristeva's distinction between biological recurrence and the progressive logic of historical time (Kristeva 17-18). Sexton positions menstruation not as a prelude to reproduction but as a rhythm in its own right, one that structures the speaker's sense of self without conforming to teleological demands. The cyclical return of blood, articulated in "two days gone in blood," echoes the semiotic rhythms that Kristeva identifies as the foundational energies driving poetic language (Kristeva 25-30). These rhythms interrupt the symbolic order with pulses of affect, bodily memory, and sensual intensity, and it is precisely such interruptions that destabilise the poem's linear framing.

The semiotics' intrusion into symbolic structures becomes even more apparent when examining the poem's engagement with abjection. Kristeva describes abjection as a psychic and linguistic crisis provoked by the presence of substances, blood foremost among them, that blur the boundaries between inside and outside, self and non-self (Kristeva 1-6). Sexton's juxtaposition of suicidal blood with ceremonial imagery ("blood worn like a corsage") sets abjection within a ritual frame, creating a tension between horror and ornament. Afef Sboui's observation that Sexton's poetry "ventures into the unspeakable" by transforming taboo bodily material into linguistic presence clarifies how abjection becomes a site of articulation rather than silence (Sboui 4-8). The poem performs the tension Kristeva identifies: the body expels what the symbolic cannot assimilate, yet poetry makes this expulsion speakable.

"Housewife" extends this dynamic from the body to the domestic interior. The poem transforms the house into a second skin, a metaphor that draws directly on the phenomenological accounts of embodiment discussed by Grosz, Young, and Ahmed. Grosz's claim that the body functions as an interface where cultural meanings become inscribed onto material surfaces illuminates how Sexton's house acquires organs and processes analogous to those of a living body (Grosz x-xii). Young's analysis of restricted bodily movement offers a framework for interpreting the housewife's kneeling posture, a gesture that reproduces the constrained orientations imposed on women's bodies (Young 27-30). Meanwhile, Ahmed's notion of orientation clarifies how the repetitive actions of cleaning and maintenance "line up" the woman's bodily orientation with the domestic interior, shaping her spatial world through habitual gestures (Ahmed 11-21).

Kristeva's monumental time provides the temporal logic that underlies this spatialization. Monumental time, associated with immobility, endurance, and maternal duration, appears in the poem's representation of cleaning as an endless labour that never culminates in completion (Kristeva 20-21). The housewife "washing herself down" enacts a temporality anchored in maintenance rather than progression, a temporal mode Catherine Waters also recognizes when she notes that Sexton's domestic imagery often binds women to repetitive cycles that determine their identity. The house, permanent and embodied, becomes a monument whose temporal logic is one of ongoing continuity, not change.

The relational dynamic between masculine and feminine subjectivities in "Housewife" introduces a further layer of temporal complexity. Men are "drawn back like Jonah; into their fleshy mothers" (Sexton, "Housewife"), a reversal of patriarchal spatial norms. This inversion can be interpreted through Kristeva's semiotic theory: the line stages a moment in which symbolic structures, masculine authority, and spatial mastery are disrupted by a pull toward the maternal interior, a semiotic movement that Oruç identifies as central to the destabilisation of patriarchal narrative coherence (Oruç 6). The domestic space no longer serves as the regulated site of women's labour but becomes a gravitational field that reorganises gendered spatial relations.

Both poems also articulate a form of generational time. In “Menstruation at Forty,” the imagined son “never growing old” occupies a suspended temporality that resonates with Kristeva’s notion of generational identity as rhythm rather than succession (Kristeva 22-23). Similarly, “A woman is her mother” compresses generational inheritance into a single declarative statement, positioning maternal identity not as something transmitted linearly but as something re-enacted cyclically (Sexton, “Housewife”). The statement’s emphatic finality underscores the force of repetition within the feminine line, an insight supported by feminist critics who emphasise the recursive patterns embedded in domestic and maternal roles.

