Chelsea St. Cyr

English 12

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Polar Opposites Both Inside and Out

A black man who “absorbs the murderous beams of the nation’s heart, as black cotton absorbs the heat of the sun” is a reminder from Sharon Olds’ poem of what African-American slaves endured. They were treated horribly while the whites received fair treatment. For example, blacks toiled in the fields from dusk to dawn, and the white men didn’t lift a finger to help. They were not given suffrage, yet white men were able to vote. Traces of this distinctive treatment of the two races continued after slavery was abolished. Sharon Olds discusses these differences in her poem “On the Subway” through the narrator’s insights and with several literary techniques.

Throughout the poem, she notes the stark contrast of both portraits. She does this in one instance by stating the counterpart skin colors of the two characters. The narrator said that “he is black and I am white” (Olds). This alone sets them apart. Another one of the differences is represented by how they dress. The black boy and the white narrator of the poem are wearing inversed jackets. He had on “red, like the inside of the body” while the narrator was wearing “dark fur, the whole skin of the animal taken and used” (Olds). Not only were their physical attributes contrary, but so was how they dressed, which is a reflection of a person’s personality.

The narrator then discusses the insights based on their outer and inner characteristics. She contemplates what would be the case if either one of them was in control of the other. If the black boy was in charge, then he “could take my coat so easily, my briefcase, my life” (Olds), thus making him the stereotypical mugger. If it was the other way around, then the white girl is capable of “living off his life” (Olds). This echoes how white men treated their slaves. The white men lived off the work of the black men since they were growing crop for them. Either way, the person who’s in control is portrayed as base.

These contrasts and insights shine forth because of the literary techniques used to create them. For instance, imagery was employed to articulate their inverse jackets. The narrator said that he looks “at his raw face, he looks at my fur coat” (Olds). The senses of sight and touch give readers the ability to comprehend how dissimilar they are. The relationship between them is additionally expressed through symbolism and simile. The poem reads that the black boy’s “black sneakers” are “laced with white in a complex pattern like a set of intentional scars” (Olds). He, represented by the sneakers, was penetrated several times by the maltreatment of whites, represented by the lace.

In conclusion, the author, Olds, used juxtaposition of blacks and whites and literary techniques to communicate the struggles that African-Americans have faced and are still facing. Even though the setting of the poem is modern, the metaphors and imagery echo slavery. Olds’ poetical social commentary shows that even after laws against discrimination are established, bits of it carry on generation after generation.