Courage Study Guide

Courage by Anne Sexton

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Courage" appears in Anne Sexton's eighth and last collection of original poems, *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* published by Houghton Mifflin, in 1975, a year after her suicide. It is the seventh poem in the collection, most of which were initially written to be a part of her 1974 collection, *The Death Notebooks* . The religious tone of the *Rowing* poems, however, dictated another book. Like many of the poems in the collection, "Courage" universalizes the speaker's experience, the "you" in the poem standing for everyone. Sexton marches the reader through the stages of life, detailing in a series of symbolic metaphors the courageous ways that human beings respond to adversity. In four free verse stanzas of crisp, fresh, sometimes surreal images, Sexton tells the story of a human being's life from childhood to old age, showing the resilience of the human spirit and underscoring human beings' power to endure even the most difficult circumstances.

Sexton wrote many of the poems in the collection when her mental health was deteriorating and her addiction to alcohol and tranquilizers was worsening. The forms of courage described in the poem were as much a part of Sexton's own life as they are symbolic of others'. "Courage" addresses such typical Sexton subjects as the death wish, loneliness, a search for meaning, and the body in pain. One of the last acts Sexton performed before killing herself was proofreading the galleys for *The Awful Rowing Toward God* with her friend, poet Maxine Kumin.

Author Biography

Anne Gray Harvey was born in 1928 in Weston, Massachusetts, the third of three daughters. Her father, Ralph Churchill Harvey, was a businessman and her mother, Mary Gray Staples, a socialite. Sexton conformed to the stereotype of a youngest child, often acting out and rebelling against her parents to get attention. Her frenetic activity and craving for attention continued through her high school years, which were otherwise unremarkable. Like many young women of her social class during mid-century, Sexton went to finishing school instead of college, and in 1948, she married Alfred Muller Sexton II, nicknamed "Kayo."

Sexton's engagement with poetry came only after she had given birth to her two children: Linda Gray Sexton in 1953 and Joyce Ladd Sexton in 1955. After the birth of her second child, Sexton was diagnosed with post-partum depression and prescribed medication. Over the next few years, she went in and out of hospitals and received regular psychiatric treatment. With the encouragement of her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne, Sexton began writing poetry, and in 1957, she enrolled in a poetry workshop with Beat writer John Clellon Holmes. During the next few years, she took part in workshops led by poets Robert Lowell and W. D. Snodgrass and met many of the writers who would help shape her career, including George Starbuck and Maxine Kumin. It was in Lowell's workshop that Sexton befriended poet Sylvia Plath. After her publication of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), a collection of poems detailing her mental illness, Sexton developed a reputation as a confessional poet with a raw, fearless, often funny voice. Along with Plath, John Berryman, and Lowell, confessional poets who wrote during the 1950s and 1960s, Sexton made art out of mental and emotional anguish. Her poem "Courage," included in her last collection of poetry, *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* provides a glimpse into the pain□and the joy□of Sexton's struggles.

In the fifteen or so years that she wrote, Sexton published ten collections of poetry, a play, essays, and short stories. Her most popular collections include *All My Pretty Ones* (1963), *Live or Die* (1966), *Transformations* (1971), and *The Death Notebooks* (1974). She was also one of the most sought performers of her poetry on the college reading circuit, known for her dramatic presentation. For a short time, she even had her own rock group named Anne Sexton and Her Kind. A heavily decorated poet, Sexton won a Pulitzer Prize, received the Shelley Memorial Award, and was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She took her own life on October 4, 1974.

Poem Text

It is in the small things we see it.
The child's first step,
as awesome as an earthquake.
The first time you rode a bike,
wallowing up the sidewalk.
The first spanking when your heart
went on a journey all alone.
When they called you a crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien,
you drank their acid
and concealed it.
Later,
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner,
you did it with only a hat to
cover your heart.
You did not fondle the weakness inside you
though it was there.
Your courage was a small coal
that you kept swallowing.
If your buddy saved you
and died himself in so doing,
then his courage was not courage,
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.
Later,
if you have endured a great despair,
then you did it alone,
getting a transfusion from the fire,
picking the scabs off your heart,
then wringing it out like a sock.
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,
you gave it a back rub
and then you covered it with a blanket
and after it had slept a while
it woke to the wings of the roses
and was transformed.
Later,
when you face old age and its natural conclusion
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,
those you love will live in a fever of love,
and you'll bargain with the calendar

and at the last moment
45 when death opens the back door
you'll put on your carpet slippers
and stride out.

