

Bana, thank you for this perceptive essay. You focused on the two extremes expressed in the short story: 1) becoming a quadriplegic can be so devastating it can lead to thoughts of suicide 2) with love and humor, it is possible to go on living. I was also impressed by your insight regarding Ralph. When you wrote that he no longer thought of suicide, I realized that everything we know about him is inferential. We never hear directly anything about his feelings or thoughts. Yet you are absolutely right – with a careful reading, we come to learn a lot about his life. Good for you for discovering another reason why this story has a happy ending!

Extremely good work, Jamie. Thank you for taking such a brave risk to share something of your own personal struggle. I hope that by facing the details of your own suicidal thoughts and gestures, they have lost some of their power. Perhaps because you have seen this circumstance from the inside out, your insights are profound. You are absolutely right that suicide is all about a final possibility to exercise control when life seems completely out of and beyond one's control. Also, as you suggest, although it is a self-directed act, it also expresses hostility toward others all those whom the suicide wishes to punish. Finally, you write with great discernment about the tone Kaysen chose to tell her story, and understood it deeply. Kaysen uses an edge in writing to avoid sentimentality, and self-pity. I agree with you that this approach draws in the reader, no matter how unwillingly, simply because there is no place to hide.

Thank you again for trusting me with this piece of your story. I'm very glad that you're here to share it.

Khor Xin, I really liked the way you tied in the poem you chose into the larger themes of the class. You showed excellent insight: Each of these parents has a story that is broken, and whether through the support group or on his or her own, each is going to have to try to construct a new, more healing story. Your discussion of the analogy of the parents' pain to a hot potato is first-rate. And of course "hot potato" is a children's game, which underlines the ironic tragedy of these adolescents, all of whom are so far away from childish play. Finally, you have an accurate insight that parents will always have great guilt about their children's problems. Although the narrator is doubtful about whether "anything can help," in fact you are correct that it is through the process of sharing and listening that they will begin to form new narratives. You demonstrated outstanding work in a short space!

Good work, Steve. You know, I have a rule that if I read a poem twice and still can't understand it, I throw it away. Sometimes simple is best. And then again, sometimes complexity is what's required. If you compare this poem to "EKG" (by Paula Tartunis, in the Heart module), you'll notice that the former is simple and straightforward, while the latter is extremely intricate, dense, and erudite, they express common emotions – pain and suffering. The point I'm trying to make is that people need to find their own voice to say how they feel, and when they do, it's authentic and believable. You did an excellent job of paying attention to pivotal aspects the poem – the dual personalities of the mother, depending on whether she is drunk or sober; the short lines conveying loneliness; and how the use of the first person ("I") inevitably draws in the reader. Good job.

Starlett, I'm glad you chose this poem to write about. It's one of my favorites. Szyborska is a Polish poet who has won the Nobel Prize for literature. You understood perfectly how she uses the objects and artifacts of the room to reconstruct the personality and passions of the suicide. She also powerfully develops another theme – how the living betray the dead, how they too often do not pay attention until it is too late. It is a beautifully written poem and I'm glad you enjoyed it.

Lisha, you made a very good selection. Often we are attracted to stories or poems because something about them resonates with our own lives. In this case, tragically, you and your family has experienced twice over the terrible price that a stroke can exact. This may make you especially sensitive to the bewilderment and loss expressed in this poem. And you're absolutely right – the central theme here is loss of self. Jordan even has to change his name to “Joe” because that's all he can utter. Since not only the physical body is damaged by stroke, but cognitions and emotions, it's no wonder people feel they are no longer who they once were. It can be an overwhelmingly frustrating experience. Whenever I read this poem, however, I always receive some solace from the last lines, which suggest that the “road back” to one's identity can be found through the support of family and friends. I sincerely hope your grandmother is doing well.

Saemyi, I loved the title of your essay. You tell an interesting and touching story. A few years ago, I did a research project examining the lives of persons with disabilities as they aged. I well remember one man who had cerebral palsy telling me about his marriage. At one point I asked him, “How did you discuss your disability with your future wife?” He paused for a moment, then replied, “You know, we've never actually discussed it.” I was surprised to hear this, but on reflection I realized that people only talk about what they think is important, and in their case, the disability simply wasn't very important to them. Perhaps you initially didn't notice your friend's disability because it wasn't as important to you as other qualities she possessed. I also admire the value you place on being able to understand what your friend “feels inside at her heart.” I suspect that, as your friendship progresses, you will each learn more about the struggles, suffering, dreams, and hopes of the other. That mutuality is what friendship is all about.

