Themes in “Wanting to Die”

Anne Sexton's poem “Wanting To Die” is a highly subjective poem that explores the workings of her own thoughts and emotions in regards to suicide, but also endeavors to speak for all individuals who attempt suicide. As Sexton is a subjective poet, the speaker is Sexton and “Wanting to Die” is based heavily on events in her life. Its purpose is to give an explanation for the reasoning behind such suicidal inclinations, but also collectively groups suicides as a category of people somewhat separate from the rest of society in terms of their viewpoints, uses drug imagery, and explores the limbo awaiting these individuals.

The tone of “Wanting to Die” is largely conversational and familiar. The opening line states, “Since you ask” (1). This indicates that Sexton is answering a question about precisely why she has attempted to commit suicide or wants to die. As Sexton is a confessional poet, the tone is also familiar and comfortable, allowing the reader to be privy to information that is personal and deep. Despite the content of the poem, this is the tone that permeates the entire work. Even though the poem is about death, “Wanting to Die” is not pessimistic; indeed, it is largely explanatory and even optimistic at some points. One line that largely encompasses this potential optimism is, “Even then I have nothing against life” (4). Sexton presents this as a mere fact about herself, not something to be upset over. Therefore, the tone is a reflection of Sexton's subjective style, but also gives further insight into her intentions and emotions throughout the poem.

Another theme which is pervasive throughout “Wanting to Die” is how suicides are categorized into a group which is separate from the rest of society. The first instance of this is in
Stojavljevic 2

the line, “But suicides have a special language” (7). Sexton uses the term “suicides” and creates a label for a collection of people so that she can now describe their habits and thought processes. Perhaps more importantly, in this moment she is saying that suicides have a special language, which, since it is “special” sets them apart from the average person. She continues this imagery in the next two lines, which say, “Like carpenters they want to know which tools./ They never ask why build” (8-9). While the suicides are similar to some other people, it also reveals the mindset of the suicides; they are inclined toward wondering over the technique of killing themselves. Additionally, there may be some element of spirituality here. In Christian doctrine, Jesus Christ is the son of carpenter. By relating the suicides to a carpenter, it gives them some divine notion and destroys negative stigma associated with suicides. However, since, in Christianity, suicide is considered a sin and suicides are condemned to Hell, this idea of equating them to Jesus Christ is immensely blasphemous and upends Christian doctrine.

Furthermore, the term “special language” is important, in another way, as Sexton was a writer who had many friends who were also writers and had either committed suicide, had attempted suicide, or wrote about death and human behavior. One such friend was Sylvia Plath. She, in particular, is important to note, because “Wanting to Die” was written on February 3, 1964 while Plath had committed suicide approximately a year earlier on February 11, 1963. By referring to the use of tools, Sexton can also be referring to the writers who would be looking at techniques of their writing, instead of why they write, just as suicides, look at how to die, but not how to live.

Additionally, Sexton shows how the urge to commit suicide is one that is innate. She states that, “Still-born they don't always die/ but dazzled they can't forget a drug so sweet” (19-
20). As the suicides are “still-born” they are born into the world in a manner that is not fully alive, or, fundamentally, linked with death. Furthermore, a still-born is a child who has not successfully made the transition into the living world, while the suicides Sexton is referring to have not successfully made the transition into the afterlife. Also, there is the notion that, no matter what, the obsession with suicide and death is something that always returns and is inescapable to these individuals. It echoes what Sexton states in the first stanza, that “Then the almost unnameable lust returns” (3) or that no matter what is Sexton is doing, eventually the desire to die returns. Another statement which reiterates the concept that death is a part of these suicides is where Sexton says “Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say” (Sexton 22). Death is equated to a bone in this stanza, and a bone is a part of the human body, making it once again, something that the suicides are born with, something which they cannot remove from themselves. The bone is also described as being sad and bruised, which relates back to the concept of there being something flawed, or not quite perfect, within the suicides.