Plot Summary

First Stanza

Sexton uses the title "Courage" as a theme to be explained. The "it" in the first stanza is courage, and the items listed after "it" are examples of courage. Sexton likens a small thing such as a "child's first step" to a large thing, an earthquake, meaning that, both literally and metaphorically, taking a first step is a momentous occasion. In all of these examples, Sexton attempts to show the courageous aspect of everyday, often mundane, events. Being a confessional poet, Sexton is surely speaking to another part of herself; however, these events are universal as well, a point underscored by her use of the second person "we" and "you." Also, most of these examples are taken from childhood, a time of exploration and firsts. It is also human beings' most vulnerable time. This vulnerability often leads to suffering, something that Sexton points out as frequently repressed. This is what is meant by the lines "you drank their acid / and concealed it." The "they" are those who hurt others, the bullies and abusers of the world.

Second Stanza

The second stanza begins with the one-word line, "Later," signaling the time after childhood, late adolescence or early adulthood. The conditional "if" speaks to those who might have fought in the Vietnam War ("the death of bombs and bullets"). As in the first stanza, Sexton uses a series of metaphors to develop the ways in which human beings are courageous at different times in their lives. Unlike the first stanza, which speaks to both men and women, this stanza seems primarily to address men (though it is important to note that women also fought in the Vietnam War). Lines 3-5 underline the idea of modesty, as the soldier does not face death with zeal and pride ("a banner") but with humility, signified by the hat-covered heart. Sexton highlights the idea of repression again, this time comparing courage to "a small coal / you kept swallowing." The last two lines show how courage can also be a form of love, which, like "shaving soap," is present every day.

Third Stanza

In this stanza, Sexton uses a series of images to describe the healing process after one has been emotionally hurt. The "fire" is the pain itself, the "coal" and "acid" swallowed in the first two stanzas, from which the speaker recovers by purging herself of pain through a symbolic transfusion of blood: "picking the scabs off your heart, / then wringing it out like a sock." The process of comforting oneself and letting time heal the pain is spelled out in how the speaker takes care of her sorrow: by powdering it, giving it a backrub, and letting it sleep. All of these actions suggest ways in which a baby is pampered and cared for. By extension, the speaker suggests that the self must also be shown the same kind of care and attention. The last image in the stanza alludes to the

story of the phoenix, a mythical bird that lives 500 years, burns itself to ashes on a pyre, and rises from the ashes to live another 500 years. This image shows how human beings can also rise from the "ashes" of their own despair and pain if they are patient and take care of themselves.

Fourth Stanza

In the final stanza, Sexton describes the courage of people in old age and the ways in which they endure by finding hope in events such as spring, itself symbolic of renewal. The stanza begins with a euphemism, when the speaker describes death as the "natural conclusion" to old age. Euphemisms are understatements, more delicate ways of saying something difficult or offensive. The seemingly mundane image of "carpet slippers" underscores the heroic nature of the "everyman" (or woman), who goes through life largely unacknowledged and uncelebrated, yet who shows courage simply by enduring and continuing to hope. The last image is as much Sexton's own fantasy as it is a poetic representation of the common person. Sexton was well known for her death wish, and, in these lines, she visualizes her own death, a common feature of much of her poetry.

Themes

Change and Transformation

"Courage" argues the idea that it is only through fortitude and courage that human beings are able to survive and flourish. Such a notion effectively dismisses the notion that luck, genes, or destiny play the major role in determining the shape of a person's life. Sexton highlights this idea in the first stanza when her speaker describes childhood as a time of loneliness and despair, when people are ostracized from family and friends because of the way they look or behave. Making it through childhood, the speaker suggests, requires that response to pain be kept in, not expressed. The speaker symbolically describes this process in the last two lines of the first stanza: "You drank their acid / and concealed it" and in the second stanza in the lines, "your courage was a small coal / that you kept swallowing." Sexton's poem repeatedly makes the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's point that "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger." In each stanza, she describes a kind of adversity and then shows how individuals deal with that adversity by integrating it into themselves. By becoming stronger, human beings can withstand pain, both physical and emotional, and live out their lives with grace and dignity. In the third stanza, in which Sexton again highlights the transformative power of suffering, she outlines the process through which people are changed by overcoming obstacles. This power is embodied in images suggested by words such as "transfusions," "wings," "spring," and "swords."

Individual and Society

Broadly conceived and applied to literature, romanticism emphasizes the individual's experience, with attention paid to expression of subjective emotion and feeling. Most confessional poetry, by its very nature, is romantic, and Sexton's poems are no different. "Courage" emphasizes the individual's journey through life, charting the self's tribulations and triumphs, while largely ignoring the relationship of the individual to society or, when the poem does allude to society, it does so in generalized and symbolic terms, as in her characterization of war in the second stanza. The "you" she addresses in the poem is at once another part of herself, and the reader. She universalizes her own feelings, making her experience representative of the human condition. Apart from using the second person "you" to mark this universalizing, the speaker uses terms such as "kinsman" in the third stanza to appeal to fellow sufferers, heroes, and heroines. The division of the poem into phases of life also emphasizes individual, as opposed to social, experience.