Brent, I'm happy to see you decided to write about “Silver Water,” it is one of my favorite stories. It is incredibly sad, but also incredibly courageous and beautiful. Your essay is particularly well-written and well-thought through. You note all the salient features of this work – its humor, its poignancy, and most importantly, how we choose to construct memory. In effect, this story is written in defiance of schizophrenia and suicide. The author asserts – even demands – that what survives is not the terrible disease or the ghastly act, but her sister's voice, and her mother's conclusion that her daughters, both of them, are “warriors.” Despite the tragic outcome, this is a story of hope and survival.

Hi Carrie. You make a poignant connection between the literal darkness of the corner in which the narrator sits, and the metaphorical darkness of alcoholism that shadowed her childhood. At the same time you recognize that darkness can represent safety in the

sense that in might provide a shelter in which the little girl can hide. Very nice – this is creative and discerning thinking! I have a slightly different interpretation of the final lines. As I read them, the narrator does retain love, perhaps unconditional, for her mother. But there is an incredible poignancy in that she misses not only the mother, but also the “loneliness” because that was the prevailing experience of her childhood. Thus, the poem is full of love, but also full of hurt and regret.

Valerie, I really admire your courage in using this class to reflect on the death of your mother. It is so tough to lose your mom at any age, but especially when you are young. Your account of your mom insisting on returning to her family when she was first diagnosed showed so much awareness and sensitivity. You saw clearly your mother’s fear and her longing, something very hard for a child to witness in a parent. It also seems that her family was a tremendous source of strength, inspiration, and comfort to her. From what you write, she sounds like a brave and loving woman. I bet you are a lot like her.

Roxanne, thank you for sharing your personal experience with your cousin, as well as your own struggles with body image. Having raised two daughters, I am well aware of all the societal, peer, and media pressures toward thinness. Too many girls succumb to these influences, and develop actual eating disorders that, as you correctly point out, can be life-threatening. It was a brave and caring act to intervene on your cousin’s behalf. Bulimia and anorexia are genuine psychological disorders that, although they often respond to SSRI anti-depressants, are difficult to treat. They usually cannot be cured simply by the advice or even support of friends and family, but without this crucial first step, the patient is unlikely to get help. Good for you for taking this initiative and good for you for learning from your cousin’s struggles.

Ashley, your essay demonstrates a deep and sensitive reading of the excerpt from William Styron’s book. One of the most common misconceptions about depression is that it is just a kind of sadness that people can be “cheered” out of. The reality is that depression is a serious psychological disorder that can create profound disturbances in the sufferer’s sleeping and eating patterns, energy, concentration, as well as mood. I also liked the way you connected this essay with your first. It shows evidence of your engagement with this course, actively working to integrate what might be extracted in common from the various readings. The conclusion is absolutely great! It acknowledges the possibility that mind and brain are distinct; and further, as Frank suggests, that while the brain may be a scientific puzzle to be solved, mind contains an element of mystery that should be approached with awe and reverence. This is really impressive work.

Kathy, thank you for disclosing your own past thoughts of suicide as part of this essay. I agree, many people contemplate suicide with varying degrees of seriousness at some point in their lifetimes, often in response to seemingly insurmountable problems or resulting from the grip of depression. As you’re probably aware, suicidal thoughts and actions are also increasingly common among adolescents, so you’re far from alone. Your reading of Millay’s poem is very astute. I agree with your interpretation contrasting the light tone with the grimness of the topic. This discrepancy makes the poem even more

disturbing, in my reading. The narrator acknowledges that she “often” thinks about killing herself, and her primary deterrents seem only the conventional lessons dinned into her about not making messes or wasting things. She seems to think that her death would be less than the disturbance it would make. This in itself would make me very worried about this child. There is only one thing I’d disagree with you about. You shouldn’t feel ashamed of your thoughts. Knowing your own experience and that of your friend will help you to better understand these impulses when you see them as a medical student and doctor.

Nicki, I’m glad you chose this poem to comment on, it is a really interesting one. Your thoughts about it are really perceptive. You get right to the heart of the matter – is mental disorder insanity or simply difference? My own view is that schizophrenia, from which this narrator suffers, is a devastating condition that causes horrific suffering to both patient and family members (look at the story “Silver Water” to get an idea about this). These patients can truly be helped by drugs. On the other hand, I think our society is all too ready to label any kind of difference as deviance that must be corrected. What the narrator in this poem is saying is that he only wants to be allowed to be himself. Often it’s more difficult to honor this desire than it seems. But at the very least, we need to listen with respect and empathy to the voices of these individuals. I really liked your willingness to enter into the perspective of this patient. It can be particularly scary to get close to the mind of a person with mental disturbance. By walking in his shoes for a few moments, you increase your ability to truly understand him. You come to a conclusion that has pervasive implications for how we as a society respond to difference. Excellent work!