Rite of Passage

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a group of boys arriving at her son's birthday party, assembling in her living room and looking like little, smooth-faced, first-grade "men." The boys stand with their hands in their pockets, bumping each other aside, trying to get into a better position, starting and ending small fights among themselves. When one boy asks another how old he is, the other boy says, "Six." The first boy gloats, "I'm seven." The other boy scoffs, "So?" The boys then size each other up, noticing their miniature reflections in each other's pupils. They keep clearing their throats, like a room full of little bankers. They cross their arms, scowling. A seven-year-old warns a six-year-old, "I could beat you up," as a chocolate cake—big and round as a guard tower—looms from the table behind them. The speaker's son—with freckles like brown spice, a chest as thin as the balsa-wood ridge along the bottom of a model ship, and hands as cool and slender as they were on the day she gave birth to him—addresses the group, trying to unify them as the host of the party. He states clearly that the group could easily kill a two-year-old. The other miniature "men" agree with him. They clear their throats like military leaders, loosen up, and start playing a war game as their way of celebrating the life of the speaker's son.

THEMES

MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE

"Rite of Passage" portrays, and quietly laments, the way violence pervades male culture from early boyhood onward. The speaker of the poem, a mother throwing a birthday party for her son, welcomes a group of six- and seven-year-old boys into her home. Immediately, they start "jostling," intimidating each other, and competing for dominance. As her son unites the group by noting that they could all kill a younger kid, the speaker recalls giving birth to him and notes how fragile he is despite his boast. With poignant irony, the poem shows how boys become initiated into a culture of aggression while they're still very vulnerable. It depicts this culture as fundamentally childish and absurd, while also suggesting that it spawns the very real violence of the adult world.

The poem shows how competition and violence are tied up with the idea of masculinity itself from a very young age. The boys at the party start sizing each other up and "jockeying for place" (that is, vying for status and dominance), comparing their ages and waging "small fights." The speaker's son then unites the guests by claiming that "*We could easily kill a two-year-old*," defusing the group's aggression by directing it against an external, weaker target. In this way, the poem shows how aggression among boys—like adult warfare—can be camaraderie-building, yet also ridiculous and dangerously misguided.

Adding to this sense of ridiculousness is the fact that the speaker refers to the children as "short men" and compares their mannerisms to those of "bankers" and "Generals." In the process, the speaker implicitly pokes fun at the posturing of these powerful adults, making their own behavior seem childish and suggesting that, even in its "adult" form, the culture of macho violence remains juvenile at its core.

After the boys agree that they could kill a weaker target, they start "playing war," suggesting that youthful aggression and boasting give rise to actual adult violence and warfare. Yet the speaker's mention of her son's "freckle[d]" cheeks and "narrow" chest reminds the reader that these boys are still fragile and naive. They're only "playing" at a violence whose true nature and consequences, the poem implies, they don't yet grasp. In linking boyhood aggression with the adult variety, the poem thus suggests that the equation of masculinity with aggression robs boys of their innocence.

At the end of the poem, the speaker contrasts this misguided culture of violence with a mature set of values: her own parental tenderness. The speaker's gentle memory of "the day they guided [my son] / out of me" evokes a traditionally feminine rite of passage (childbirth) that involves creating rather than destroying life. The birthday party itself is meant to honor birth and life, so it's painfully ironic—and ominous—that the boys "celebrat[e]" by "playing war," as though training to treat life cheaply in adulthood.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

As the guests ...
... jaws and chins.

Lines 1-4 introduce the poem's setting: a birthday party for the son of the speaker and her partner. (The partner is mentioned only as part of the "our" in line 1.) The party is held in the speaker's "living room," and the birthday boy is most likely turning seven years old given that he and his friends are "in first

grade" (and they're all either six or seven). The phrase "living room" will turn out to have subtle thematic importance, as the poem deals with themes of life, death, and violence.

Pointedly, the speaker describes the party guests as "short men, men in first grade." On one level, it's clear that this description is supposed to be comic and/or figurative; male first-graders are little boys, not grown "men." But much of the poem will observe the ways in which small boys *behave like* (imitate) grown men. More subtly, it will imply that grown men, including those who fight wars, often behave with the juvenile aggression of little boys. In some ways, from the speaker's perspective, boys might as well be men and vice versa; she describes these kids as if all that separates them from their adult counterparts is their lack of facial hair ("smooth jaws and chins").

