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Cause I A’int Got a Pencil by Joshua T. Dickerson

The struggles of young black children has always been a topic of discussion in many literary works. However, no one has truly depicted black hardship quite like Joshua T. Dickerson. Inspired by a heartbreaking scene in a play he saw in Atlanta, Dickerson was inspired to create the now infamous poem “Cause I Aint Got a Pencil”. Joshua T. Dickerson is a young, 38 year old man from Atlanta, created the poem after seeing play scene in which a student asked for a pencil from the teacher. In the scene, the teacher tells him that he may borrow a pencil if the student gave a shoe as collateral. Following through with the teachers orders, the student proceeds to remove his shoe, revealing a dirty, smelly sock. Dickerson explained that the children in the classroom laughed and made fun of the boy who could not afford new socks or a washer and dryer to wash the ones he was wearing. Dickerson was inspired to create a poem that told the tale of poverty and the importance of empathy for those around you. “Cause I Aint Got a Pencil” has now circulated the web and was even claimed by thousands over the internet. The poem was so relatable, that some thought it was written by an inner city, Baltimore school child. Using different literary strategies like irony and climax, the goal of the poem was to inspire people to push further, even in the face of doubt and adversity.

Written in April of 2014, “Cause I Aint Got a Pencil” is the perfect representation of poverty for both today’s world, and the world of the past. In fact, Malcolm X speaks about how poverty and poor education are directly related to one another (DePaul, 2018). One of the key controversies exemplified in this poem is the façade that education is equal for all and that the experience is the same across the spectrum of those who partake in it. Dickerson used this poem to make it clear that this is not the case; and often times, those who are poor or those who are black, must work ten times harder to receive half of the recognition than the rich and the white. Simply stated, those who wake up in time, have clean clothes, a good breakfast, and even a pencil, will have a day that greatly contrasts those who don’t—granting them the privilege of focusing solely in their education. The last two lines that state, “Then when I got to class the teacher fussed / Cause I aint got no pencil” (Dickerson, Lines 12-13) not only supports the idea that one must work harder to receive recognition even for items as simple as a pencil, but it is also a case of irony that the child successfully pushed through all those obstacles, only to be yelled at about a pencil.

I interpreted this poem in many ways by allowing myself to look at it from all angles. In one sense, I felt that this poem did exhibit the power of pushing through, even when faced with obstacles. Joshua Dickerson said that his main message is for people to “continue to fight, regardless of circumstances” (Richman, 2016). I got this interpretation from the entire poem, but more specifically the first two lines when Dickerson says “I woke myself up / Because we aint got an alarm clock”. I felt that this symbolizes the power of making things happen, even when you do not believe that you have the resources to do so. Another interesting way I interpreted this poem was the power of maturity. Even though Dickerson did not state that this was a goal in this poem, I felt that the child showed high levels of maturity in a paternal way. For example, when Dickerson says “Even got my baby sis ready, / Cause my mama wasn’t home. Got us both to school on time, / To eat us a good breakfast” (Dickerson, Lines 7-8). This showed that the young child was capable of taking the initiative to do things for the good of himself and those around him. This level of maturity is often displayed in parents and adults, not young children. I also felt like that this paternal maturity symbolized the idea of poverty. The fact that this young child had to do this was likely because his mother was not home due to long hours to provide for the family. My final interpretation circles back to the idea of poverty and poor education. Malcolm X once said “When you live in a poor neighborhood, you are living in an area where you have poor schools. When you have poor schools, you have poor teachers. When you have poor teachers, you get a poor education. When you get a poor education, you can only work in a poor-paying job. And that poor-paying job enables you to live again in a poor neighborhood. So, it’s a very vicious cycle” (Douglas, 2015). This poem is the epitome of this quote in that this child must go through these things, only to go to a school that may not grant them the proper education, by a poor teacher who may not have adequate supplies, so she must use collateral to ensure that she gets a pencil back to possibly give to another student in the same situation.

This poem can be looked at from many different angles. Joshua Dickerson took something as simple as a scene from a play and turned it into a poem that, unfortunately, so many can relate to. Through the use of irony, Dickerson was able to make a lasting impression on his readers. The use of climax helped him build up a story behind a young kid’s struggles, only for those struggles to be diminished by the lack of a pencil. Though the goal of the poem was to push readers to fight through hard times, Dickerson created several perspectives through this poem. He was able to show the correlation between poverty and education, he was able to exemplify individuality and maturity, and he was able to spark conversation about a group of people who have constantly been ignored.

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