French feminist theory deepens the interpretation of these temporalities. Cixous’s insistence that feminine writing emerges from the body enables a reading of Sexton’s rhythmic constructions as linguistic manifestations of lived corporeality (Cixous 875-82). Irigaray’s discussion of feminine multiplicity helps clarify the poems’ refusal of singular, unified identities (Irigaray 23-32). Instead of presenting womanhood through fixed categories, Sexton’s work reflects the fluidity and permeability that Irigaray associates with feminine subjectivity.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks reveal that Sexton’s poems operate at the juncture of bodily recurrence, spatial enclosure, and linguistic disruption. “Menstruation at Forty” and “Housewife” not only depict feminine experience but also produce it through temporal and symbolic structures that interrogate patriarchal norms. Sexton’s recursive rhythms, disruptive metaphors, and insistence on bodily detail enact what Kristeva describes as the semiotics’ pressure on the symbolic, a process that gives poetic language its revolutionary potential (Kristeva 30). Through these operations, the poems move beyond confession into a mode of writing that transforms feminine embodiment into a conceptual force, allowing menstrual and domestic rhythms to interrupt and reshape the temporal logic of patriarchal discourse.

Insights:

The analysis of “Menstruation at Forty” and “Housewife” demonstrates that Sexton’s treatment of menstruation and domestic labour produces temporal structures that align closely with Kristeva’s articulation of cyclical, monumental, and generational time. The poems do not merely reference feminine embodiment; they organise their images, rhythms, and metaphors through the temporal logic of recurrence, endurance, and inherited identity. This temporal organisation reveals that Sexton’s poetics anticipate forms of feminist theorisation that would emerge more explicitly only in later decades.

The first key finding concerns the operation of cyclical temporality within “Menstruation at Forty.” The poem’s refusal of linear metaphors, such as the womb as “a clock,” positions menstruation outside teleological time (Sexton, “Menstruation at Forty”). This aligns with Kristeva’s distinction between biological recurrence and historical linearity, suggesting that the poem articulates a temporal mode grounded in return rather than progression (Kristeva 17-18). Through repeated speculative gestures addressed to an imagined child, the poem enacts rhythmic movement characteristic of the semiotic, indicating that poetic form becomes the means through which cyclical time is experienced.

The second finding concerns abjection and semiotic disruption. Sexton’s handling of blood, particularly when framed through ceremonial imagery, exemplifies Kristeva’s account of abjection as a disturbance of bodily boundaries (Kristeva 1-6). The transformation of taboo bodily material into poetic image supports Sboui’s argument that Sexton’s work destabilises patriarchal speech through the visibility of the abject (Sboui 4-8). This suggests that Sexton’s poems do not merely depict the abject but allow abjection to reshape the symbolic order from within, demonstrating a linguistic process consistent with Kristeva’s semiotics.

The third finding stems from reading domestic space as embodied architecture in “Housewife.” The house’s attribution of organs and bodily processes supports Grosz’s theorisation of the body as an interface where cultural inscriptions materialise (Grosz x-xii). Sexton’s metaphors reveal that domestic space is not neutral but charged with the embodied histories and constraints described by feminist phenomenologists such as Young and Ahmed (Young 27-30; Ahmed 11-21). These frameworks clarify how the woman’s repetitive gestures in the poem accumulate into a spatial identity aligned with Kristeva’s monumental time, a temporality of endurance rather than advancement (Kristeva 20-21).

A fourth finding emerges through the interplay of gendered spatial relations. The depiction of men being “drawn back like Jonah; into their fleshy mothers” (Sexton, “Housewife”) inverts symbolic hierarchies and demonstrates the capacity of poetic imagery to unsettle patriarchal spatial norms. Oruç’s analysis of semiotic rupture helps explain how this poetic inversion destabilises the symbolic authority (Oruç 6). The finding suggests that Sexton’s poems stage gender not as a fixed identity but as a set of relational orientations shaped through cyclical returns.

A final finding concerns generational temporality. The statement “A woman is her mother” (Sexton, “Housewife”) exemplifies Kristeva’s notion of identity formed through rhythmic inheritance rather than genealogical succession (Kristeva 22-23). The link between menstrual recurrence in “Menstruation at Forty” and maternal continuity in “Housewife” produces a temporal field in which bodily experience and generational identity operate in tandem. Catherine Waters’s work on domestic inheritance supports this reading by demonstrating how domestic structures reproduce inherited patterns across time.

Together, these findings indicate that Sexton constructs a poetic idiom in which feminine temporality becomes thinkable as a linguistic and conceptual practice. The poems make visible how bodily rhythms and domestic labour act as structuring forces, not merely as content. Sexton’s attention to repetition, spatial compression, and abject material participates in what Kristeva identifies as the semiotics’ pressure on the symbolic (Kristeva 30). The study, therefore, finds that Sexton’s work anticipates key theoretical concerns in feminist scholarship, demonstrating that poetic language can articulate temporal and spatial orders that contest patriarchal frameworks.

