

"On Poverty" Paper 1 Sample #2:

"You ask me what poverty is." This opening line of the essay 'What is poverty' by Jo Goodwin Parker captures its spirit and purpose. Through her use of language she engages the reader directly with this abstract idea of poverty, making it very real and concrete. She wants the reader to understand poverty so that they feel motivated to do something about it.

Parker has written her essay for a wealthy audience, targeting 'clean', middle-class Americans, calling on them to recognize her struggle. She seems to know how the middle class think, as she puts words in their mouths and responds to them. For example, she writes, "You can say in your clean clothes coming from your clean house, 'Anybody can be clean.' Let me explain about housekeeping with no money." Her purpose is to defend herself against these kinds of accusations. Furthermore she describes how humiliating it is to ask for money, by explaining to the reader, "Think about asking for a loan from a relative, if this is the only way you can imagine asking for help." Interestingly, she puts herself in her reader's shoes, asking them to do the same.

Parker's message is very clear. She wants the reader to become angered by her poverty and eventually help her. She says she does not want the reader's pity. "I cannot use your pity," she says. Instead she asks the reader to "listen with understanding." She wants to make the reader more aware of her despair and the despair of others around her. In the last lines she says, "Others like me are all around you. Look at us with an angry heart, anger that will help you help me." After sketching an image of poverty throughout the essay she closes with this very clear call to action.

Parker achieves her purpose and conveys her message through a very direct tone, placing the audience in a very sombre, uncomfortable mood. As a reader, you feel lectured, because she uses imperative verbs, such as, "put yourself in my dirty, worn out, ill fitting shoes, and hear me." Her use of the pronoun 'you' is two-fold. Firstly she uses the second person to speak directly to the reader, such as, "Have you ever had to ask for help?" Secondly, she uses the second person as a general subject, as in 'one in general'. For example sketches a scenario, describing how one goes about asking for help. "You find out where the office is that you are supposed to visit. You circle that block four of five times." Mixing the general 'you' with direct, second-person narration makes the reader feel very much a part of the story that she is telling, creating both a sense of empathy and frustration.

The author achieves her purpose further through her use of stylistic devices such as imagery. She constantly uses concrete images to portray the abstract idea of poverty. For example she explains that "poverty is staying up all night on cold nights to watch the fire, knowing one spark on the newspapers covering the walls means your sleeping child dies in flames." This horrific image of a child burning to death, together with the newspaper-covered walls of a make-shift house add to the reader's understanding of this abstract idea of poverty. There are many more nouns, such as diapers, runny noses and grits with no oleo that paint a picture of poverty in the reader's mind. What's more you can smell poverty through phrases

that describe the “stench of rotting teeth,” “urine,” and “sour milk.” You can feel poverty through hands that are “so cracked and red,” because the author cannot afford Vaseline. The effect of this use of imagery on its audience is that you become more conscious of the effects of poverty.

Structurally speaking, the essay is written in a very persuasive way. There are parallel structures that start each body paragraph, such as “Poverty is getting up in the morning...” in paragraph 2, “Poverty is dirt” in paragraph 3, “Poverty is staying up all night” in paragraph 4, and “Poverty is asking for help” in paragraph 5. This use of repetition, or anaphora, reinforces Parker’s ideas. Furthermore she continually asks questions such as, “You ask me what poverty is?” which she answers throughout the essay with simple sentences such as, “I will tell you how it feels.” Finally she concludes that she has come out of her despair to tell us this. Again, we feel that we, as the readers have been spoken to.

To conclude, Jo Goodwin Parker’s essay is very effective in creating empathy for the poor. As she claims, it is not her goal to create pity but understanding. She achieves this through imagery, direct tone and other structural devices, such as anaphora. Their effect on the reader is that we care more about poverty.