

Steve Ross  
Expository Writing  
Dr. Nancy Nester  
Final 10/25/96

Elements of the Argument: "What is Poverty?"

What do you consider poverty to be? Do you have a definitive explanation of it or do you consider it an abstract circumstance? In the article "What is Poverty?", Jo Goodwin Parker gives her ideas on what poverty is. First given as a speech, this article is written as an attack on human emotion. Her use of connotative language creates many harsh images of her experiences in a life of poverty. By using these images, Parker is capable of causing the reader to feel many emotions and forces the reader to question his or her own stereotypes of the poor. With the use of connotative language and the ability to arouse emotion, Parker successfully compels the reader to examine his or her thoughts and beliefs on who the poor are.

Parker's use of connotative language causes the reader to feel many emotions. Of these emotions, a prominent one is guilt. Parker is capable of making the reader feel guilty for the possessions that he or she has. For example, she uses the phrase "You say in your clean clothes coming from your clean house, ..." (Parker 237). This causes the reader to feel guilty for having the opportunity to be clean when we all know that she doesn't have the same. She calls hot water a "luxury" (Parker 237). To those living in poverty hot water is a luxury. The unimpovertished take it for granted and never before considered it anything other than a basic possession. When the reader hears that someone else calls it a luxury that they cannot afford, he or she can't help but feel guilty for having it as a basic possession. Parker also attacks the guilt of the reader through stories of her children. She knows that some readers may not feel guilty for things that happen to her, but when children are introduced to the situation they will feel more guilt. She says, "My children have no extra books, no magazines, no extra pencils, or crayons, or paper..." (Parker 238). The reader cannot help but feel guilty for having these basic things when her children, who need them, do not. Another thing that Parker makes the audience feel guilty for having is health. She says, talking about her children, "...most important of all, they do not have health." (Parker 238). She goes on further to describe what is wrong with them. Parker says, "They have worms, they have infections, they have pink-eye all summer" (238). These descriptions of her children cause the reader to feel horrible for them. By making the reader feel this way she is increasing the level of guilt the reader also feels. She is very successful in accomplishing this and this success causes her argument to become very powerful.

Not only does she make us feel guilty for having possessions that she cannot, but Parker also makes us feel guilty about the stereotypes we hold. She knows what society's stereotypes are and she successfully combats them. Parker knows that society thinks the poor don't want to work. To attack this she tells of why she can't work. She has three children. The last time she had a job the babysitter she left them with did not take care of them. She returned to find all three in dangerous situations. Her baby had not been changed since she had left it there, her other was playing with a piece of sharp glass, and her oldest was playing alone at the edge of a lake (Parker 236-237). Her chances of finding a better babysitter are slim because she cannot afford a nursery school due to fact that she makes too little (Parker 237). This is why she cannot work. Her inability to work leads to many of the other stereotypes that society has of the poor. Society questions why the poor cannot be clean. She tells of how without money she cannot afford any cleaning supplies (Parker 237). Parker tells of how she saved for two months to buy a jar of Vaseline and when she had finally saved enough the price had gone up two cents (237). She cannot wash in soap because it has to be saved to clean the baby's diapers (Parker 237). She effectively shows

how society's stereotypes are incorrect. She is capable of making the reader feel guilty for the stereotypes and causes the reader to question why he or she has them. If the audience would just take a little time to try and understand her situation they would know how unfounded the stereotypes are.

Parker is also successful in evoking sympathy from the reader. She uses connotative language to create disturbing images of what poverty is. For example, she calls poverty an "acid that drips on pride until pride is worn away (Parker 239)." Not only is poverty bad but it is an acid. An acid is a horrible thing. It burns and corrodes away at something until it no longer exists. By this reasoning poverty is destroying her life. This phrase forces the reader to consider poverty as something worse than they had ever thought before. She shows poverty as a curse, as a "chisel that chips on honor until honor is worn away (Parker 239)." Parker starts almost every paragraph with a new definition of what poverty is. Some examples are: "poverty is being tired" (Parker 236), "poverty is dirt" (237), "poverty is asking for help" (237), and "poverty is looking into a black future" (238). All of these phrases create a different image of poverty and each one is a success in evoking sympathy from the reader. They all force the reader to imagine poverty in a new way. We all knew it was bad but Parker makes us realize how bleak poverty is. She shows us that there is no hope for the poor without understanding.

Parker is successful in getting her point across with her use of connotative language and her ability to create images. She has done a good job of attacking the reader and getting him or her to listen to what she has to say. Even though she attacks the audience she does it in an appropriate way whereas she does not come across as offensive. All in all, Parker has done a successful job at creating images and using the readers' emotion to get an audience to listen to her plight and the struggles of other's in her situation.