Lines 1-4 also establish the conversational-sounding free verse that will continue throughout the poem. The poem has no meter or rhyme scheme, and no stanza breaks, either. Instead, it presents its story simply, informally, and continuously, as if narrating events in real time.

LINES 5-8

Hands in pockets, ...
... —I'm seven. —So?

Lines 5-8 begin describing the boys' aggressive behavior at the birthday party.

The speaker watches as these boys "stand around" with "Hands in pockets"—interestingly, a pose that many adults also strike at parties. The boys start "jostling" and "jockeying for place," as if competing for status or dominance. They even wage "small fights," which keep "breaking out" and "calming."

Again, you might see versions of these behaviors at adult parties, too. For example, you might see grown men fighting while drinking, or competing for status by talking about their jobs. The poem could easily have described more juvenile actions (nose-picking, walking around with shoes untied, etc.), but instead picks out details that make these boys seem childlike *and* adult-like at the same time. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that the boys are "short men": miniature versions of the adults they might become.

The next detail is a snippet of dialogue between two boys:

> *How old are you? —Six. —I'm seven. —So?*

Although this exchange is clearly childish, it again shows how aggression and competition have already become ingrained in these kids. They effectively greet each other by competing with each other!

Alliterative /j/ sounds, assonant /aw/ sounds, and identical /-ing/ suffixes connect "jostling" and "jockeying" in line 6, making these words sound so percussive and emphatic that readers can almost hear the boys' squabbling. Frequent enjambment (and omission of end-line punctuation where it would normally occur, as in line 7) makes the lines, like the boys, seem a bit unruly. (If the lines were neat and tidy, beginning and ending in grammatically predictable places, they wouldn't capture this disorderly scene nearly as well.)

LINES 9-12

They eye each ...
... arms and frown.

Lines 9-12 continue to portray the aggressive, and in some ways adult-like, behavior of the boys at the birthday party.

They "eye each other" as if to intimidate or provoke, standing so close to each other that they can "see[] themselves / tiny in the other's pupils." They also seem to imitate the mannerisms of grown people, including, perhaps, men they've observed in their families or communities. Specifically, "They clear their / throats a lot," reminding the speaker of "small bankers," and "they fold their arms and frown," possibly in an attempt to look serious or further intimidate the other boys.

This behavior is funny and absurd on one level, but disturbing on another: it lacks the elements of cuteness or sweetness readers might expect in a description of young children. (At the same time, it's realistic, as anyone who's been in a similar setting knows!)

Notice how many words in this first half of the poem point to the boys' small size. They are "short men" (line 3) who engage in "small fights" (line 6); their reflections look "tiny" (line 1), and they resemble "small bankers." These adjectives heighten the irony of the boys' attempt to look big, strong, and intimidating. At the same time, they reinforce the point that the world of childhood is, in many respects, a miniature version of the adult world.

LINES 12-15

I could beat ...
... on the table.

In lines 12-15, the tension escalates, as an older boy threatens a younger one:

> [...] *I could beat you*
> *up*, a seven says to a six [...]

Notice how enjambment forces "*up*" over the line break, giving it extra emphasis. (Readers can almost hear the boy saying it with relish: "I could beat you *up!*") It's unclear whether the "seven" is actually much bigger or stronger than the "six"; the point is that the older boy uses a trivial age difference as a way of wielding, or attempting to wield, power over the younger one.

This line is followed by a simile that turns an ordinary birthday

cake into an ominous image. Looming "behind" the two boys is a "midnight cake"—a kind of chocolate cake—that looks as "round and heavy as a / turret." At least, it looks that way to the speaker, apparently because watching the boys threaten and fight each other has put her in mind of war. (A *turret* is a tower on top of a castle, fort, etc., often used for defensive purposes; it can also refer to a weapon mount—a *gun turret*—on a tank, warship, or warplane.) The word "midnight" adds to the gloominess of the image. (In this Cold War-era poem, it might even allude to the "Doomsday Clock" that gauges how close humanity is to "midnight," meaning nuclear war or a similar catastrophe.)

The alliteration in these lines ("seven says [...] six"; "turret"/"table") gives them a little extra weight and emphasis, in keeping with the image of the "heavy" cake and the atmosphere of heavy tension.

LINES 15-20

My son, ...
... out of me,

In lines 15-20, the speaker describes her son using a series of similes. This descriptive passage briefly takes the reader out of the main action of the poem, as the speaker reflects on her son's youth and vulnerability.

