

Simultaneous rites of passage for mother and son



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In "Rites of Passage" Sharon Olds honestly portrays her own struggles with understanding manhood and attempting to overcome her contempt for conventional modes of masculinity by alternating between visions of her son as a baby and the children at the party as men. From associating her objective observations of her son's male friends with the memory of giving birth to her son and observing that his hands are as "thin and cool as the day they guided him out of [her]," Olds displays the obstacle to come to terms with the images presented before her, which is the core of her poem. This struggle is prescribed by the time the poem was written, in the early 1980's as a part of *The Dead and the Living* published in 1984. In the 1980's, feminism had experienced an unprecedented degree of progress in terms of women's sexual awareness and openness, and their openness about wifehood and motherhood (Yalom Chapter 10). At a time when people's worst fears about the extent of the sexual revolution were being confirmed and women also felt freer to discuss their perspectives on motherhood, myth met with reality (Yalom 375). Responses to studies and polls showed that women were becoming less content with taking on traditional roles of stay at home mother, and far more women than ever before were working outside of the home (Yalom 371); long-standing myths about womanhood and gender roles were being questioned by such influential writings as *Dialects of Sex*, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and mythologies were being exposed in writings such as "Diving Into the Wreck" and "She Unnames Them" soon to follow (Yalom 370-72). Perceiving that she must tackle and hopefully overcome her disdain for conventional manhood in order to prevent such stigmatization in impairing her own children's judgment, Olds describes a form of "rite of passage" that she encounters simultaneously with her son. As he comes a

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year closer to being a man, Olds attempts to dispel her adult male prejudice by trying to understand the behavior of the boys. The poem seems to conclude in ambivalence as she contends that the “ men,” “ get down to playing war, celebrating [her] son’s life” which occurs a few lines after she describes her son’s birth and the present “ freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks.” Her “ rite of passage” involves the realization that her son will be a man, in spite of her anxieties, and that he may possess masculine traits that she feels at odds with. Her reproach of masculine aggression impels the anxiety of this poem as well. Her anxiety is apparent when she immediately sees the boys as “ short men, men in the first grade with smooth jaws and chins” and becomes more pronounced when the boys are not only men, but also evoke stereotypical ideas through their behaviors such as “ hands in pockets, jostling, jockeying for place.” The notions that characterize her view of men are present in her observations of the way they “ clear their throats a lot, [like] a room of small bankers, [and] they fold their arms and frown.” While the descriptions of their behaviors are faithful representations, there is conspicuous sardonicism in her serious manner of comparing them to bankers. However, even as she does so and subtly mocks their competition to be older than one another—with the seven year olds feeling superior to the six year olds—she sympathizes with them when she observes them “ seeing themselves tiny in the other’s pupils.” Olds describes the cake in order to add gravity to the birthday party and to elaborate on her “ bankers” metaphor. The comparison of the “ midnight cake,” with a “ turret” causes something that is usually representative of child-like candor, such as a birthday cake, to seem heavier and more consequential. There is an element of darkness attributed to the cake from the word “ midnight;” although it is

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probably chocolate and, therefore, dark in color, it seems ominous and shrouded in fear and also conveys an idea of crossing from one measure of time to the next. As a result, the birthday party becomes more fraught with meaning, like a pivotal rite of passage. The imagery of this heavy turret-like structure behind the boys and above their heads on the table also causes one to imagine a large building structure behind these boys that are like business-men, making the metaphor more encompassing, as if it eclipses the party and her thoughts. Therefore, as something as usually inconsequential as a cake takes on far grater importance in this poem, Olds displays both her fears of her son growing older and also her tendency to associate the objects that accompany his maturation with powerful symbols of conventional manhood. In the same manner that the cake eclipses the party with its darkness and gravity, Olds' fixation on her son becoming a man eclipses her ability to identify with the "small bankers." Throughout the poem, Olds interchanges the naivete of the children's words with her vision of them as grown men and she also interchanges realistic depictions of their youthful appearances with their references to violence used in order to prove their strength and assert their egos; ultimately this signifies the inevitability of her son's maturation into a man and the sacrilegious process she finds this to be. Although they are "short men" with "smooth jaws and chins," there are abruptly after they arrive "small fights breaking out and calming." She shows a similarly indiscriminate notion held—and observed—about all men when she describes how a "seven says to a six," "I could beat you up." The way she refers to the boys by calling them their age demonstrates not only that she feels that many men have similar traits and are indistinguishable, (which is why she poses them as such generalizations), but also her fixation

