

Prompt

In the following poem Nicanor Parra describes the point of view of a person who has difficulty relating to those about him in the expected manner. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Parra uses such elements as imagery, metaphor, and tone to convey the poet’s complex views on how possessing a different outlook complicates life.

“Travel Notes”

I managed to stay away from my job for years.
I devoted myself to traveling, to exchanging impressions with the people I talked to.
I devoted myself to sleeping;
But the scenes I had lived through at other times kept coming to mind.
While I was dancing I would think of ridiculous things:
I would think of lettuces I had noticed the day before
As I was passing the kitchen,
I would think of innumerable fantastic things to do with my family;
Meanwhile the boat had entered the river,
It was forcing its way through a shoal of jellyfish.
Those photographic scenes affected my reason,
They obliged me to shut myself in my cabin;
I had to force myself to eat, I rebelled against myself,
I was a permanent menace on board,
Since at any moment I might come out with some nonsense.

Essay 1

Through childhood and adolescence, most people are told “you are special”; they are taught to revel in their differences. However, when they reach adulthood, society begins to slowly suffocate the traits that make one stand out from the crowd. Now, it is important to do what is deemed “normal,” to avoid being ostracized. Nicanor Parra uses elements such as imagery and tone to convey his views on how life becomes difficult for those who do not share the same outlook as everyone else.

The descriptions in the poem present contrasting images of reality and imagination. For example, the narrator describes a scene in his imagination with a boat “forcing its way through a shoal of jellyfish” (10). The description leaves the reader with a sense of freedom, as the boat freed itself from restraint. A boat has the connotation of freedom and serenity, as the reader can picture a boat going gently down the river. However, in reality, the narrator has “shut [himself] in [his] cabin” (12). The reader is provided with two very different pictures: one of an unrestrained boat and one of a man imprisoned in his room. The image of man exiling himself to his own cabin is sorrowful, and the reader is given a glimpse into the tortured mind of the narrator. When he explains his fear that “at any moment [he] might come out with some nonsense” (15), the

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reader can imagine a troubled man resigned to locking himself in his home, away from society, due to his fear of society's judgment. Parra's contrasting imagery allows the reader to understand different views between reality and imagination and the price one must pay for a vivid imagination.

Not only do the images between reality and imagination contrast, the tone does as well. For example, the tone is dark and serious when the author describes himself as a “menace” (14). Undertones of self-loathing can be felt as the narrator chooses the word “menace” to establish himself as the villain, rather than the victim. The narrator's thoughts of “lettuce” (6) and “fantastic things to do with his family” (8) give off a cheery tone. The word “fantastic” allows the reader to see the narrator's excitement and liveliness. This liveliness contrasts with the author's dark description of himself, once again establishing the line between reality and dream. The opposite tones enable Parra to emphasize the difference between the “real world” and the “dream world,” and the narrator's different behavior in each of these worlds displays the complications of being part of both world.

Society claims to embrace unique people, but in reality society only accepts those who are different within society's standards. Those who deviate from the standards are labeled as rejects and treated like lepers. Those who see the world differently from others are cursed and blessed-- blessed to see what few others can and cursed to suffer isolation from society.

Essay 2

In “Travel Notes” Nicanor Parra describes a complex maneuvering between two worlds, two ways of seeing things. On the one hand there is the everyday world of the majority, contrasted, at least implicitly, with a world illuminated by the power of imagination. The poem, in other words, is a treatise on the artistic temperament and the complications it presents for those who possess it.

That the speaker is establishing this contrast is revealed through context. Notice, for instance, that the speaker's absence in his wanderings is from his “job”, managing to stay away “for years” (1). Employment here connotes stability and everyday normality-- the opposite of “travelling” and “exchanging impressions” in the second line, which both suggest a lack of consistent attachment to any one thing. That he is rejecting one for the other, then, implies a rejection (on some level) of the ordinary and conventional. The activities in which the speaker is engaged help establish this context as well, as the poet describes himself as “sleeping” (3) and “dancing” (5) through life, both emblematic of the rootless, carefree existence that the speaker enjoys, for to travel, to dream, to dance through life suggests an impermanence of existence and susceptibility to the mercurial perception developed later in the poem. Even without these verbs, though, it is obvious that the speaker is not living life according to convention.

If the conflict were just about a failure to commit to everyday norms, the speaker would have less difficulty integrating them. It is not, however. Instead the everyday is transformed into the fantastical through a way of seeing that alienates the poet from those around him. For the speaker, the world is experienced as a series of “impressions” (2), so that mundane reality is supercharged with pregnant meaning. “Lettuce” (6), for instance, becomes, in the context of the speaker's imagination, “ridiculous” (5), hinting not only at the way the poet's mind invests the everyday with latent significance, but also suggesting that he recognizes that, from the point of

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view of those around him, his vision is “nonsense” (15). Witness too the “shoal of jellyfish” (10), experienced by fellow passengers on the boat as an obstacle to progress, becoming for the poet, however, a “photographic [scene]” (11) that affects his reason-- small wonder given the amorphous shape and prismatic coloration of the jellyfish-- Parra using the scientific name in the Spanish original (medusas) to indicate again how phenomena can be seen as both prosaic or sublime (dependent on the way one looks at it). In this way, the problem for the speaker is not simply that his outlook and lifestyle is unusual; it is also that he understands the alternative point of view as well, but cannot accommodate himself to it.

Thus, when travelling through life (the metaphorical “river” [9] of the poem), the poet must reconcile a manner of seeing that is largely incompatible with his fellows. “Shut...in [the poet’s] cabin” (12), the speaker doubts even himself. Forced to “eat” (13)-- suggestive of the everyday sustenance at variance with the spiritual nourishment of the poet’s vision-- the speaker “[rebels] against [himself]”, internalizing the implicit critique of daring to invest the mundane with the patina of art. Even so confined, however, the poet remains a “permanent menace” (14), for he can no more change who he is than those around him can experience the world as poetry. In this sense, the speaker as poet must navigate a hostile world-- alternately compromising with it and drawing inspiration from it. What the artist cannot do, however, is become ordinary, for even the ordinary (for the artist) is filled with a world of imaginative possibility.

Essay 3

In Nicanor Parra’s poem, “Travel Notes,” Parra creates a character who has trouble relating to people “normally.” Parra uses this character to portray the idea of when one carries a considerably different outlook it complicates life. He shows this through the use of specific repetition of an idea and imagery.

Parra writes up this character as someone who keeps his distance from people and who did that so much so that once he was heading back home/the real world, he did not know how to deal with it. He had been “away from [his] job for years” and “devoted [himself] to travelling”, keeping himself far away. Parra mentions instances of this character distancing himself throughout the poem, saying things like how the character “devoted [himself] to sleeping” and “shut [himself] in [his] cabin.” Being away from people for so long, and civilization too for that matter, makes one think differently. And coming back to the real world, talking to people again, may feel like a totally different existence than it used to, making life seem more complicated than need be.

As well as using repetition of a specific idea, Parra also uses imagery in his poem. To create a picture that connects to his character’s lives, Parra mentions how a river “[forced its way through a shoal of jellyfish” and how “those photographic scenes affected [his] reason... obliged [him] to shut [himself] in his cabin.” This image is much like the idea of how when this character goes back to regular life, being faced with all those things that used to be normal, he will only shut himself out of the world, defaulting back to what he is most recently used to.

Nicanor Parra’s poem reflects how one who distances themselves from people and civilization, that not only creates a barrier between himself and people, but also himself and “normal” life.