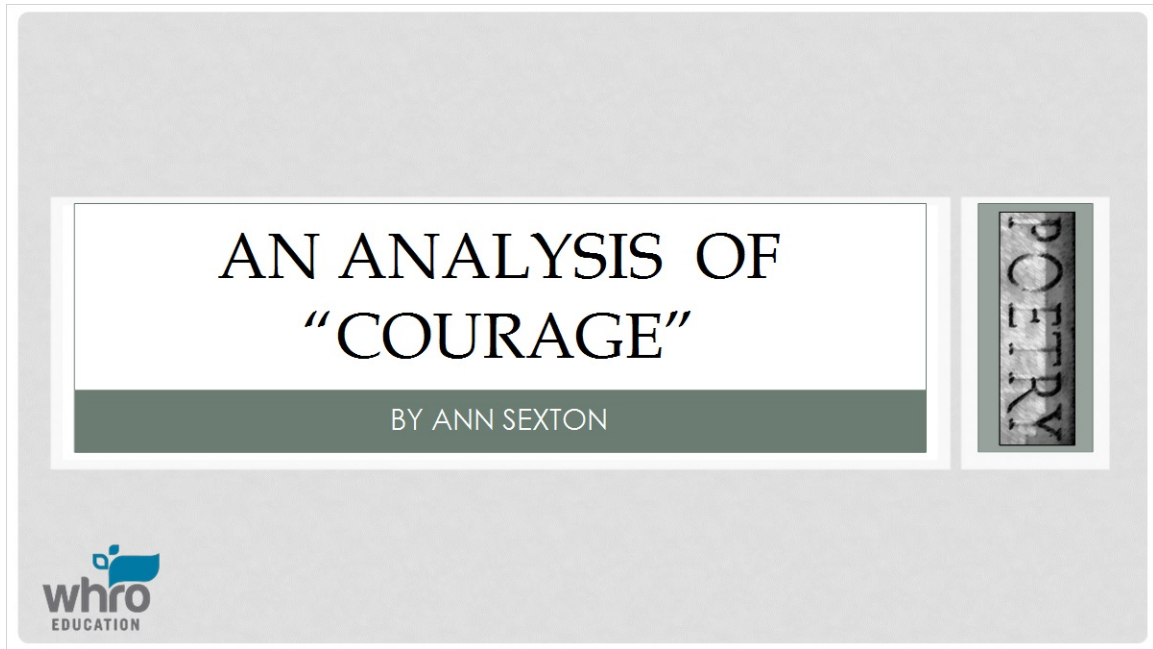


Module 4: Self-Discovery Through Facing Life's Obstacles
Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

