Ethics 2 Essay, Research Paper

Ethics

In Linda Pastan s poem “Ethics,” the speaker recounts a moral dilemma that her teacher would ask every fall, which has been haunting her for a long time. The question was “if there were a fire in a museum / which would you save, a Rembrandt painting / or an old woman who hadn t many / years left anyhow?” and the speaker tells us through the theme that ethics and moral values can be only learned from the reflection which comes through experience and maturity. In this poem, imagery, diction, and figures of speech contribute to the development of the theme.

The speaker in the poem uses images to help to support the theme. For example the statement that “sometimes the woman borrowed my grandmother s face” displays the inability of the children to relate the dilemma to themselves, something that the speaker has learned later on with time and experience. In this poem, the speaker is an old woman, and she places a high emphasis on the burden of years from which she speaks by saying “old woman, / or nearly so, myself.” “I know now that woman / and painting and season are almost one / and all beyond saving by children.” clearly states that the poem is not written for the amusement of children but somebody that has reached the speaker s age, thus supporting the idea of the theme that children cannot help or understand her or anybody of her age. In addition, when the speakers describes the kids in the classroom as “restless on hard chairs” and “caring little for picture or old age” we can picture them in our minds sitting, ready to leave the class as soon as possible, unwilling and unable to understand the ethics dilemma or what the speaker is feeling.

The choice of words of the author also contributes to the development of the theme. For example, the use of words like “drafty,” “half-heartedly,” and “half-imagined” give the reader the idea of how faintly the dilemma was perceived and understood by the children, thus adding to the idea that the children cannot understand the burden the speaker has upon herself. In addition, referring to a Rembrandt as just a “picture” and to the woman as “old age,” we can see that these two symbols, which are very important to the speaker and to the poem, are considered trivial by the children, thus contributing to the concept that the children cannot feel what the speaker is feeling. To add to the idea of old age of the woman, and to define the point of view more clearly, the speaker uses “old woman” a number of times.

The speaker uses the metaphors “The colors / within this frame are darker than autumn, / darker even than winter” and “the browns of earth, / though earth s most radiant elements burn / through the canvas.” to give us the impression that the painting is not just a simple drawing, but it is something alive, something connected to the earth which is worth saving, thus putting it at the same level of the old woman, and thus making the dilemma more balanced. In addition, the idea of a color “burning through the canvas” puts more emphasis on the painting being something supernatural, thus increasing its status in the poem to be as high as (and maybe even higher than) the old woman. Symbolism is also used at the end of the poem, when the speaker describes the color of the painting as “dark than autumn, / darker even than winter” which adds to the idea that the painting is something that represents old age and death but that is also something natural, like a season. In addition, by saying that “I now know that woman / and painting and season are almost one / and all beyond saving by children” the speaker implies that both the painting and the woman represent something old, wise, and decadent, and are something that ethics say we cannot and should not easily give up, but children are not able to understand that, therefore they cannot save them.

In conclusion, this poem is not just about a lesson of ethics learned in school by a student. Instead, this poem is about the life of an old woman, the view of life children have of old things and old people and of life, and true beauty and importance things of age have, either for being wise and experienced or just for being there for so long. I have to admit that I did not take this poem too seriously at first, but after examining it closely and thinking about it, I have discovered its message and learned to appreciate its deepness.