

**Constructing Madness:
Institutional and Social Role in Patients' View of the Self**

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Abstract

This paper examines Anne Sexton's confessional poetry from the mid-twentieth-century confessional movement focusing specifically on two poems from her 1960 collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, "You, Dr. Martin" and "Kind Sir: These Woods." With support from Michel Foucault's perspective on institutional power and control, the argumentative focus is that Sexton challenges traditional understandings of "madness" by presenting it not as a personal affliction, but as a socially defining label shaped and enforced by institutional structures that shape patients' identity and views of the self.

The paper explores how setting and tone shift between poems to empathize institutional control. In "You, Dr. Martin," the psychiatric ward is depicted as a rigid, highly structured environment that enforces conformity, erases individuality, and encourages patients to internalize institutional norms. In contrast, "Kind Sir: These Woods" presents a disorienting setting where authority is less visible but still influential, contributing to the speaker's unstable sense of self. Despite their differences, both settings reveal how environments regulate behavior and perception, reinforcing definitions of sanity and madness.

The paper also analyzes Sexton's shifting tone, from restrained and observational in the institutional setting to pleading in the woods. Additionally, it examines how institutional labeling reduces individuals to diagnoses. This undermines the personal identity and autonomy of patients. Supporting scholarly research on institutionalization reinforces this idea and suggests how such environments negatively impact self-concept and self-definition due to the views of authority figures and structure of institutional life.

Ultimately, this study argues that Sexton's poetry critiques the power of psychiatric institutions to define and control individuals. By exposing the tension between institutional authority and personal experience, Sexton reclaims herself through poetic expression urging audiences to reconsider who has the authority to define sanity and the consequences of that power on individuals' identity.