Style

"Courage" is comprised largely of a list of metaphors and symbolic metaphors. Symbols are images or actions that can stand for something else, often an idea or a related set of ideas. Metaphors are figures of speech that make associations and find similarities between two dissimilar things. Symbolic metaphors make associations between dissimilar things as well, but they do it in such a way that the vehicle of the metaphor represents something symbolically. The vehicle of a metaphor is that part that stands for something else. For example, in the last stanza, Sexton writes: "each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen." A sword is the image that represents spring. But a sword is also something associated with war, violence, and death□ideas not usually connected to spring. In this way the sword represents more than just spring; it represents a range of emotions and ideas.

Historical Context

Sexton believed that poems came from the unconscious and often meant more than the person writing them was aware of. Her poetry is full of imagery and details, not necessarily linked to a particular time or place but symbolic of the writer's own desires. "Courage" is typical of this kind of Sexton poem. In 1973, when this poem was written, Sexton's mental health was deteriorating, and she was in and out of the hospital for suicide attempts. Her family and friends speculated that she killed herself (in 1974) largely because she feared spending the rest of her life in psychiatric institutions and hospitals like her great-aunt Nana. The 1970s was also the time when the dissolution of America's psychiatric institutions was gathering steam, and the mentally ill were released into the community, often without a sufficient support system in place. Many of these people developed drug and alcohol problems, fueled by their illnesses. Combined with a housing shortage in many of America's cities, the breakdown of institutions contributed to the exponential increase in homelessness in the 1970s.

Though Sexton took Thorazine, tranquilizers, and other prescribed drugs during the latter part of her life, critics and biographers often link her depression to societal oppression of women in general and the emotional battles that women fought for recognition and selfhood in a patriarchal society. Although Sexton was often reluctant to call herself a feminist, many women nonetheless saw her as a role model and an icon for the women's movement during the 1960s and 1970s. It was in 1966 that Betty Friedan, author of the 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique,* helped found the National Organization for Women (NOW), which fought for equal rights for women in the marketplace and in the home. In 1971, the National Women's Political Caucus was formed, and firebrand congressional representatives such as Shirley Chisolm and Bella Abzug helped to give women a greater say in national conventions. The percentage of female delegates in these conventions jumped from 10 percent in 1968 to 40 percent in 1972; in addition, from 1969 to 1981, the number of female state legislators tripled. It was also in the year 1972 that Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment.

However, the amendment failed to pass in the required number of states and failed to win ratification in 1982. Women gained a major victory in 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that state law prohibiting abortion during the first three months of pregnancy was unconstitutional.

The early 1970s saw the women's movement gain a foothold in academia as well, with the establishment of women's studies programs in various universities and courses devoted to women's issues in many humanities and social sciences departments. Poetry written by women became a vehicle through which women could express their discontent and argue for change. Anthologies of women's poetry such as the influential

Critical Overview

In the last three weeks of January 1973, Sexton wrote all of the poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* including "Courage." Though many of her friends, including poet James Wright, made unfavorable comments about the manuscript as a whole, Sexton submitted it anyway, and it was accepted for publication. The collection received mostly negative reviews. Reviewing the book for *Modern Poetry Studies,* Steven Gould Axelrod writes, "These poems resemble episodes of consciousness rather than completed, unified objects."

Axelrod, like many others, argued that the poems "should be seen as psychological jottings and prophetic notes." Sexton's close friend, poet Maxine Kumin, points out that the poems were written in an almost manic phase of Sexton's life and agrees with Axelrod, noting, "There is no psychic distance between the poet and the poem." Critic Kathleen Nichols makes no judgment as to the aesthetic value of the poems; rather, she considers them as evidence of Sexton's "poetic descent into the unconscious." Nichols claims that "What she imaginatively attains at the end of the volume is a wish-fulfilling reunion with her lost soul or 'divine' father on a sigh-shaped island floating in and surrounded by the archetypal amniotic fluid of her preconscious, maternal origins." Caroline King Barnard Hall, in her book-length study of Sexton, notes that Sexton admitted in her letters that the poems in the collection are "raw" and "unworked."

Hall notes, "Creation of a dramatic situation by which to realize theme is another strength of many of Sexton's best poems." However, Hall concedes that "Such strengths are largely absent from *The Awful Rowing Toward God* ."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Semansky has published widely in the field of twentieth-century poetry and culture. In the following essay, he considers the role "Courage" plays in the mythology of Anne Sexton's life.

Coming as it does in the middle of Sexton's collection *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* "Courage" is a fantasy of Sexton's own life and her future death. As such, it is part of the poet's personal mythology of self, the way in which she would have others think of her. For many confessional poets, such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, the stories they tell about themselves become, in effect, the stories they come to believe. They construct personal mythologies of self, mining their own mental anguish for material. The psychoanalysis that these poets participated in helped them both to unearth and articulate many of their poetic themes. Hence, it is almost impossible to write about confessional poets' poetry without also discussing their lives, since they are inextricably entwined.