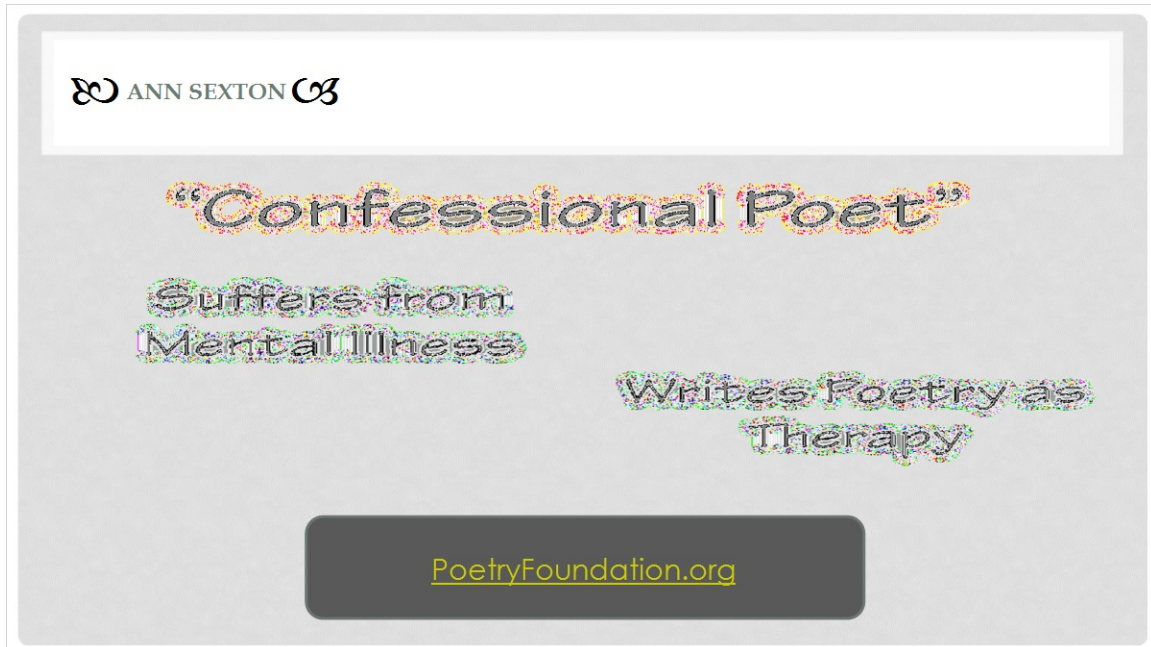
Introduction



An analysis of "Courage" by Ann Sexton.

Module 4: Self-Discovery Through Facing Life's Obstacles Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

Ann Sexton



Ann Sexton is known as a “confessional poet” due to her style of poetry. Born in Newton, Massachusetts in 1928, Sexton lived a normal life until giving birth to her first child. After the birth of the child, she suffered from extreme post-partum depression. The depression worsened after she gave birth a second time and she was hospitalized for mental illness. For therapy, she wrote poems. Her poetry focused on personal feelings and her mental health. This style of poetry is what helped her to become known as a “confessional poet.” You can read more about Ann Sexton and her life at the Poetry Foundation website. What follows is a reading of her poem “Courage.”

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Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

"Courage" Stanza One

∞ "COURAGE" STANZA ONE ∞

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 crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien,
you drank their acid
and concealed it.

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 crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien,
you drank their acid
and concealed it.

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"Courage" Stanza Two

∞ "COURAGE" STANZA TWO ∞

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 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.

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"Courage" Stanza Three

∞ "COURAGE" STANZA THREE ∞

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,
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.

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"Courage" Stanza Four

∞ "COURAGE" STANZA FOUR ∞

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

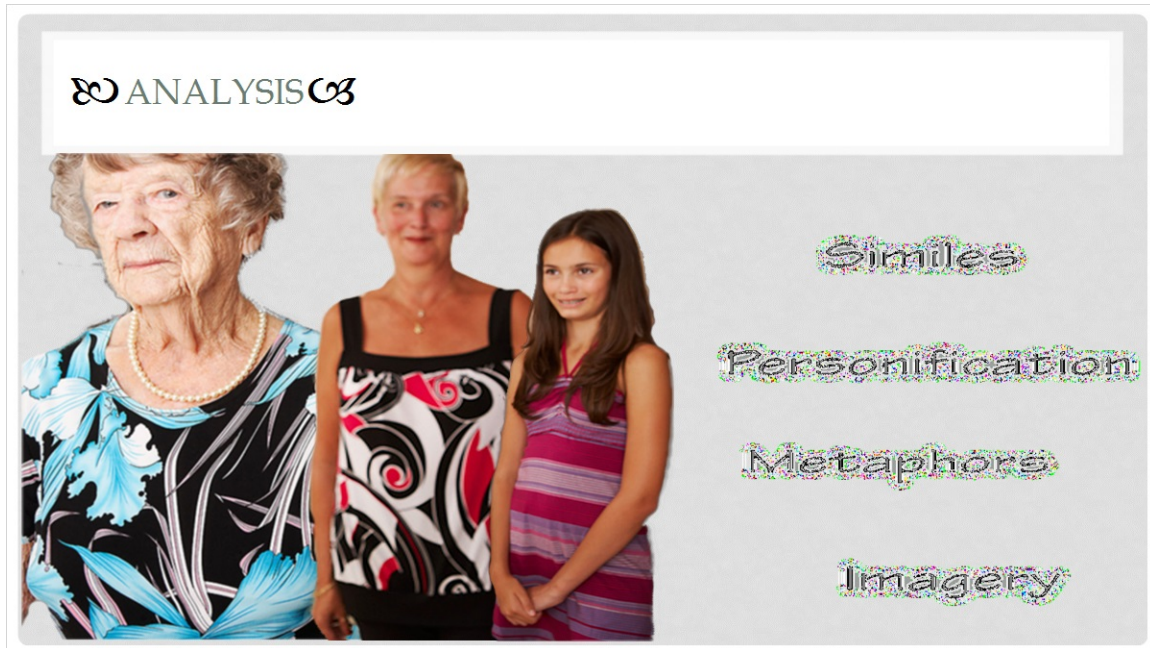
--Ann Sexton

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
when death opens the back door
you'll put on your carpet slippers
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Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

Analysis



As you may have noticed, the poem takes you through each of the stages of life. The poem uses figurative language such as similes, personification, metaphors, along with imagery to tell the story of a human's life from childhood to old age. "Courage" is the story of how resilient a human being can be when faced with even the most difficult of circumstances.