Sexton also paints an image of the suicides struggling against the impaired bodies they are trapped within. She composes nearly an entire stanza about this concept, saying, “I did not think of my body at needle point./ Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone./ Suicides have already betrayed the body” (19-21). By committing suicide, Sexton is not considering herself in pain, “at needle point.” Yet, despite this, she is putting emphasis on the physical death of the body by naming parts of it, such as the cornea and urine, which she says are both gone. The lines culminate in Sexton's statement that suicides have already betrayed the body. By trying to kill themselves and end their lives, they are at odds with the physical body, and therefore, have betrayed it by trying to leave it. This concept of the physical body being at odds
with the true goal of the suicide is reiterated when Sexton states, “and yet she [Death] wait for me, year after year,/ to so delicately undo an old wound,/ to empty my breath from its bad prison” (25-27). Death is helping Sexton to die by drawing her breath from her physical body, which is described as a “bad prison.” Therefore, the body is viewed as being the containing force, and a poor one at that, which, the suicides must overcome if they truly wish to die.

Throughout “Wanting to Die” there is a great deal imagery which relates to chemical or drug usage. In the fourth stanza, Sexton says, “Twice I have so simply declared myself,/ have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,/ have on his craft, his magic” (10-12). The first line in this stanza refers to the fact that Sexton has twice tried to commit suicide. The latter two lines may refer to how she attempted to commit suicide; however, the diction in these lines does contradict some of her other terminology in terms of death. Namely, she has not said that death was her enemy thus far. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, when Sexton personifies Death she regards her as a female that is freeing her from a prison. Therefore, the enemy is arguably not death, but perhaps drugs, or anti-psychotics, that Sexton is taking, which would be her enemy as they prevent her from achieving her desire. The next stanza reinforces the drug imagery. She says, “In this way, heavy, and thoughtful,/ warmer than oil or water,/ I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole” (13-15). These lines evoke a drugged sensation in that Sexton is made lethargic and “drooling.” Despite the contrast, Sexton also compares death to a drug. She says, “they can't forget a drug so sweet/ that even children would look on and smile./ To thrust all that life under your tongue” (20-22). Sexton alludes to the near-addiction that the suicides have with pursuing death, as they cannot forget it. However, she also mentions that this pursuit is not a negative, as it is considered “sweet.” In fact, she goes so far to say that even children, who are
arguably a source of innocence, would not be able to deny the pleasure that comes from attempting to kill one's self. The concept of thrusting life under the tongue reiterates the drug imagery by alluding to the fact that such a simple action can bring life to an end. Therefore, drugs in “Wanting to Die” are used to both thwart the want of the suicides, such as Sexton, but also reemphasizes the addiction to, or inability to stray away from, killing one's self.

In the last two stanzas, Sexton discusses a limbo for the suicides and some potential reasons for her own suicide. She recapitulates the concept of the suicides gathering, saying “Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,/ raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,/ leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss” (28-30). The suicides are able to congregate in this place which hangs between true death and life. However, Sexton also describes what they do there, which is to rage at the fruit and the pumped-up moon. Both are symbols of fullness and fruition, so the suicides, by raging at them, are continuing their rejection of life. Additionally, fruit and the moon may also be construed to be symbols of fertility. In the last line of this stanza, Sexton says how they leave the bread they mistook for a kiss. These images may allude to Sexton's own fears and concerns about being a mother and a housewife. As she was initially not earning any of the income for the family, she would be dependent on her husband for the bread, which was initially seen as an act of love, but perhaps one Sexton became disillusioned with. It is a sentiment which is repeated in the final line, which says, “and the love, whatever it was, an infection” (33). Love, once again, is also shown as being a prospective source of pain. Sexton also delves into what the suicides leave behind while attempting to commit suicide. She says they are “leaving the page of the book carelessly open,/ something unsaid, the phone off the hook” (31-32). These actions are all unfinished, in perpetual motion, so while these actions are
interrupted while they are in limbo, they are also connections to the living world. Therefore, Sexton explores the connections to death and life that these suicides have.

Sexton depicts the suicides in a manner which is unconventional in modern society. She shows them, not in a negative light, but as beings who are merely trying to achieve a goal. They have little choice in the matter; their desire to die is both addictive, permeating all aspects of their lives, but also something they are born with. While trying to explain the thoughts and motivations of the suicides, Sexton reveals many of her own personal thoughts and motivations, as she considered herself to be part of this group of suicides. However, such revelations do help to make her eventually successful suicide less tragic.
Works Cited