On the surface, "Courage" sets out to tell the story of a representative human being's life. In so doing, Sexton also attempts to tell the story of her own life, though it may be argued that her desires and gifts are anything but representative. Comparing the phases of life she symbolically describes□childhood, adolescence/early adulthood, middle age, and old age□with the phases of her own life, however, doesn't necessarily help to clarify the extent to which this poem is autobiographical, for Sexton was a complicated person. Sexton biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook writes about Sexton's relationship to the past: "One thing that became clear to her, since she spent so much time dwelling on it, was that the past exists only in versions, which differ according to our motives at the moment of recall." The version of the life described in "Courage," then, is an idealized version in which the individual is at once a martyr to and savior of herself.

In the opening stanza, Sexton describes childhood as a place of firsts, when the child realizes her aloneness in the world. Though she presents the individual as a risk taker, the real emphasis is on the individual as a victim, someone that others pick on and ostracize. This victimization becomes internalized, figuratively described in the "acid" she drinks, and is carried with the individual throughout her life. Sexton develops the sense of victimization in the second stanza, as the individual courageously faces war. The metaphor becomes complicated midway through the stanza, however, when the speaker says:

your courage was a small coal
that you kept swallowing.
If your buddy saved you
and died himself in so doing,
then his courage was not courage,
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Swallowing courage suggests resisting it, giving in to one's own fears. The sense of shame in doing this is underscored by the individual's characterizing his friend's sacrifice as an act of love, rather than courage. Explaining the world to themselves is how human beings survive. Sexton suggests that sometimes it is important to call things by different names for the sake of emotional and psychic survival. The image of "shaving soap" highlights the regularity with which this occurs.

The third stanza again begins with a statement about the individual's isolation, and readers can infer that a transfusion is needed because the individual is emotionally, spiritually exhausted. What is the fire, though? It is the resentment, bitterness, *and* courage that the individual has swallowed in the first two stanzas. Up until now, Sexton has characterized someone who has been victimized over and over but has done nothing about it. All of the pain has been endured alone. But in this stanza, representative of adulthood, the speaker has come to a crossroads. Her wounds have healed, and she is now "picking the scabs" from her heart. At age twenty-nine, after two years of psychotherapy and hospitalizations for depression, Sexton began writing poetry as a way of dealing with her demons.

It's hard not to think of her life in this stanza, for poetry became a means by which she could indulge herself. Her transformation from a suburban housewife and mother of two to a nationally recognized and lauded poet came quickly. But this transformation didn't relieve Sexton of the pain and the sense of isolation; it merely gave her a way to express it. This expression, in turn, led to a great deal of attention, most of which Sexton craved and needed.

The last stanza is a variation on a theme that recurs throughout Sexton's work: the obsession with death. This representation of death is as part of the natural life cycle, a kind of quiet suburban death symbolized by the "carpet slippers." There's no raging against death, no spectacular violence, no dramatic suicide. Rather, it's an ordinary death, an image of death from the popular imagination. This everyday death can be seen as symbolic of the truth that Sexton sought in her poems. As critic Caroline King Barnard Hall and others note, Sexton threads the theme of death and rebirth throughout her poems. She does this as well in "Courage." She is born, suffers, is beaten down, is reborn, and dies again. This is not only Sexton's story but also the story of all human beings, of all life forms. In this sense, the poem is not confessional, as it contains no explicit details of the writer's own life but merely its outline. Looking outside herself for truth, then, Sexton here searches for what she has in common with others rather than for what sets her apart.

Sexton's poem is not only a symbolic version of the human journey but it is also the representative poem of *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* which tells the story of an individual's search for God and redemption. The two poems that bookend "Courage" are "The Earth Falls Down" and "Riding the Elevator into the Sky." The former is comprised of a litany of people, ideas, and things onto which the speaker attempts to cast blame for "conditions." At one point, the speaker asks, "Blame it on God perhaps?" then answers, "No, I'll blame it on Man, / for Man is God / and man is eating the earth up." This secular idea of god is also apparent in "Riding the Elevator into the Sky," a death

fantasy ending with the speaker riding an elevator thousands of floors up, out of herself, to find a key "that opens something." Readers aren't told what the something is, and, indeed, Sexton herself didn't know. Her hunger for God and for death had merged. The story of Sexton's life by the time she wrote the poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* had become so entwined with her public persona that it was difficult for her to distinguish the difference. Her redemption, finally, wasn't in some god or death that she imagined existed outside of herself but in the very act of writing and rewriting her story. When she finally exhausted that story, she exhausted her will to live. She never got to battle against time and have the small ordinary death of old age that she described. Rather, she battled the very will to live and finally succumbed to a drive that haunted her a good part of her life, committing suicide at age forty-six. Whether this final act was one of courage or not is left for her readers to decide.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Courage," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins is a writer and poet who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System. She is the author of The Man Who Went Out for Cigarettes, *a chapbook of poems, and has published poems, essays, and stories in many journals, magazines, and anthologies. In this essay, Blevins argues that "Courage" "suffers from a number of significant flaws."*