First, she compares his "freckles" to "specks of nutmeg on his cheeks"—that is, a sprinkle of brown spice. Symbolically, freckles are associated with (white, Western) notions of youth, wholesomeness, and innocence. Both this detail and the speaker's homespun simile set up a contrast with the boy's not-so-wholesome words in line 22.

The speaker then observes that her son's "chest" is as "narrow as the balsa keel of a / model boat." The object being described here is the *keel*, or lengthwise center ridge, running along the hull of a miniature boat made out of soft, lightweight balsa wood. In other words, the speaker is comparing her son's chest to something thin, soft, and fragile. Model boats tend to be built by kids (or older hobbyists), so the speaker is further highlighting her son's youth by likening his body to a children's toy.

Finally, the speaker observes that her son's "long hands" are as "cool and thin as the day they guided him / out of me." In other words, his hands remain as cool and slender as the day she gave birth to him. This simile indicates that, on some level, she will always see her son as the delicate newborn he once was.

Again, these similes set up a stark, ironic contrast with what her son actually says in line 22: "*We could easily kill a two-year-old.*" He may play tough in front of his friends, but as his mother, the speaker understands how young and fragile he really is.

LINES 20-23

speaks up as ...
... his clear voice.

Lines 20-23 deliver the ironic twist set up by the previous five lines. After the speaker has noted her son's youth, delicacy, etc., he addresses the other boys with a boast about their collective capacity for violence: "*We could easily kill a two-year-old.*" This is the only line he speaks; the poem provides no other sense of his personality. The speaker notes his "clear voice," possibly to contrast it with the deeper, rougher voices of adult men, but also to indicate that he talks about killing matter-of-factly.

The irony here has multiple layers. As a first-grader, the speaker's son is still small and vulnerable by adult standards; he and the other boys probably believe they're bigger and tougher than they really are. And while he may no longer be as innocent as a newborn, he's certainly naive about the nature and consequences of murder. His "thin" hands (line 19) might be technically capable of harming a smaller child—especially with others' help—and, of course, it's possible that he'll grow up to be capable of serious, adult violence. But whether he could kill someone "*easily*" in a psychological sense is a question he hasn't begun to consider, because he doesn't have a mature understanding of guilt. The reader, like the speaker, understands this in a way the boy doesn't, creating dramatic irony.

The fact that the boy makes this claim "as a host / for the sake of the group" is also important. His parents are the real hosts of the party, of course, but as the birthday boy, he takes on a leadership role among his peers. He speaks "for the sake of the group" in the sense that he defuses the aggression among them by redirecting it toward an imagined, weaker target. As the boys start "playing war" in the following lines, it's clear that the poem is drawing a parallel between the boy's tactic and the way adult leaders seek to unify nations through *real* war. (Politicians and military leaders, too, sometimes redirect aggression within their societies toward an enemy perceived as weaker.)

LINES 23-26

The other ...
... my son's life.

The final lines of the poem drive home the comparison between boyhood aggression and adult warfare, adding a little extra irony in the process.

First, the other boys "agree" with the son's claim that they could all "*easily kill a two-year-old*": this ridiculous boast manages to unify the group. (Again, there's an implied parallel here with the way adult leaders, including politicians, sometimes defuse tensions within their societies by channeling group aggression toward some external, supposedly weaker enemy.)

With the tension blown over, the "men" (as the speaker ironically calls the boys) are able to "relax." Having cleared their throats like "bankers" before (line 11), they now "clear their

throats / like Generals": figures of greater authority, directly associated with war and violence. (Overwhelmingly, generals also tend to be men.) The capitalization of "Generals" seems to poke fun at the make-believe authority the boys have assumed. As pretend generals, the boys "get down to" their oh-so-serious business: "playing war, celebrating my son's life."

The parallel structure of this last phrase helps draw out its fundamental irony. Setting the two actions in parallel suggests that they're part of the same process: that is, *by* playing war at a party, the group celebrates the birthday boy's life. But from the perspective of the speaker (and any reader who shares her skepticism of war, masculine aggression, etc.), there's really a deep conflict between these actions. "Playing war" glorifies an activity that *cheapens* and *destroys* lives, including the lives of young males (who are most likely to fight as soldiers). The boys don't understand this conflict at all, so the poem ends on a note of dramatic irony.

