Poetry Final Assessment: *Courage* by Anne Sexton

Courage is typically associated with bravery, valor, or fearlessness and is reminiscent of rather heroic images. Anne Sexton, however, asserts a new perspective on the trait in her poem *Courage*. Such a perspective opens up the reader to the idea that courage does not have to be a heroic feat; instead, it can be shown in life's everyday occurrences. By using diction, juxtaposition, and repetition, Sexton conveys her idea that courage is a characteristic of humanity that possesses the ability to exist at any time within any given individual and thrive under various circumstances. Essentially, courage is not meant to be regarded as a special quality; rather, it is to be recognized simply for its existence in human life.

With her use of diction, Anne Sexton communicates the idea that any individual can possess courage. By selecting the personal pronoun “you” to appear frequently in her poem, she creates a means for every member of her audience to personally connect with the meaning of her writing. According to Sexton, courage appears in the small things in life such as when others call “you crybaby ... and [make] you into an alien,” and rather than giving up, “you [drink] their acid and conceal it” (8-12). If Sexton had written her poem as a dramatic monologue in the first-person, such as the works of Robert Browning, the individuals of the audience might have become overly focused on the speaker rather than trying to connect the meaning to their own experiences. By predominantly using “you” in *Courage*, Anne Sexton is clearly making an address to her readers, allowing them to realize that by living through common difficulties such as name-calling, they can show courage. Sexton continues her use of “you” by writing, “when you face old age and its natural conclusion/ your courage will still be shown in the little ways” (39-40). In these lines, if “you” and “your” are replaced with “I” and “my” respectively, the
focus of the poem would shift significantly. Again, the individuals of the audience would apply the circumstances of the poem to the speaker rather than themselves. Therefore, the use of “you” is crucial to Sexton's efforts to convey that courage resides in all individuals.

By juxtaposing images that depict the different stages of life, Anne Sexton emphasizes that courage is present under varying conditions. She first introduces courage as being in “the child's first step” (2) only to jump quickly to courage being shown in facing “the death of bombs and bullets” (14) one stanza later. Learning how to walk and trying to survive are both dramatically different challenges in life. Despite these differences, courage is present through both situations, for from a child's perspective, learning how to walk is equivalent in difficulty to an adult soldier trying to survive on the battlefield. According to Sexton, courage is also “shown in the little ways ... [when] you'll bargain with the calendar” (40, 43). Facing death is in a different realm in comparison to learning how to walk or survival. Anne Sexton even states death to be as simple as “put[ting] on your carpet slippers and strid[ing] out” (46-47), which is a stark contrast to the child's first step being “as awesome as an earthquake” (3). Such contrast in life's stages highlights courage's ability to exist under any circumstance.

The thematic idea that courage can exist in a constant state is supported by the combination of repetition with the previously discussed use of juxtaposition. Not only does the poem contain examples of life's stages such as childhood and old age, it also mentions “endur[ing] a great despair” which inevitably leads to courage “[waking] to the wings of the roses/ and [being] transformed” (27, 36-37). These particular lines indicate a new chapter in life, particularly through the word “endure.” The overall tone of the circumstances have also become more challenging compared to childhood, much like the tone set by the “bombs and bullets”
mentioned previously. Nevertheless, courage is present even if it must be transformed. Repetition reinforces the idea that time has passed by repeating the word “later” (13, 26, 38). Each *later* emphasizes the shift of courage from one chapter of life to the next, while juxtaposition describes the ways courage appears at each stage. Although each stage of life is depicted differently, Anne Sexton's repetition of *later* creates of feeling of consistency, making courage appear to be ever-present in life. Essentially, this repetition paired with juxtaposition causes courage to develop a strong sense of continuity.

*Courage* serves as an address to the individuals of Sexton's audience which communicates the concept that courage is an everyday characteristic of humanity. Through her use of literary features, Sexton takes the uniqueness out of possessing courage as a trait. The use of “you” personalizes the meaning of the poem to every individual reader, allowing each reader to recognize the courage within him or herself. Meanwhile, juxtaposition and repetition emphasize that courage reveals itself in any situation at any given time. Plainly stated, courage does not have a special moment in which it blossoms within a person. Instead, it is characteristic that has integrated itself as part of being human.