"Courage" is among the thirty-nine poems in the last book Anne Sexton wrote, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* . According to Diane Middlebrook's interesting and controversial biography of Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Biography,* Sexton wrote the poems in this collection in less than a month. Middlebrook suggests that Sexton "knew the work was still fairly raw" after she finished it. She showed the manuscript to Maxine Kumin, George Starbuck, James Wright, and other friends and poets whose opinions she valued. Wright (quoted in Middlebrook) reportedly responded to Sexton's book by saying, "I have no intention of excusing your bad verse and your bad prose. . . . There are some good poems here that I think are fine. There are some that I think are junk. The choice between them is yours." Yet Kumin argues in favor of many of the poems Wright had found less than appealing, as have other critics. William Shurr, writing in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal,* strives valiantly to praise *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* suggesting that it is a book of "artistic vision and extraordinary beauty." Shurr, however, does not use "Courage" as an example of this vision and beauty. Perhaps he has good cause to comment that "like many of Sexton's poems in *The Awful Rowing,* 'Courage' suffers from a number of significant flaws."

Like other poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God,* "Courage" is addressed to a specific reader, someone Sexton calls her "kinsman." If it were not for the references to "bombs and bullets" in the poem's second stanza, it might be possible to assume Sexton is addressing herself in "Courage"□telling herself in poetic terms what courage is in order to prepare herself (and her audience) for that final "stride out" into suicidal death. The war references, however, complicate this reading. It appears, instead, that Sexton is addressing a male reader in "Courage." In some poems, the epistolary stance can be very moving□readers can experience the thrill of a private exchange, as is the case with Shakespeare's more moving sonnets. In "Courage," by contrast, there's too little information about the relationship between the speaker and the person she's addressing. Sexton has undercut her opportunity to give her readers the main pleasure of the point of view of direct address by being too mysterious about the affiliation between the poem's "I" and its "you."

"Courage" is organized chronologically, from "the child's first step" to "old age and its natural conclusion." The first stanza states matter-of-factly that we see the virtue of courage in "the small things"□in a "child's first step" or in "the first time you rode a bike." The poem turns in its sixth line from these picturesque images: we learn that courage might also be seen "in the first spanking when your heart / went on a journey all alone." The first stanza's last five lines implicate a child's caregivers or peers more directly, since they suggest that courage during this stage of life might be made from being

called "crybaby / or poor or fatty or crazy." In other words, the sense of "despair" that is everywhere in Anne Sexton's poems begins to emerge in this section of the poem: the "you" of the poem must become an "alien"; he or she must "[drink] acid and [conceal] it."

The poem's second stanza moves to a war scene, with "bombs and bullets." Here, the unspecified "you" is reminded that he "faced death . . . with only a hat to / cover [his] heart." This makes the "you" of the poem very vulnerable, as does the beautiful line about "Courage" being "a small coal / that you kept swallowing." Yet it would probably be more moving if the *speaker* of the poem were the person who was made vulnerable—if the speaker of "Courage" were the person who "kept swallowing . . . a small coal," the poem might inspire more empathy. It's also worth noting that Sexton mentions love in this part of the poem, which she says is not courage but "simple as shaving soap." While it's interesting to note that Sexton makes a distinction between love and courage, the idea doesn't seem to serve the poem in any major way; it operates like a parenthetical observation. The poem's third stanza is the most grotesque in Sexton's poem: here the unspecified person Sexton is addressing is told he has "[picked] scabs off [his] heart." Despite the ungainly image (which fails, because of its grotesque nature, to inspire empathy for the poem's "characters"), this line marks a shift from the poem's first two stanzas, since it suggests that courage comes from "[enduring] a great despair . . . alone," or from revealing the "acid" that was concealed in the poem's first stanza, turning it into "sorrow" and "wringing it out like a sock." These odd and illogical images point to Sexton's desire to transform her own "sorrow" into something more positive, as the rose image at the end of the stanza suggests. This "transformation" is death, as the poem's final stanza tells us.

The poem's final stanza moves to "old age" but repeats the idea that "courage will still be shown in little ways," as it was in the poem's first stanza. In this stanza, "each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen . . . those you love will live in a fever of love," and "when death opens the back door / you'll put on your carpet slippers / and stride out." This last gesture offers the poem's only surprise: if readers had thought previously that the courage of the "concealed acid" that turned into the courage of the "scabs [on the] heart" and then "transformed" into some untold other thing would save the "you" of the poem from death, they were mistaken.

Although the narrative structure just described may give the poem its accessibility by allowing the reader to follow Sexton's associations from first to last line, its risk is the flatness that chronological order sometimes produces. Because Sexton can rely on actual time to organize the poem, she need not bother with inventing her own methods of sequence or movement. The first lines of stanzas two, three, and four, each of which begins with the word "Later," reinforce the poem's structural flaws. The repeated use of the abstract term "later" does help Sexton leapfrog from segment into segment or stanza into stanza, but the lines themselves are uninteresting. They are utilitarian; Sexton is borrowing built-in structures rather than inventing them.