SYMBOLS

CHILDHOOD COMPETITION

To the speaker, the competitive aggression of young boys symbolizes—and foreshadows—the violence and power struggles of grown men. The aggressiveness of the boys at the birthday party strikes her as a preview of their future, adult behavior in spheres such as business and war. (At the same time, the speaker implies that the warfare, business rivalries, etc. of grown men is basically juvenile.)

The speaker pointedly describes the boys as little "men," suggesting that they're much like actual adult males, except for their lack of facial hair ("smooth jaws and chins"). She shows them "jostling" and "jockeying for place" at the party, much as men compete for power and status. Sometimes they show open aggression, engaging in "small fights," or explicitly intimidate each other ("*I could beat you / up*"). The group finally bonds over the birthday boy's claim that the whole group of them "*could easily kill a two-year-old*." Symbolically, this detail evokes the way groups of aggressive men—for example, soldiers in training—often bond over their shared desire, and perceived ability, to defeat a weaker opponent.

As if to drive the point home, the boys then "clear their throats / like Generals" and "relax" by "playing war." Again, their shared enjoyment of conflict symbolizes—and, the poem implies, leads to—the armies and warfare of the adult world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-10
- Lines 12-15
- Lines 22-26

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps reinforce the poem's meaning at a few key points. For example, when the party guests are "jostling, jockeying for place" (line 6), the alliterative /j/ sounds (plus the assonant short /aw/ sounds: "jostling, jockeying") give the words extra punch; readers can almost hear the boys pushing and elbowing each other.

Soon after, sibilant /s/ sounds add an undertone of hissing menace to two of the boys' confrontations: "*How old are you? —Six. —I'm seven. —So?*" (line 8) and "*I could beat you / up*, a seven says to a six" (lines 12-13). In line 12, /f/ alliteration links two simultaneous, related actions ("they fold their arms and frown"), while in lines 16-17, /ch/ alliteration links two nouns describing the son's physical features ("cheeks" and "chest").

Finally, the crisp /t/ alliteration in line 15 makes the phrase a bit denser:

> [...] the midnight cake, round and heavy as a
> turret, behind them on the table.

This makes sense, since the image itself is *about* "heav[iness]," and since the atmosphere in this passage is heavy with tension. The combination of alliteration and enjambment gives particular weight to "turret," helping the reader notice the symbolic, military associations lurking behind this word choice.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "jostling, jockeying"
- **Line 8:** "Six," "seven," "So"
- **Line 12:** "fold," "frown"
- **Line 13:** "seven says," "six"
- **Line 15:** "turret," "table"
- **Line 16:** "cheeks"
- **Line 17:** "chest"
- **Line 26:** "celebrating," "son's"

ASSONANCE

Assonance pops up a few times in the poem, supporting the imagery or reinforcing the meaning of certain lines.

For instance, the /aw/ assonance and /j/ alliteration in "jostling, jockeying" (line 6) make these words sound sharp and percussive; they seem to roughen the line up, mirroring the boys' roughness with each other. This assonance also echoes a vowel from the previous line: the /aw/ in "pockets." (In fact, the first syllables of "pockets" and "jockeying" create an internal rhyme.)

Assonance links the noun and verb in the phrase "a seven says" (line 13). It also helps conjure up the imagery of line 16:

"freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks." Those gentle repeated /eh/ sounds seem to sprinkle the line itself, much as freckles sprinkle the boy's face.

More subtly, assonance links the two verbs "playing" and "celebrating" in the final line. These verbs are set in grammatical parallel, strengthening the connection between them. But this connection is ironic, since the poem implies that there's a deep tension between "playing war"—glorifying a deadly human activity—and "celebrating [...] life."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "pockets"
- **Line 6:** "jostling, jockeying"
- **Line 13:** "seven says"
- **Line 16:** "freckles," "specks," "nutmeg"
- **Line 26:** "playing," "celebrating"

IRONY

The poem is loaded with irony, especially in its second half. All of this irony revolves around the same central premise: the boys in the poem are very young, small, and innocent-looking, yet they're already acting like—and may even imagine that they're as tough as—grown "men."

Even though "Rite of Passage" is about boys, the word "boys" never appears in the poem. Instead, from the start, the speaker calls them "men" (lines 3-4):

> short men, men in first grade
> with smooth jaws and chins.

This word choice may reflect the speaker's point of view, as she sees these boys adopting adult mannerisms despite their "smooth," babyish faces. But it might also hint at the *boys'* point of view: *they* might feel as if they're simply shorter versions of the men in their families and communities. If so, this would be an example of dramatic irony, because the characters don't know something the reader does: how immature they really are.

