

Hollie Hare

K. Groninga

Women in Literature

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Rite of Passage

A seven-year-old boy's birthday party should be full of little boys running around, playing, and laughing. As I began to read "Rite of Passage" (Olds, see appendix) it had a serious tone, more like a meeting or formal gathering, not a child's birthday party. "As the guests arrive at my son's party/they gather in the living room-/short men, men in the first grade/with smooth jaws and chins." (1-5). Olds dictates the partygoers as men, not boys or children. Olds repeats the term men when referring to the party guests, "short men, men in first grade" (3) I felt the repetition of this word to classify the boys, was a major component in setting the serious tone of the poem.

A party men attend would be a much more formal event than a child's birthday party. There would be small talk, guests sizing each other up, and attempts at one-upping others during conversation and body language. As Olds describes her son's birthday party, the reader finds the boys doing all of the things men would do at a formal event. So to me, when she describes the boys as men, she is right. Although the guests are children, they are doing what grown men would do at a social gathering.

For example, in line eight, "*How old are you? Six. I'm seven. So?*" (8), two guests are comparing ages. This seems like a normal innocent conversation when taken out of context; however, at this party the conversation is being used to determine social status. The seven year-

old is staking claim he is bigger, better, and more important than the six year-old. As the two continue to determine their opponent's and their own status their actions become even more adult-like. "They eye each other, seeing themselves/tiny in the other's pupils.' (9-10) In reality, most six and seven year-old boys do not have physically signs of strength. During this visual exchange, each boy can see his true stature is not one of enormity. This may make them even more determined to prove themselves the bigger man in the conversation. When grown men eye each other, it is a way of determining who is macho. According to Merriam-Webster's website, macho is defined as "having or showing qualities (such as very noticeable strength and aggression) that agree with traditional ideas about what men are like : manly or masculine in a very noticeable or exaggerated way" (Merriam-Webster.com)

There is no imagery in the poem of the two boys having physical signs of strength, and yet the poem is loaded with the imagery of aggression. This is shown when Olds uses the following lines to describe the scene in the living room after the guests have arrived. "Hands in pockets, they stand around/jostling, jockeying for place, small fights/ breaking out and calming." (5-7) The boys are attempting to prove to peers they are macho. "They clear their/throats a lot, a room of small bankers,/they fold their arms and frown." (11-12) Clearing of the throat is a social way of gaining attention of others in a room. When several of the boys are clearing their throats 'a lot' (11), each boy is trying to gain control and attention of the other boys in the room. Once they receive the attention their body language changes, 'fold their arms and frown' (12). Olds describes the group as "small bankers"; the first image to pop in my mind was of the group of old bankers from Mary Poppins. The group was unwilling to put down barriers and speak kindly to each other. This body language causes another to confrontation erupt, a different seven year-old-boy boy states '*I could beat you/up*' to one of the six year-olds.

The writer takes the reader's view to away from the argument at hand and refocuses it on a staple of a birthday celebration...the cake. The birthday cake is described as "round and heavy as a turret" (14-15). A birthday cake is supposed to be fun and exciting, a sweet treat for guests to enjoy. In "Rite of Passage" the birthday cake being described as a 'turret' (15) gives the reader a completely different view of the cake. A turret is defined as "a small tower on a building :the part on a military tank, airplane, or ship from which guns are fired." (Merriam-Webster.com). In this situation, the cake sits high on the table waiting to be eaten while the boys are acting as turrets by firing weapons of verbal and physical messages of being the bigger man towards each other.

The picture painted in the reader's head of confrontation, anger, and 'men' attending the party is quickly cut off and softened by the image Olds paints of her son. "My son,/freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks,/ chest narrow as the balsa keel of a/model boat, long hands/cool and thin as the day they guided him/out of me, speaks up as a host/for the sake of the group." (15-21) The image of the son is one of youth among his guests, whose actions are much older than their age. The other boys' actions seem much older, while the birthday boy's actions seem wiser than his new young age of seven.