In writing workshops, teachers advise students to show rather than to tell in an effort to urge apprentice writers toward images, or mostly metaphorical word-combinations, that make usually visual but sometimes auditory and tactile sensual (and therefore

emotional) sense. Sexton's topic in "Courage," is, of course, the *idea* of courage. Yet the poem is oddly unquestioning; "Courage" is very certain of itself. Sexton uses many images in this poem, as we shall see, but her overriding stance in "Courage" is an expository one. That is, she is not *showing* the reader what courage is metaphorically or by the use of image; rather she is *telling* the reader what courage is and using similes as examples. In this poem, Sexton is not so much wondering what courage is but is *telling* us what, in her opinion, courage is. Sexton's uncertainty regarding the answer to this philosophical question also undermines the poem's ability to move beyond itself, to transform everyday experience into art.

Sexton's indiscriminate use of simile also undermines the poem's power. The poem's last few lines suggest in the poem's most beautiful moment that "when death opens the back door / you'll put on your carpet slippers / and stride out." Sexton's view of death in these lines is everywhere in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* and is one of the book's few virtues. The accomplishment of these last lines has to do with the power of the final image; it is both unique and ironic. The comfort in "carpet slippers" destabilizes our more common vision of death, as does the power and strength in the phrase "stride out." Here and elsewhere in Sexton's final book is a statement about the beauty and power of death, and that is unusual enough to be interesting. In the image that ends "Courage," Sexton personifies death by suggesting it will "open the back door" (like a kind lover or friend). Then the person with courage will, Sexton suggests, go into that happy sleep, wearing "carpet slippers."

Yet other images and similes in the poem do not live up to the power and strength of this last image. Sexton says that a "child's first step" is "as awesome as an earthquake." This kind of statement fails because it's too obvious to be anything but common. Or perhaps the image fails because there is not much of a corollary between a child's first step and an earthquake. Sexton also says in "Courage" that if the person she's addressing will "powder" his or her "sorrow," "[give] it a back rub," and "[cover] it with a blanket," it□the sorrow□will "[wake] to the wings of the roses." Aside from the fact that roses don't have wings□not even imaginary or mythical ones□this image fails because it is shockingly sentimental□it's almost indistinguishable from a Hallmark card. The same might be said for "fever of love"; although the "e" sounds in this phrase are sonically pleasing, the image is ultimately cliché.

According to Sexton's biographer Diane Middlebrook, "[Maxine] Kumin remembered being worried about how agitated Sexton seemed [while she was working on the poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*] . . . [H]er friend's manic energy reminded her uncomfortably of the stories told about Sylvia Plath writing *Ariel* at white heat." Sexton killed herself the same day that she and Kumin met for lunch to correct the galleys of the book, so it seems Kumin was rightly concerned. Though Anne Sexton's work illuminates some of the connections between mental illness and art and is for this reason alone worth investigating, some of it fails quite miserably. Although Sexton's mental illness helped her produce many stunning and moving poems, the poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* are not as successful as some of her earlier poems, perhaps because she had already begun to move away from the hard labor of revising poems

into the new labor of "[striding] out" toward death. Imagine what she could have done had she chosen to live instead.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "Courage," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Mowery has a Ph.D. in literature and composition and has written extensively for the Gale Group. In the following essay, he considers the ironic twists that result when courage fragments into false heroism and bitterness in Anne Sexton's poem.

In an article for the *New Leader,* Pearl K. Bell said that Anne Sexton's collection " *The Awful Rowing Toward God* is sad reading, . . . because the poems are haunted by the self-destruction that was to be their terrible climax." In the first poem, "Rowing," she embarks on a voyage toward God that takes the reader through many disappointing and unsatisfying attempts to find Him. Another of these poems, "Courage," sets out a plan to examine courageous behavior in the face of unpleasantness. However, this poem takes the reader on a journey into a more unflattering aspect of courage: bluff, show, and resignation. It is not the heroic courage of bravery confronting adversity. Indeed, "Courage" is a sad little poem. Its sadness comes from the internal conflict of someone ("you") summoning courage in an attempt to confront a variety of issues at various stages of life. But the persona in the poem keeps coming up short. As a result, the courage in the poem fragments into false heroism and bitterness. The speaker in the poem, addressing "you," describes these two outcomes. As a result, the poem writhes with an irony coming from the contrast between them.

Images of heroism are scattered throughout the verse from the images of recent wars, "bombs and bullets," to the more ancient image of the sword in the last stanza. These images are caught up in a set of expectations in which boys were not allowed to cry, men went off to war to save a nation, husbands were taught to "suck it up and tough it out" in the face of marital difficulties, and even the specter of impending death was greeted with little more emotional investment than to put on one's slippers and trundle off into the abyss.

