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AP Literature & Composition

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Mrs. Rutan

**Mother vs. Man**

 Sharon Olds’ poem, “My Son the Man,” shows the difficulties of being able to accept a child growing up. Olds presents us with the persona, an annoyed mother, who is revisiting memories of her son’s childhood now that he is older and is shown clearly with imagery, allusions, and very strong diction.

 The poem starts off with the persona’s sons, “shoulders [got] a lot wider,” (1) and then goes into imagery of things she used to do with her son such as, “help him to put on his sleeper,” (4). Starting off with talking about how his shoulders grew really sets up a nice contrast for the warm and fuzzy feelings later on. These lines—up until the tone shift at line eleven—are very nostalgic due to the memories that she includes of dressing her son in a “sleeper” (4), and getting him ready for bed and saying that, “It seems no time since [then],” (4). You can feel how happy she is thinking about the past and how upset she is to see it all leave. You see this through the way she uses memories of his childhood rather than memories of him right now because at that younger age was a time where he needed and counted on his mother rather than now when he’s independent. By stating that his shoulders got wider you can really see the power shift going from the mother to the son.

 The tone changes to something more aggressive when the line says, “he pressed up through me like a/sealed trunk through the ice of the Hudson, /snapped the padlock, unsnaked the chains, /and appeared into my arms,” (11-13). These lines are talking about the persona’s birth of her son. The diction she uses like “snapped” and “unsnaked” help show the burden and the pain that she went through to have her baby boy and now he’s leaving her alone. You can really feel how distraught she is through this diction choice and see her frustration she is when she says, “this was not/what I had in mind,” (10-11). She’s saying that her son growing up and turning into a man isn’t something that she planned on while having her son. She’s troubled over something she cannot control (this really adds to her characterization as a mother too). But what else was there for him to do? We all must grow up and leave our parent’s behind, it is human nature.

 Olds uses several allusions comparing the persona’s son to Houdini throughout the poem.

*Houdini?*

Yes, Harry Houdini the famous illusionist known for his dangerous escape acts. Now why in the world would any mother compare her son to a magician?

Olds uses this comparison rather than any other person because Houdini put himself into chains and other situations where he was trapped because he knew the way out. She writes that “Now he looks at me/the way Houdini studied a box/ to learn the way out, then smiled and let himself be manacled,” (14-16). Houdini allows himself to be chained up because he can escape, similarly, the persona’s son knows that he is able to leave his mom, and that’s why he’s allowing her to be so irritated at the fact that he’s growing up—because he doesn’t have to stay. The persona says she must, “get over my fear of men,” (9).This could also play a role on why she is so angered by the fact of her son leaving. If she has a fear of men maybe the father left them or has passed away and that’s why she wants him to stay with her so desperately.

Old’s poem shows the heartache of losing a child as they get older and the different ways a mother can be distraught. It’s easy for a mother to feel this way after her child is all grown up because of the strong connection they have when they’re little and it is easily displayed in this poem.