The irony thickens from line 15 onward, as the group bonds over the speaker's son's claim that they "*could easily kill a two-year-old*." This violent boast contrasts ironically with the boy's appearance, which—to his mother, at least—seems innocent and delicate (lines 15-20). There's also irony in that word "*easily*": this group of six- and seven-year-olds might be strong enough to kill a toddler, but they have no understanding of the horror and guilt that would accompany such an act. Nor do they understand the punishment that would likely follow. Once again, the reader knows more than the characters, creating dramatic irony.

The boys have even less understanding of the horrors of warfare, yet they start happily "playing war." They even "clear their throats / like Generals," emulating powerful (typically male) adults whose aggression they look up to. Most ironically of all, they pretend to wage war—one of the world's most deadly activities—as a way of "celebrating" the "life" of the speaker's son. Like the speaker, the reader understands that war *threatens* life, and often endangers the lives of young "men" most of all. (A subtler irony might be that the boys' fantasies of warfare seem less outrageous—more "normal"—than their fantasy of killing a toddler, even though the first involves more killing than the other!)

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "short men, men in first grade / with smooth jaws and chins."
- **Lines 15-26:** "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. / We could easily kill a two-year-old / , / he says in his clear voice. The other / men agree, they clear their throats / like Generals, they relax and get down to / playing war, celebrating my son's life."

PARALLELISM

The poem uses quite a bit of parallelism. For example, line 3 ("short men, men in first grade") contains two parallel noun phrases, the second of which elaborates on and clarifies the first. "Short men" might seem to refer to *grown* men, but "men in first grade" clarifies that the speaker is really talking about little boys.

In line 6, the parallel verb phrases "jostling" and "jockeying for place" seem to jostle each other with their alliterative, assonant sounds. Later, the parallel "They + [verb]" phrases in lines 9-12 ("They eye [...] They clear [...] they fold") lay out a number of actions happening simultaneously or in close succession, creating the sense of a scene unfolding in real time. The repetition of "They" at the beginning of successive sentences is also an example of anaphora, and it creates a sense of building tension the boys size each other up:

> They eye each other, seeing themselves
> tiny in the other's pupils. They clear their
> throats a lot, a room of small bankers,
> they fold their arms and frown.

The parallel similes in lines 16-20 ("freckles like [...] chest narrow as [...] long hands / cool and thin as") present a loving, multi-layered portrait of the speaker's son. Finally, the two gerund phrases in the last line ("playing war, celebrating my son's life") crackle with ironic tension. While the parallelism here indicates that "playing war" is the boys' *way of* "celebrating my son's life," the reader understands that, in a larger sense,

these activities are in conflict rather than parallel with one another. (War is about the destruction, not the celebration, of life.)

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "short men, men in first grade"
- **Line 6:** "jostling, jockeying for place,"
- **Lines 9-12:** "They eye each other, seeing themselves / tiny in the other's pupils. They clear their / throats a lot, a room of small bankers, / they fold their arms and frown."
- **Lines 16-20:** "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,"
- **Lines 24-26:** "they clear their throats / like Generals, they relax and get down to / playing war, celebrating my son's life."

ENJAMBMENT

All but a few lines in the poem are enjambed, or at least punctuated to look as if they are. [Under standard punctuation rules, lines 1 and 7 ("breaking [...] another") would be end-stopped with commas, but the poet omits these commas so that each line seems to flow into the next without pause.) In general, heavy enjambment makes the poem's form a bit unruly, its rhythm a bit unpredictable. Some lines (such as in lines 12-13: "they fold [...] you / up") start or end in unexpected places, keeping readers on their toes. This off-kilter rhythm seems to suit the chaotic atmosphere of the son's birthday party.

In some cases, enjambment draws particular attention to a word or phrase. This word/phrase might occur just before the line break, as when line 2 breaks on "first grade" and forces the reader to linger a moment over the seemingly paradoxical term "men in first grade":

> short men, men in first **grade**
> **with** smooth jaws and chins.