The surface images give off an air of familiarity, a feeling with which most people can identify from personal experiences. As Michael Lally claims, this is a poem "full of common things." But this is deceiving, because those familiar images hide something less noble: a willingness to hide from courageous behavior. In the poem, the speaker tries to invoke a strength of will in the "you." But by the end of each stanza, that will is subsumed by an attitude of resignation. The inevitable acquiescence results in a loss of self.

Joyce Carol Oates said that, in the search for a kind of self-immortality, Sexton had resigned herself to the idea that it could not be reached by "any remedy short of death." Sexton comments on this contradiction in many of her poems. In "The Poet of Ignorance," she says that she is trapped by her "human form. / That being the case / I would like to call attention to my problem." She suggests, although she does not say, that removing or being removed from that form is the answer. Here is the contradiction of trying to find a self-expression that can only be realized after death. She writes, "The place I live in / is a kind of maze / and I keep seeking / the exit or the home." These

lines from the third poem of the volume, "The Children," are even more intense because that poem was published posthumously, one year after Sexton's suicide in 1974.

In "Courage," Sexton presents a similar contradiction. The efforts to maintain the self by drinking the acid of personal attacks, by transforming despair through "a back rub," or by sharpening the sword each spring are overwhelmed, and the self is lost in the attempt to be what others want "you" to be. Finally, when further attempts at courage are given up, "you'll put on your carpet slippers and stride out." This is not a courageous entrance through death's back door but rather resignation. Rather than being in charge of the self, "old age and *its* natural conclusion [italics added]" are in command and have made the decision for "you." Personal courage is given up through tacit compliance with outside decisions. In the poem "For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open" (1974), she closes with these lines: "But when it comes to my death let it be slow, / let it be pantomime, the last peep show, / so that I may squat at the edge trying on my black necessary trousseau." This is in direct contrast with the persona in "Courage," who strides out quickly at the request of "old age."

The cycle of life, whether biological (birth, life, death) or temporal (hours, days, months), is a familiar thematic device many authors have used to tie their works together. Thoreau uses the circular nature of the seasonal changes to shape his *Walden* . In Sexton's volume, the first poem describes her rowing toward God as the symbolic searching for some theological purpose to life. The last poem closes with the mooring of the boat on the Island (God), the symbolic discovery of the God for whom she has been looking. These two poems complete the circle of the entire volume.

Sexton also uses the calendar as a unifying device. In her poem "Sermon of the Twelve Acknowledgements," she uses the months of the year to shape the poem. In "Courage," the human lifespan is the device that gives the poem its overall form. The child of the first stanza and the old person shuffling off through the back door wearing "carpet slippers" in the last are images that frame the poem. The reader is pulled through the poem and through the human life cycle by the repeated word "Later."

The cyclic nature of life's experiences is shown from "the child's first step" to the final striding out, in the "making into an alien" to the transformation, and in the eager anticipation of the child to the resigned capitulation of the old one at the end. The cycle of happiness returning to bitterness and back again in each stanza, the cyclic shifts of weakness in the face of the fury of war to the hidden strength of concealing the acid of the dehumanizing taunts of would-be friends create the irony that girds this poem. To these disappointments brought on by the loss of the self, add "the cruelty of life and the cruelty of people," as Robert Mazzocco noted in Sexton's poetry, and the easy resignation to the will of others is understandable. At the end of the poem, even the act of dying is cruel because there is no option, no choice for the individual, who acquiesces and merely steps through the open door.

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath both have written that there ought to be a choice. In her memoir of Plath, Sexton said (reprinted in Oates's article "On the Awful Rowing Toward God"), "We talked death, and this was life for us." For both poets, suicide was not a

desperate last solution but a deliberate choice that was fed by a more heroic courage than that which is found in this poem. Readers may see that choice as a result of the loss of an individual's will to live. But for Sexton and Plath, it is a deliberate act of seeking God. In the last poem of the volume, she says, "I'm mooring my rowboat / at the dock of the island called God. / . . . and there are many boats moored / at many different docks. . . . I empty myself from my wooden boat / and onto the flesh of The Island." With these lines, she affirms her belief that it is her choice to row her boat to the Island (God); it is her choice to climb out of the boat; it is her choice to go to God when she wants. In "Courage," the "you" does not actively make the choice. That choice has been made for "you." It is this struggle that tormented Sexton for much of her life and which found expression in her poetry, especially her last volumes.