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on the age of the children. The fact that the little boy tells the younger one that he could beat him up shows the naivete of youth in his casual manner in announcing this, yet this near-innocence contrasts ironically with the violence contained in the words, which shows her criticism of the early-developed sense of violence in boys. Along with this, it exposes the partial reality of the common conception of boys or men as aggressive, which speaks tellingly of the power of myth to become reality, and further instills her need to stop this from happening, starting with herself. Her emotional and sentimental investment in this is apparent when she describes her son and subsequently presents his response to this previous squabble. Olds describes her son in a way that portrays his youth as sacred, through the description of his "freckles like specks of nutmeg," his "chest narrow as the balsa keel of a model boat" and his hands thin like the day he was born. The description of his freckles comes across as sweet and conveys a sense of child-like mutability as does describing his chest as narrow as a children's toy boat, particularly since boats sail by. In mentioning his hands when he was born, she longs for the unscathed innocence of an infant compared with his presently influenced mind. After these images, she describes his response in an objective sentence that still exudes critical irony in the words "We could easily kill a two-year-old, he says in his clear voice." While this still carries with it a similarly small degree of naivete as she portrayed in the characterization of the seven-year-old who could beat up the six-year-old, it is placed more staggeringly within the poem, as she depicts the words and those of a leader, as the "host" of all of the "men." The fact that his voice is clear suggests no shame in the sentence, which is confirmed when the "other men agree, [and] they clear their throats like Generals." This is said

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simply and without her emotional responses included, showing her belief of the brutality of men, further emphasized by the metaphor of “ generals.” The plainness of Olds’ description, even in spite of the metaphors, displays her contempt for this “ masculine” quality and her inability to change it, based upon her observations of its prevalence. Olds’ perspective as this party as a rite of passage for herself as well as her son is completed by the more open tone of the last two lines. These lines appear after her son speaks, in which she subtly portrays herself as sobered certain truths about boyhood and manhood. While her contempt was mainly for the other boys, her son’s words make her more fully aware of the ways young boys think. Since she knows her son more personally and observes him in this context, she comes to a more full understanding of the interactions between young boys and men, and how their interactions do not necessarily define them. As a result, Olds sees how myths endure and stereotypes prevail for good reason, yet that they are not useful once they take on discriminatory and reproachful nature in people who believe them. As Olds observes this from hearing what her son says, she does not completely relinquish her contempt for these masculine conventions or completely understand why men, but her identifying with the boys who feel small in the others’ pupils and with her son fitting in by making an even more extreme point than their first one, she sees that the myths prevail because of social pressures. Therefore, there is no complete shift in thought or attitude, but the words “ get down to playing war, celebrating my son’s life” show slightly more acceptance while they still display her opposition and perplexity. Beforehand, the boys were more vilified in the word “ Generals,” but now the game is vilified in the word “ war.” Also, while she used metaphors earlier to describe them as bankers

and generals, she importantly says “ playing” war, showing that it is not necessarily their innate natures. The tension is still very present, especially in the fact that she equates “ playing war” directly with “ celebrating her son’s life,” showing a parallel between war and manhood. This is both sardonic and serious, and where her criticism of the situation is clear, it is the constructs, rather than the boys, that she criticizes more strongly. The incoherence of “ playing war” and “ celebrating” a life reveal that Olds cannot entirely understand masculinity and that the conventional ways in which it is manifested presents opposition to her values and beliefs. “ Rite of Passage” represents not only her fear and disapprobation of many aspects of manhood, but also her attempts to comprehend these aspects, in order to dispel the conceptions that preside over her perspective. Through the blunt and simple description of her observations, Olds discloses her desire to understand men so that she can disbelieve damaging stereotypes. Olds, Sharon. “ Rite of Passage.” *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980-2002*. New York: Knopf, 2004. 27. Print. Yalom, Marilyn. *A History of the Wife*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.