Conclusion:

The readings of “Menstruation at Forty” and “Housewife” undertaken in this study demonstrate that Sexton’s poetry generates a sustained meditation on feminine temporality, one that converges with Kristeva’s articulation of cyclical, monumental, and generational time. Rather than positioning menstruation and domestic labour as incidental themes, Sexton structures her poetic language around these recurrent processes, revealing how the rhythms of the body and the routines of maintenance operate as temporal frameworks in their own right. The poems’ recursive metaphors, oscillating tonalities, and spatial compressions collectively enact the forms of temporal disruption that Kristeva identifies as central to the semiotics’ pressure on the symbolic (Kristeva 25-30). In this sense, Sexton’s poetics emerges not merely as a confessional expression but as an early articulation of conceptual possibilities that would later become foundational within feminist theory.

“Menstruation at Forty” situates menstrual bleeding as a temporal event that interrupts linear progression and reasserts the cyclical recurrence of embodied life, a pattern consistent with Kristeva’s distinction between biological rhythm and historical linearity (Kristeva 17-18). The poem’s movement between speculation and return produces a temporality grounded in reappearance rather than advancement. Similarly, “Housewife” renders domestic space as an embodied architecture whose labour unfolds within monumental time, a temporality characterised by endurance, repetition, and spatial saturation. The house’s corporealization, its ‘heart’ and ‘liver,’ enacts the fusion of bodily and domestic processes that Elizabeth Grosz describes as central to the body’s mediation between materiality and culture (Grosz x-xii). These linguistic constructions reveal how domestic labour functions as a temporal regime, shaping identity and orientation in ways that align with Ahmed’s account of habitual gestures structuring lived space (Ahmed 11-21).

The study further finds that Sexton’s incorporation of abject material, blood, decay, and bodily leakage, creates moments in which the semiotic emerges into visibility. Kristeva’s understanding of abjection as a disturbance of bodily boundaries provides a frame for interpreting the corsage of blood in “Menstruation at Forty” as a symbolic crisis transformed into a poetic image (Kristeva 1-6). This resonates with Sboui’s argument that Sexton’s writing exposes the instability of patriarchal discourse by making taboo corporeal processes linguistically present (Sboui 4-8). The poems manifest this instability not through explicit argument but through subtle dislocations in rhythm, metaphor, and spatial logic.

The findings collectively suggest that Sexton’s work anticipates later feminist inquiries by demonstrating how feminine embodiment organises temporality and language simultaneously. Her poems enact what

Kristeva identifies as the semiotics' transformative potential within poetic discourse (Kristeva 30). They show that the seemingly private domains of menstruation and housework are capable of generating conceptual structures that reveal the fragility of patriarchal temporal frameworks. This insight positions Sexton within a genealogy of writers whose work challenges inherited forms of meaning by foregrounding the temporal and spatial specificities of women's lived experience.

However, the study is shaped by a few limitations. It focuses only on two poems, which necessarily bracket other works of Sexton. The availability and scope of the theoretical materials consulted also constrain the analysis. While Kristeva's framework proves particularly generative, it represents only one strand within a broader field of feminist theorisation. Other models, such as Black feminist thought or queer temporalities, may reveal further dimensions of Sexton's engagement with embodiment and temporality. Additionally, although this study draws on phenomenological accounts of space and orientation, a more expansive spatial analysis could explore how Sexton's imagery intersects with wider cultural constructions of domesticity in mid-century America.

The scope for future research is therefore substantial. Extending the analysis to a wider corpus of Sexton's poetry could clarify how recurring patterns of abjection, domesticity, and cyclical time interact across her body of work. Comparative studies involving contemporaries such as Sylvia Plath or Adrienne Rich may also illuminate variations in how feminine temporality is articulated within confessional poetics. Furthermore, integrating queer or postcolonial theories of temporality may expand understanding of how Sexton's images participate in, resist, or reconfigure other temporalities beyond Kristeva's model.

Despite its limits, the study demonstrates that Sexton's poems constitute a significant contribution to feminist conceptions of time and linguistic disruption. By transforming menstrual recurrence, domestic endurance, and abject material into poetic structures, Sexton creates a language in which feminine temporality becomes thinkable and perceptible. Her work remains a compelling site for examining how the body's rhythms, domestic gestures, and inherited identities operate not merely as themes but as forces that shape the temporal and symbolic organisation of poetic discourse.

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