In seeking the courage to take full control of life, she rejects the attempts of some to define others as a "crybaby or poor or fatty or crazy" or to turn "you into an alien." These cruel and dehumanizing attacks are often used by oppressors to control their subjects. The most egregious example of this is the manner by which the Nazis of the 1930s and 1940s turned the whole of European Jewry into aliens, people who were less than human. If one's victim is believed to be less than human, then there is no need for remorse. Sexton illustrates this remorselessness in her poem "After Auschwitz" when she writes, "And death [a Nazi] looks on with a casual eye / and picks at the dirt under his fingernail." In that poem, the oppressor is unmoved by the death of a baby he has just killed. One might expect a poem entitled "Courage" to deal with one of the lofty concepts that ennoble and define human character. Here, however, this concept is used to hide the bitterness of the individual's experiences and tendencies towards self-destruction,

as noted by Pearl K. Bell. Sexton has demonstrated how hard it is to maintain one's individuality and self-confidence in the face of life's difficulties. It is the struggle to find a resolution to this contradiction that haunted Sexton throughout her life, which found a voice in her poetry. The result is this bitterly ironic and sad poem.

Source: Carl Mowery, Critical Essay on "Courage," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Harper Audio released a 60-minute audiocassette of Sexton reading her poems, called *Anne Sexton Reads* (1993).

Voice of the Poet (2000), an audiocassette of Sexton reciting her poems, can be purchased from Random House.

A documentary on Sexton's life was produced in 1966 as part of the public television series *USA Poetry* and is available at local libraries.

Sexton is a documentary based on outtakes from the above film and is available from the American Poetry Archive at the Poetry Center, San Francisco State University, California.

The Department of English at the State University of New York at Brockport has a videocassette of Art Poulin and William Heyen interviewing Sexton. *The Poetry of Anne Sexton* is included in their Writer's Forum Videotape Library.

The Center for Cassette Studies has an audiocassette of Sexton, recorded in 1974: *A Conversation with Anne Sexton: The Late Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet Talks with James Day* .

Topics for Further Study

Draw a time line ranging from your first memory to your current age. Then at the appropriate years mark events in your life when you behaved courageously. What do these events have in common? What do they tell you about yourself and your idea(s) of courage?

Write an essay comparing a courageous deed of a public figure with a cowardly deed of a public figure. The figure may be a politician, a celebrity, a sports star. What does the comparison tell you about the pressures of living under public scrutiny?

Ask at least a dozen people for their definitions of the word "courage"; then discuss features those definitions share. Discuss which features you agree with and which you disagree with.

Compare and Contrast

1974: Battling mental illness, Anne Sexton commits suicide.

Today: More than 30,000 people commit suicide in the United States.

1974: Although drugs are sometimes prescribed for depression, psychotherapy remains a popular form of treatment.

Today: Prescription drugs such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft are advertised on television and routinely used to treat depression and other forms of mood disorder.

1974: Publishing heiress Patty Hearst is kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army, a left-wing underground organization dedicated to the overthrow of the United States government.

Today: Sara Jane Olson, an alleged former member of the Symbionese Liberation Army, is arrested on a federal fugitive warrant that identified her as a member of the SLA who was wanted on charges of plotting to kill Los Angeles police officers by placing explosives under their patrol cars.

1974: The average life expectancy for Americans is 72 years. For males it is 68.2, for females 75.9.

Today: The average life expectancy for Americans is almost 77 years. For males it is 73.6, for females it is almost 80 years.

What Do I Read Next?

"Courage" appears in Sexton's collection, *The Awful Rowing toward God,* published in 1975. Many of the poems in this book deal with the poet's quest for meaning in the form of religious understanding.

The Bell Jar (1963), a novel by Sexton's friend and fellow tormented poet, Sylvia Plath, describes the fictional Esther Greenwood's descent into madness. Most critics see the novel as autobiographical.

Noonday Press published Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* in 1967 in one volume. Lowell was Sexton's teacher and is considered to be one of the leading confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s. These two critically acclaimed volumes are his most popular.

Nicholas Mazza's 1999 text, *Poetry Therapy: Interface of the Arts and Psychology,* addresses the therapeutic use of creative writing including metaphor, narrative, journal writing, storytelling, bibliotherapy, and poetry. Sexton, who was in psychotherapy much of her adult life, considered the writing of poetry therapeutic. Mazza explicitly shows how to use poetry as part of a therapeutic program.

Further Study

Davison, Peter, *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston from Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath,* W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Davison recounts the Boston poetry world in this memoir and describes the complex relationships and behavior of such celebrated poets as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Richard Wilbur, and W. S. Merwin.

Middlebrook, Diane Wood, *Anne Sexton,* Random House, 1991.

Diane Middlebrook's 1991 acclaimed biography is based on hundreds of hours of taped conversations between Sexton and her therapist. Middlebrook shows Sexton as representative of a generation of "broken" poets who fought alcohol and drug addiction, and were infatuated with the idea of celebrity.

Wagner-Martin, Linda, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton,* G. K. Hall, 1989.

This study collects critical essays on Sexton's poetry from some of America's better known poetry critics such as Joyce Carol Oates, Paul Lacey, and Maxine Kumin. Almost all of the essays are accessible and useful and include further secondary sources.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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