Lia’s assignment: Find a problem, tension, or complication that emerges from your textual analysis of a particular aspect of Nancy Mairs’ essay “Carnal Acts,” and craft an argument about your textual analysis so that it helps a reader understand Mairs’ essay in a more nuanced way. You should not use any additional sources.

Lia X.
University Writing

What makes me Vulnerable makes me Beautiful

In her essay “Carnal Acts,” Nancy Mairs explores the relationship between how she copes with her multiple sclerosis disability and how she finds her voice as a writer. She discovers that the vehicle linking her disability to her voice is shame, or indeed, the subversion of shame. Ultimately, she concludes that whilst her bodily disability is the source of shame, her voice acts as the antidote to shame:

Paradoxically, losing one sort of nerve has given me another. No one is going to take my breath away. No one is going to leave me speechless. To be silent is to comply with the standard of feminine grace. But my crippled body already violates all notions of feminine grace. What more have I got to lose? I’ve gone beyond shame. I’m shameless, you might say. You know, as in ‘shameless hussy’? A woman with her bare brace and her tongue hanging out. (Mairs, 281)

If readers are presented with this quotation alone, we may be under the illusion that Mairs has always displayed courage in the face of hardship. Yet this is not how Mairs chooses to
portray herself. Prior to this point in the essay, Mairs recounts numerous experiences where she falters under harsh societal norms. Rather than hiding the elements that make her feel shameful, she exposes her vulnerabilities in an honest way. This forces readers to contend with a paradox: How does Mairs achieve the effect of appearing courageous in the eyes of her readers despite presenting herself as a vulnerable character?

From the beginning, Mairs presents her disability as something she is ashamed of. She describes what it is like to suffer from MS, which “trips you even when you’re watching where you’re going, knocks glassware out of your hand, squeezes the urine out of your bladder before you reach the bathroom, and weights your whole body with a weariness no amount of rest can relieve” (Mairs, 269). The four verbs used in this compound sentence (“trips”, “knocks”, “squeezes”, “weights”) are all action verbs with a strong sense of movement and direction. The common ending, “s”, prolongs the vowel to creating a hissing sound, which creates a sinister feeling. In particular, the monosyllabic verbs “trips” and “knocks” convey a sense of unpredictability and suddenness, for readers immediately call to mind the image of someone falling over. This image of someone falling over is strengthened with Mairs’ choice to pair the description with “glassware” and “urine”. Whilst “glassware” necessarily shatters and is potentially hurtful when knocked over, spilled “urine” is pungent and hard to clean up. We are thus presented with the harsh reality of the life of a MS patient: Not only do MS patients never know when their disease is going to knock them off their feet, they also have to deal with the chaotic aftermath of their fall. The hidden irony is that this description can easily be likened to describe the carelessness of a child. This paints the image that a MS patient is not only dependent, but also incredibly vulnerable.
On top of being a MS patient, Mairs’ sense of shame is made more pronounced by the simple fact that she is a woman. This idea is explicitly conveyed in “let the word for my external genitals tell the tale: my pudendum, from the Latin infinitive meaning ‘to be ashamed’” (Mairs, 272). Her rhetorical choice of words (“let the word”) not only sets a tone of absolutism, but also implies that her argument is so sound that no further elaboration is necessary. It’s as if she’s proclaiming with authority, let me tell you, a single word is sufficient to convey what I mean! Indeed, the fact that “pudendum”, literally referring to the external genitals of women, traces its etymology back to the Latin root pudere “be ashamed”, is a shocking revelation. Not only does this synthesize Mairs’ argument that women are subject to more bodily shame than men, it also reveals a deeper, more disturbing reality – this bodily gender bias is embedded in society, conceived throughout history. This effectively renders Mairs extremely vulnerable, for like the permanence of MS, her gender is something she cannot change.

By recounting the shame she experiences because of her body, Mairs insinuates a central idea: vulnerability is what underpins shame. Instead of trying to conceal the things that make her shameful, she exposes them to her readers, rendering herself vulnerable. In the process of doing so, she ties her vulnerability back to who she is – her vulnerability, stemming from her gender and disability, is part of her identity. Thus, it becomes “doubly” (Mairs, 272) powerful when Mairs transforms this vulnerability into courage through her voice. “Speaking out loud”, she finds, “is an antidote to shame” (Mairs, 276).

This courage is made all the more compelling as Mairs presents her vulnerability as a universal condition by raising it into “the plain light of shared human experience” (Mairs, 277). By refusing to conform to the “rules of polite discourse” (Mairs, 276), she subverts her shame by talking about topics that society shames and views as taboo. As opposed to speaking like all the
other “nice girls” (Mairs, 276), she speaks openly about “sweat” and “menstrual blood” as well as her experience in “suicide” and “rape” (Mairs, 280). These topics are considered unladylike, repulsive even, and in normal circumstances are precisely the experiences that would render her vulnerable. We know they are considered taboo by the repetitive whispers of her mother and grandmother screaming “Don’t tell! Don’t tell! Don’t tell!” (Mairs, 276) Yet we also know that they are universal from the understanding chorus of “Me too! Me too!” (Mairs, 277)

What can be seen on the surface as an outright submission to shame in the penultimate paragraph of the essay (that I quoted above) is therefore not conveyed as a sign of weakness. Much the contrary, it demonstrates unexpected courage in Mairs, both as a patient with MS and as a writer.

Implicitly, Mairs shows courage in the different words and images she chooses to use in this quotation. Whilst the word “shame” has already appeared seventeen times in the essay prior to this point, it is the first time Mairs mentions its antonym “shameless”. This rhetorical choice signifies a key paradigm shift within the essay. Rather than talking about shame, Mairs has gone beyond shame; she is shameless.

Linguistically, the lines “No one is going to take my breath away. No one is going to leave me speechless” demonstrate a strong resolve in tone. The syntax (both lines have ten syllables), the evident parallelism in sentence structure, and the repetition of the words “no one” all underline Mairs’ determination to not be defined by the things that make her vulnerable. This is further emphasized by the fact that “shame” is repeated three times within this short quotation - once in “shame” and twice in “shameless”. The high frequency in which the same word repeats itself is almost as if the word is being spat out, possibly even interpreted as with a vengeance.
This creates the impression that Mairs is fed up with talking about shame that she finds the need to redefine herself, hence the use of the new word “shameless”.

Fundamentally, Mairs does not leave out her vulnerable side even though this quotation is essentially a declaration of courage. She includes her vulnerability in mentioning “losing one sort of nerve”, in the words “speechless” and “silent”, and in the self-deprecating label “hussy”. The very coarse nature of the consonant “s” creates an almost violent urgency in her tone and the sibilance makes it impossible to ignore these vulnerable elements she chooses to emphasize. Indeed, the inclusion of this vulnerability is precisely what makes this quotation so powerful and her courage so gripping.

By showing how vulnerability underpins shame, Mairs is able to subvert shame and rise above it, trumping and winning against the very concept of shame. Paradoxically, it is only by embracing her vulnerability that she is able to demonstrate courage. She is courageous both as a MS patient and as a writer because she defies societal expectations and breaks out of societal norms. As readers, we are forced to consider whether or not we have the courage to do the same.

Word Count (including in-text citations): 1376

Works Cited