Or it might come just after the line break, as when enjambment (plus caesura) places heavy stress on "jostling" in line 6—so that the word itself seems to jostle its way forward:

> Hands in pockets, they stand **around**
> **jostling**, jockeying for place, small fights

This kind of emphasis can even suggest how the reader should "hear" a particular phrase; for example, the enjambment in lines 12-13—"*I could beat you / up*"—makes it sound as if the little boy is pronouncing that final word with relish.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "party / they"
- **Lines 3-4:** "grade / with"
- **Lines 5-6:** "around / jostling"
- **Lines 7-8:** "another / How"
- **Lines 9-10:** "themselves / tiny"
- **Lines 10-11:** "their / throats"
- **Lines 12-13:** "you / up"
- **Lines 14-15:** "a / turret"
- **Lines 17-18:** "a / model"
- **Lines 18-19:** "hands / cool"
- **Lines 19-20:** "him / out"
- **Lines 20-21:** "host / for"
- **Lines 23-24:** "other / men"
- **Lines 24-25:** "throats / like"
- **Lines 25-26:** "to / playing"

CAESURA

Sixteen out of 26 lines in "Rite of Passage" contain one or more caesuras. As with the heavy use of enjambment, these frequent mid-line pauses create an unpredictable rhythm that reflects the poem's slightly chaotic setting. In other words, the poem's formal unruliness mirrors the unruliness of the boy's birthday party.

Caesuras contribute to the poem's meaning in other ways, too. For example, the caesuras in line 6 (marked by commas) roughen the rhythm of the line, evoking the rough-and-tumble behavior of the kids:

> [...] they stand around
> **jostling, jockeying** for **place, small** fights [...]

Notice that the word "jostling" is enjambed over the line break, so it's already strongly stressed. The pause (caesura) immediately following it gives it an especially emphatic sound. The same thing happens with the word "*up*" in line 13:

> they fold their arms and **frown.** ***I*** *could beat you*
> ***up,*** **a** seven says to a six,

The three caesuras in line 8 set off brief snippets of dialogue:

> *How old are you? —Six. —I'm seven. —So?*

The poem squeezes four such snippets (divided by three caesuras) into a single line, highlighting the rapid-fire nature of the exchange. Rather than using quotation marks, it indicates divisions in the dialogue with dashes: a bit more efficient and dramatic!

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “men, men”
- **Line 6:** “jostling, jockeying,” “place, small”
- **Line 7:** “calming. One”
- **Line 8:** “you? —Six. —I'm seven. —So?”
- **Line 9:** “other, seeing”
- **Line 10:** “pupils. They”
- **Line 11:** “lot, a”
- **Lines 12-12:** “frown. / I”
- **Lines 13-13:** “up, / a”
- **Line 14:** “cake, round”
- **Line 15:** “turret, behind,” “table. My”
- **Line 18:** “boat, long”
- **Line 20:** “me, speaks”
- **Line 23:** “voice. The”
- **Line 24:** “agree, they”
- **Line 25:** “Generals, they”
- **Line 26:** “war, celebrating”

SIMILE

The speaker uses similes to describe her son and link the seemingly innocent world of childhood with the world of grown-up violence.

For example, the simile in lines 14-15 compares the "midnight cake" (a rich chocolate cake) to a "turret." The comparison makes sense because both items are "round," "heavy," and dark, but it has other implications, too. A *turret* can mean a tower on top of a larger structure, such as a castle or fort; it can also mean an armored structure on top of military equipment such as tanks and warships. In other words, it's generally associated with defense and war. The speaker sees this innocent cake as a "turret" because the birthday party has turned into a site of aggression and conflict—almost a miniature war zone. She fears that the boys who are now jostling and fighting each other will grow up to fight in real wars.

This comparison is followed by similes that illustrate how the speaker sees her son. He still has "freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks"; symbolically, freckles are often associated with youthful innocence. His "chest" is as "narrow as the balsa keel of a / model boat": that is, it's as thin as the ridge that runs lengthwise down the underside of a miniature boat. Model boats are often built by hobbyists, including kids, so this reference to a child's toy again highlights how young the birthday boy is. The speaker then compares her son's hands (in the present moment) to the way they looked and felt when she gave birth to him: "long," "cool," and "thin." In short, while her son and his friends like to imagine they're big and tough, she still sees her son (accurately) as small and physically vulnerable. She remembers when he was a newborn—the most vulnerable kind of human—and understands that he's still pretty fragile as a first-grader.

But the final simile (lines 24-25) suggests that he and the other boys are no longer as innocent as newborns. The speaker observes that "they clear their throats / like Generals" before acting out fantasies of war. She sees that they've begun to emulate adults, including powerful men (most military generals are male), in terms of both their mannerisms and their fascination with violence. They may even have begun to equate masculinity itself with toughness and aggression.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** “the midnight cake, round and heavy as a / turret,”
- **Lines 16-20:** “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,”
- **Lines 24-25:** “they clear their throats / like Generals,”

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help bring its portrait of rough-and-tumble boys to life.