The description of his freckles makes him seem sweet, even though the spice nutmeg is bitter. He is identified as being 'cool' (19) during all of the tension in the piece. He is the one who cuts through the tension and brings the group in to unison when he states, "*We could easily kill a two-year-old,*". He is the voice of reason for the entire group. He gives them common ground to stand on and ends the confrontations. Through his calm and matter-of-fact actions he ends the fighting and commands unity from the group. It is ironic the one who remained calm is the one who ended the fighting by taking control.

It is interesting Olds chose to describe the situation as “like Generals, they relax and get down to/playing war, celebrating my son’s life.” (25-26) Typically, when a General is defined as “7: holding superior rank or taking precedence over others similarly titled.” (Merriam-Webster.com), the idea of relaxing does not really exist. Generals must stay alert and needs to know the next move. Generals also must be in command of their troops. Through the poem, Olds describes all of the bickering as a way of determining who will be the General of the group. Ultimately, the birthday boy becomes the General.

Another definition of general defines the word as “relating to the main or major parts of something rather than the details :not specific- used to indicate that a description relates to an entire person or thing rather than a particular part.” (Merriam-Webster.com) I find it interesting the same word can mean the opposite. A General in a military setting describes one individual as the overseer of several less important than oneself. The other definition describes general as being a whole group, no one more important than another individual. The importance of the group celebrating the son’s birthday as a harmonious entity, or a general group of boys, is the idea of the party.

Another point of importance occurs when the birthday boy takes control of the group, giving them a common thread. He “speaks up as a host/for the sake of the group./*We could easily kill a two-year-old,*he says in his clear voice.” (20-23) This was the moment he earned his rite of passage as General of the group. I believe the actions of the birthday boy also gave him the rite of passage of becoming more mature. He was able to take charge of the room, without requiring the interference of an adult to settle the boys’ differences.

At the end of the piece, I find the last two lines very ironic. The boys “get down to/playing war, celebrating my son’s life.” (25-26) Throughout the poem, the boys have been at

war with each other and now that the issues have been resolved, the group will be playing war. Real war is not a game! People get hurt mentally and physically in real war. In this poem, the only possible injury from the war between the ages was hurt feelings. Boys tend to be creatures that are able to quickly get over hurt feelings. At the beginning of the party hurt feelings were quickly dropped, so the group could get to the real business of playing.

The other bit of irony I found was in the idea of the group playing war to celebrate the life of Olds' son. War is not a way people celebrate anything. Typically, people who are at war with another group, or at war within their own group, are fighting for their right to live how they wish. The end of a war is cause for celebration. So, when the group decides to play war to celebrate a birthday, it seems quite backwards to me. Yet, the war between members of the group had ended, so it was time to celebrate by playing and enjoying each other's company.

Throughout the poem, as I read I had feelings of anger and fear for the younger boys. As the poem moved through the stages of the argument I grew sad for the birthday boy. As a parent, the more I read the more I hoped for Olds to step in as a voice of reason, to save the party. It was a surprise to the reader when the birthday boy stepped in and ended the argument, bringing the poem to have a more joyous tone. Overall, I feel the poet took a simple child's birthday party and gave the reader a different view of what can be looked upon by adults as child's play.

Works Cited

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Appendix

“Rite of Passage”

By Sharon Olds

1. As the guests arrive at my son’s party
2. they gather in the living room-
3. short men, men in first grade
4. with smooth jaws and chins.
5. Hands in pockets, they stand around
6. jostling, jockeying for place, small fights
7. breaking out and calming. On says to another
8. *How old are you? Six. I’m seven. So?*
9. They eye each other, seeing themselves
10. tiny in the other’s pupils. They clear their
11. throats a lot, a room full of small bankers,
12. they fold their arms and frown. *I could beat you*
13. *up*, a seven says to a six,
14. the dark cake, round and heavy as a
15. turret, behind them on the table. My son,
16. freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks,
17. chest narrow as the balsa keel of a
18. model boat, long hands
19. cool and thin as the day they guided him
20. out of me, speaks up as a host
21. for the sake of the group.
22. *We could easily kill a two-year-old,*
23. he says in his clear voice. The other
24. men agree, they clear their throats
25. like Generals, they relax and get down to
26. playing war, celebrating my son’s life.