

The Victims

by Sharon Olds

When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and took it in silence, all those years and then kicked you out, suddenly, and her kids loved it. Then you were fired, and we grinned inside, the way people grinned when Nixon's helicopter lifted off the South Lawn for the last time. We were tickled to think of your office taken away, your secretaries taken away, your lunches with three double bourbons, your pencils, your reams of paper. Would they take your suits back, too, those dark carcasses hung in your closet, and the black noses of your shoes with their large pores? She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it until we pricked with her for your annihilation, Father. Now I pass the bums in doorways, the white slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their suits of compressed silt, the stained flippers of their hands, the underwater fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and took it from them in silence until they had given it all away and had nothing left but this.

Poetry Explication

- Introduce the reader to the poem: include title and author of poem and include a brief summary of the content.
- Discuss the beginning of the poem (first stanza or first segment before the poem seems to change theme or mood). What's a specific technique you notice? What's a specific diction choice that affects the meaning?
- Discuss the middle of the poem. Techniques? Diction choice?
- Discuss the end of the poem. Techniques? Diction choice?
- Summarize briefly on the significance of the poem. Look back on the title of the poem to see if it reflects anything important about theme or meaning.
- Aim for 250-300 words

Poem Explication: “The Victims”

Sharon Olds’ poem “The Victims” tells a child’s view of a parents’ divorce. The poem is divided into two main sections: the first part in the past tense showing the speaker as a child and the last section in the present tense with the speaker as an adult trying to make sense of past events. The first section creates a negative tone toward the father, who is painted as a villain by “Mother,” who “took it” from him “in silence” until she finally “kicked [him] out.” Instead of having any sympathy for him, the children were taught “to hate you and take it” and the children seem to have followed this direction very well. While the poem never says specifically what Father did to justify his family’s hatred, the speaker hints he could have had an affair (“your secretaries”) or could have been an alcoholic (“your lunches with three double bourbons”), but clearly he misused his power and his kids “grinned” at his disaster like they did when President Nixon resigned. Line 17, with its strong diction (“annihilation”), caesura, switch to present tense and first person, shows the switch to the second section which is stranger and more abstract. This section, with long metaphor (comparing “bums in doorways” to some kind of strange underwater creatures) and alliteration of the creepy “s” sound, shows the speaker wondering about the other victim of the situation; maybe it was her father and those like him who actually lost out, victimized by their own bad behavior. Whatever it is, the first person “I,” now away from her mother’s bitterness, ends the poem seeing how many people were “The Victims” of this bad situation.

279 words