First of all, the speaker refers to these boys as "men" in both line 3 and lines 23-24. They are "short men," "men in first grade / with smooth jaws and chins"; they "agree," as "men," that they could collectively kill a two-year-old. These descriptions have *some* literal truth to them, in that boys are smaller versions of the men they'll someday become. But the descriptions are also figurative (and comic), because little boys and grown men are significantly different in many respects. As with any metaphor, the poem is comparing two non-identical things in order to highlight similarities between them: specifically, the way little boys emulate grown men (and grown men retain some childish behaviors).

Line 6 uses the conventional metaphor "jockeying for place" to describe the way the boys competitively push each other aside, like jockeys vying for position in a horse race. Lines 10-11 compare them to "small bankers" as "They clear their throats" in an oddly grown-up, pompous-seeming way. Along with the simile "they clear their throats / like Generals" (lines 24-25), all these metaphors reinforce the idea that the boys are behaving like male adults.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** “short men, men in first grade / with smooth jaws and chins.”
- **Line 6:** “jockeying for place”
- **Lines 10-11:** “They clear their / throats a lot, a room of small bankers,”
- **Lines 23-24:** “The other / men agree,”

VOCABULARY

Jockeying (Lines 5-6) - Jostling or competing for a place, position, or status. A metaphor that comes from the way jockeys compete for position during a horse race.

Midnight cake (Lines 14-15) - A rich chocolate cake, here being served for the son's birthday.

Turret (Lines 14-15) - A small tower rising from a larger structure such as a castle or fort, typically used for military or defensive purposes. Can also refer to a weapon mount (gun turret) on a tank, battleship, etc.

Nutmeg (Line 16) - A fragrant brown spice.

Keel (Lines 17-18) - The ridge-like structure running along the center line of a boat's hull.

Balsa (Lines 17-18) - The lightweight wood of the balsa tree.

Model boat (Lines 17-18) - A miniature boat built by designers or hobbyists.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Rite of Passage" is written in free verse (it contains no meter or rhyme) and consists of a single long stanza. The lines range between five and twelve syllables in length, with most having eight to ten. Single-stanza poems whose lines are of roughly even length are sometimes called *stichic* poems.

The lack of formal structure gives "Rite of Passage" a natural, conversational style, while the lack of stanza breaks makes it cohesive. It unfolds as a single, uninterrupted, self-contained narrative, almost as if the speaker is describing events in real-time. In works of fiction, dialogue is typically set off by paragraph breaks, but in this poem, even the snippets of dialogue (lines 8, 12-13, and 22) are part of the unbroken flow of the single stanza.

This continuous flow might reflect the poem's busy, lively setting. If you've ever been to a young child's birthday party, you know that they're full of activity, often leaving guests and parents very little time to pause for breath!

METER

"Rite of Passage" is a free verse poem, meaning that it doesn't use meter or rhyme. It flows organically and conversationally, almost as if the speaker is narrating events in the moment.

This informal, conversational quality makes a good fit for the setting: a child's birthday party. (If the poet had imposed a metrical structure on the interactions among these first-graders, the result might have seemed forced and overly "poetic.") In general, Sharon Olds's poetry avoids both meter and rhyme. Her work often explores family life and intimate relationships in frank, confessional terms, and the conversational flow of her free verse suits this material well: it helps give the impression that she's "telling it straight."

RHYME SCHEME

"Rite of Passage" is written in free verse, so it doesn't contain a rhyme scheme. Instead, it unfolds in a natural, conversational style, as if the mother/speaker is simply describing a domestic scene as it happens. A rhyme scheme, meter, or other traditional formal elements would likely detract from this informal tone.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is the mother of a young boy, for whom she and her partner (referenced with the "our" in line 1) are hosting a birthday party in their home. The party guests are all six and seven years old, so the speaker's son, who's "in first grade" (line 3), is most likely turning seven.

Though she's supervising the party and may well have been responsible for the "midnight cake" being served (lines 14-15), the speaker doesn't do anything active in the poem. Instead, she observes the behavior of the boys, including her son. At the same time, her personality and feelings about their behavior come through strongly in her observations. With comic skepticism, she describes the boys as "short men," notes their "jockeying" for status and superiority, and points out the mannerisms they seem to have picked up from adults—including, perhaps, powerful or affluent men (lines 10-12):

> They clear their
> throats a lot, a room of small bankers,
> they fold their arms and frown.