Module 4: Self-Discovery Through Facing Life's Obstacles

Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

Interpretation

∞ INTERPRETATION ∞

It is in the small things we see it.
The child's first step,
as awesome as an earthquake. ← Simile
The first time you rode a bike,
wallowing up the sidewalk. ← Metaphor
The first spanking when your heart
went on a journey all alone.
When they called you crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien, ← Metaphor
you drank their acid ← Metaphor
and concealed it.

The title of the poem is "Courage," but the word courage is never used. In the first line, courage is referenced as the word "it." Courage is the theme of this poem and "it" is courage. All items that follow are examples of courage. All of the examples in the first stanza are from early childhood. This is a time of many firsts. This is when a human being is most vulnerable. Sexton suggests that vulnerability leads to suffering and suffering is repressed. The last lines of the stanza prove this; "You drank their acid/and concealed it." In these lines, "they" are the bullies and the acid is the terrible words that bullies often speak. By concealing the terrible words, the child is repressing or holding their feelings inside. Please take a moment to examine the figurative language that Sexton uses in stanza one.

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Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

Interpretation

∞ INTERPRETATION ∞

Later,
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner, ← Metaphor
you did it with only a hat to
cover your heart.

You did not fondle the weakness inside you ← Metaphor
though it was there.

Your courage was a small coal ← Metaphor
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. ← Simile

The second stanza begins with the word “Later,” telling you that the poem is now discussing a time after childhood, possibly young adulthood. In this stanza, Sexton discusses how courage can take different forms during adolescence, especially during times of war. The second line of the stanza speaks of, “if you faced the death of bombs and bullets.” In these lines, Sexton is speaking to those who have used their courage in war. It is the many young adults that face the great wars in American history. Again, the idea of repression is present in this stanza. Sexton uses the lines, “Your courage was a small coal/that you kept swallowing.” Sexton also refers to courage as a love in the last lines of the stanza, “it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.” Please take a moment to examine the figurative language that Sexton uses in stanza two.

Module 4: Self-Discovery Through Facing Life's Obstacles

Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

Interpretation

∞ INTERPRETATION ∞

Later,
if you have endured a great despair,
then you did it alone,
getting a transfusion from the fire, ← Metaphor
picking the scabs off your heart,
then wringing it out like a sock.
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow, ← Metaphor
you gave it a back rub ← Personification
and then you covered it with a blanket ← Personification
and after it had slept a while ← Personification
it woke to the wings of the roses ← Personification
and was transformed.

The third stanza begins with the word “Later” meaning that the poem is now discussing a time after young adulthood. In this stanza, Sexton uses imagery to describe how you could heal after being hurt emotionally. She uses the word “fire” to represent pain. Sexton also describes how you could heal painfully over time by removing the scars and draining out the bad blood, “picking the scabs off your heart,/then wringing it out like a sock.” Or, the healing processes could be treated much differently like you would treat a newborn baby, “you powdered your sorrow,/you gave it a back rub/and then you covered it with a blanket.” Here, Sexton describes a completely different way to heal emotionally. Again, the usage of imagery is vivid in each description of the healing processes. The last three lines of the stanza describe an ancient mythological bird, the phoenix. After dying, a phoenix will burn to ashes and will then rise from those ashes in a rebirth. The phoenix will then go on living for a very long time. Sexton uses this image to show that if a human takes care of himself or herself and heals their wounds, then they can also “rise” from their ashes and can be “reborn.” Please take a moment to examine the figurative language that Sexton uses in stanza three.

Module 4: Self-Discovery Through Facing Life's Obstacles

Topic 3 Content: An Analysis of "Courage"

Interpretation

∞ INTERPRETATION ∞

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

← Metaphor
← Personification
← Personification

--Ann Sexton

Using the same starting word as in the second and third stanza, the final stanza begins with the word "Later" meaning that the poem is now discussing a time in old age. This stanza describes someone's courage as they approach the end of their life and try to find hope. Please take a moment to examine the figurative language that Sexton uses in stanza four.