

# The effect of the traditional poetic form used in the poem "incident" by countee ...

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## **The Effect of the Traditional Poetic Form Used in the Poem “ Incident” By Countee Cullen Essay Sample**

The poem titled “ Incident”, written by Countee Cullen is a very old poem. It is a poem that captures vividly the historical racism that confronted African-Americans in America. This poem reminds the reader the painful aspect of the racism; that the whites are not equal to blacks based on the color. The speaker in the poem is one of the victims in this evil of racism. The reader feels empathy for the speaker when he gets victimized and insulted because of his race. It becomes apparent that the racism as evidenced by the change in the speaker’s mood upon this absurd encounter. Though the poem is old and is written in the traditional form, the meaning in the poem is not affected.

It is crucial to give the general analysis of the poem at the outset. The speaker in the poem is in a bus riding to Baltimore. He is young. He says in stanza two first line, “ Now I was eight and small.” The reader learns that the speaker was a young person, who by all means, was not ready to take what was about to happen to him. Initially, he is happy and enjoying his ride. He is filled with joy as depicted in stanza one line one and two. While in the bus, he notices a Baltimorean boy looking straight at him. The speaker gives a brief description of this boy. He tells the audience that the boy was not bigger than him, to suggest that he was probably of the same age and same size as him. There is one thing that is pertinent though and requires attention. The boy whom the speaker notices is a Baltimorean, and, therefore, a White by race. The first and pertinent question that needs to be

asked at this juncture is whether the boy admired the speaker and whether this explains the long stare that the speaker observed? No. The speaker tells the audience that he smiled. Perhaps, he thought that this long stare may have suggested a possible friendship. However, his smile attracted what defines the main theme of the poem; racism and racial discrimination. The boy opened his mouth and the word that came out was an insult. He called the speaker a Nigger. The speaker feels angry because of this insult. The mood changes from that of happiness to sadness. The tone of the poem changes from jovial to one filled with sadness. In stanza three, the speaker says clearly that despite the many other things that happened to him while in Baltimore in the months of May to December, this single incident is the one that stands out in his memory. This conclusion carries a very crucial message to the reader. It tells the audience that the speaker had never forgotten the incident when he experienced racism first hand. In other words, racism was loathed by the African-Americans.

The author uses narration style using the first person “ I” in the poem. This style helps him achieve his goal. When the poem is read in the first person, the reader feels like the one involved in what is happening in the poem. In this case, the author wants the reader to feel and share the pain associated with racial discrimination. It is not possible to ignore the feeling of the speaker, who is a young boy, when he encounters the truth of racism. The first person “ I” helps bring this truth vividly into our minds and makes us feel their impact in ourselves as we sympathize with the young boy.

The author uses imagery in the poem. He helps the reader create mental images by using a description. Initially, the speaker tells the audience how happy and elated he is in his ride to the Baltimore. The audience can see the speaker in the bus riding to Baltimore. The audience also has a mental image of the happy speaker looking around his surroundings. The reader can visualize the young speaker's eyes meeting the eyes of a stranger. The stranger is another boy who is more or less of the same age and size except the race. He is a white. The reader can see the speaker smile at the boy. The author manages to make the poem real by use of this imagery. It makes the reader see the events that are happening in the mind. In addition, the message of the poem becomes clearer by use of such styles.

Another traditional poetic style that the author uses is rhyme in the stanzas. In the poem, the rhyme pattern is ABCB in every stanza. The use of rhyme makes the poem rhythmical and musical. It makes it interesting and captivates the reader to continue reading. In other words, this style makes the poem more interesting and enjoyable to read. In addition, rhyme brings to the attention of the reader the key words that the author wants the reader not to miss. They are the words that are carrying the message. For instance, looking at stanza two, the ending words in each line are small –A, bigger –B, out –C and Nigger –B. The words bring out the musical pattern. Notice the pattern repeating itself in lines two and four that help make the poem song-like.

The other style that the author has used successively is the use of the four lines in every stanza. It is, therefore, a quatrain poem. It is called ballad style

except that it lacks a refrain. Nevertheless, it helps make the poem rhythmical. The lines are short and have almost the same number of syllables. The poem is interesting and enjoyable owing to this style. It makes it lyrical. The reader feels the smooth flow of words. It is an excellent style that has been utilized in this poem and it is in no dispute that it makes the poem more interesting.

In conclusion, the traditional style that the author adopts in this poem does not diminish the power of the incident described in the poem. All that the style serves to do is to make the poem more interesting for the reader. The message is intact and as vivid as intended by the author. The reader can experience the pain that the speaker feels due to the racial discrimination incident that occurs to him. Traditional poetic forms are more captivating to the readers. Therefore, they should be used more in the field of poetry. They do not affect the message of the poem if they are used appropriately. In any case, they enhance the taste of the poem while reinforcing the themes in it.

## References

Bell, Larry, and Countee Cullen. Incident: Based on the Text by Countee Cullen for Baritone Voice and Pianist. Boston, Mass: Casa Rustica Publications, 1984. Print.