Above all, she notices and is disturbed by their fascination with violence. Though her observations are partly funny and affectionate, they reflect a real concern for the attitudes these boys are adopting, including an early form of macho aggression. As a mother, she's especially concerned for her son, whom she tenderly recalls giving birth to (lines 18-20) and whom she still accurately sees as small and vulnerable (lines 17-18)—no matter how tough he may pretend to be.

Sharon Olds's poetry is known for its intimate depictions of her family and personal life. Although the speaker of "Rite of Passage" isn't *necessarily* Olds herself, the poem appears in a collection (*The Dead and the Living*, 1984) that contains extensive material based on Olds's real experience, so it's fair to assume that there's not much of a gap between poet and speaker here.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is the speaker's home, where she and her partner are hosting a birthday party for their son. Since all the birthday boy's friends are either six or seven, it's likely that he's just turning seven.

The speaker is specifically hosting the party in her "living room," a term that ties in with the themes of the poem. Since the boys are gathered to "celebrat[e] my son's life," and since the speaker treasures that life (she tenderly recalls giving birth to him), it's ironic that the boys celebrate by "playing war." The *living* room becomes the site of their fantasies about violence and death.

The speaker notes that the room contains a table and a birthday cake, but otherwise, there's not much description of the physical environment. The poem focuses more on the people *in* this setting than the setting itself.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sharon Olds (b. 1942) is a contemporary American poet and the author of 14 poetry collections (including *Strike Sparks*, her 2004 volume of selected poems). "Rite of Passage" was published in her 1984 collection *The Dead and the Living*, which won the prestigious National Book Critics' Circle Award in poetry. She also won a Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for her 2013 collection *Stag's Leap*.

The Dead and the Living is divided into two main sections: "Poems for the Dead" and "Poems for the Living." The first section contains elegies and reminiscences about deceased family members, historical figures, and celebrities; the second section contains detailed portraits of living family members, lovers, and friends. "Rite of Passage" appears in the second section, in a sub-section called "The Children." It's no coincidence that this poem "for the Living" takes place in a "living room" (line 2): both a family setting and a setting that prompts reflections on life and death.

Olds's work is deeply, sometimes painfully candid in its depictions of love, sex, violence, and family life. Its use of raw personal material has earned her comparisons to 20th-century "Confessionalist" poets such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell, although she has resisted this comparison. "Rite of Passage" isn't as intensely personal as some of her poems, but it does incorporate potentially awkward material (i.e., the aggressive behavior of a son and his friends) that may be rooted in real-life family experience.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Rite of Passage" doesn't directly refer to historical events. However, it was published about a decade after the end of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, a long, bloody conflict that spawned widespread anti-war sentiment in America and abroad. Olds (who was born during World War II) was a young adult throughout the "Vietnam era," as it became known in America. Many American poets of that era protested the war directly, both in their writing and their communities. Olds has written about her own involvement in such protest in the poem "May 1968" and cited the anti-war poetry of that period as an influence on her work.

Olds's poetry career began after the end of the Vietnam War, but she had her first child in 1969, during the height of the conflict. Since hundreds of thousands of young people—including an estimated 84,000 Vietnamese children—died in that conflict, "Rite of Passage" may reflect Olds's parental fears that her own child(ren) might someday become embroiled in such violence. The speaker is clearly disturbed at her son's (and his friends') fascination with violence, including their emulation of "Generals" and their love of "playing war." Unlike her son, who casually imagines "*kill[ing] a two-year-old*," she's intensely aware of the value of life and the way childhood war games can lead to real ones.

While it isn't linked to a particular conflict, then, "Rite of Passage" can be read as an anti-war or anti-violence statement, written in the shadow of the Vietnam War and the protest literature surrounding it.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Watch Olds read "Rite of Passage" (starting at 18:35). (https://youtu.be/b4en5YkXyuc?t=1115)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A biography of Olds at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sharon-olds)
- An Interview with the Poet — Olds discusses the challenges of writing about family. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3O3X3BVhfE)
- A Talk by the Poet — Watch Olds deliver a lecture on the craft of poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36f5b5bl0-g)
- The Poet's Website — Browse books and media related to Sharon Olds at her website. (https://www.sharonolds.net/)

HOW TO CITE

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