

Name

Teacher Name

Class

Date

Poet Spotlight: Sharon Olds

Born in San Francisco in 1942, Sharon Olds has become one of America's most well-known and critically praised poets. She has published numerous collections of poetry, including *The Dead and the Living* (1984), which received the national Book Critics Circle Award. Considered a “confessional poet,” Olds typically writes about her own life, as she does in these two poems about her children growing up and the effect it has on her as a mother.



“My Son the Man”

Suddenly his shoulders get a lot wider,
 the way Houdini would expand his body
 while people were putting him in chains. It seems
 no time since I would help him to put on his sleeper,
 guide his calves into the gold interior,
 zip him up and toss him up and
 catch his weight. I cannot imagine him
 no longer a child, and I know I must get ready,
 get over my fear of men now my son
 is going to be one. This was not
 what I had in mind when he pressed up through me like a
 sealed trunk through the ice of the Hudson,
 snapped the padlock, unsnaked the chains,
 and appeared in my arms. Now he looks at me
 the way Houdini studied a box
 to learn the way out, then smiled and let himself be manacled.

This is Harry Houdini, the magician, just before he is sealed into a trunk and dumped into the Hudson River, in a famous illusion that becomes an extended metaphor in “My Son the Man.”



1. The poem makes use of a literary device known as a “conceit” or an extended metaphor, in which an author repeats a comparison multiple times throughout a text. In this case, the speaker makes three separate comparisons between her son and the famous magician Harry Houdini. For each of the following lines from the poem, explain how the reference to Houdini reveals a different aspect of the relationship between the speaker and her son:

a. “His shoulders get a lot wider/ the way Houdini would expand his body/ while people were putting him in chains...”(Lines 1-3)

b. “When he pressed up through me like a/ sealed trunk through the ice of the Hudson,/ snapped the padlock, unsnaked the chains,/ appeared in my arms....” (Lines 11-14)

c. “He looks at me/ the way Houdini studied a box/ to learn the way out...” (Lines 14-16)

2. Now that you have explored the individual parts of the extended Houdini metaphor, explain the overall purpose of the comparison. What is Sharon Olds saying about the relationships between mothers and sons by using the multiple comparisons to Houdini?

3. The final lines of the poem bring the situation into the present, as the son looks at his mother and smiles like Houdini does before he lets “himself be manacled” (Line 16). From the point of view of the speaker, is this a sinister or a playful smile, or something else?

4. Read the following definition of mood. Then, **answer the questions** below in full sentences.

◆ **Mood**

a literary element that evokes certain feelings or vibes in readers through words and descriptions.

Usually, mood is referred to as the atmosphere of a literary piece, as it creates an emotional situation that surrounds the readers. Mood is developed in a literary piece through various methods. It can be developed through setting, theme, tone and diction.

Example

Charles Dickens creates a calm and peaceful mood in his novel *Pickwick Papers*:
 “The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on.”

(The depiction of idyllic scenery imparts a serene and non-violent mood to the readers.)

Questions:

1. What is the **mood** of the poem? THESIS JOOS.

J ustifies discussion	<i>Write your thesis statement here.</i>
O pinion	
O ne main idea	
S pecific	

2. Write (at least) one line below that you think best demonstrates the **mood** of the poem.

Quote #1	
Line Number(s)	