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Period A7
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AP Language

“Graduation” OPR

Maya Angelou’s extraordinarily written anecdote, *Graduation*, defines a transformational experience in every student’s life, depicts the perseverance of the students from the Lafayette County Training School to achieve their life goals, as well as alludes to influential writers and poets to justify her emotions through each segment of the graduation ceremony and identify herself as a proud member of the “wonderful, beautiful Negro race.” Composed initially in the third-person, shifting to the first-person point of view, Angelou conveys a sense of universality regarding the concept of graduation and the sentiments associated before and after experiencing it. By relating her personal graduation experience with such sequential clarity and precision, Angelou portrays herself as having shared the same thoughts and feelings as everyone else participating in the ceremony, especially those who stood up on stage or in the auditorium, while Mr. Edward Donleavy implicitly debased the remarkable accomplishments the students worked so diligently to attain. By employing rhetorical devices and a considerable degree of ethos, Angelou doesn’t describe an ordinary graduation ceremony, but one demonstrating a transition from the shortcomings of the past to a merited success influenced by the role models of rhetoric and determination from the values and triumphs of African-American heritage.

Throughout the story, figurative language constitutes a prominent device of displaying Angelou’s emotions, society, and the fantastical nature of graduation. For instance, “Her dark fingers ducked in and out of the lemony cloth as she embroidered raised daisies around the hem. Before she considered herself finished she had added a crocheted cuff on the puff sleeves, and a pointy crocheted collar. I was going to be lovely. A walking model of the various styles of fine hand sewing and it didn’t worry me that I was only twelve years old and merely graduating from the eighth grade. Besides, many teachers in Arkansas Negro schools had only that diploma and were licensed to impart wisdom” (Angelou, 1969, pg. 24). By referring to the details and time dedicated by the her mother to embellish her graduation dress, despite their impoverished social status, the act represents encouragement for the author to embrace her well-deserved academic recognition, similar to just about every other graduate’s feelings. Subsequently, when Angelou stated, “I was headed for freedom of open fields” (Angelou, 1969, pg. 24), it serves to evoke sympathy from the reader to understand the ideological African-American dream of freedom from the oppression of slavery as a parallel with the significance of graduation. This idea was reiterated at the very end, when Angelou said, “Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?” (Angelou, 1969, pg. 32)

Amid the struggle for success and acknowledgment, from the point Angelou described the gloomy atmosphere while heading to the ceremony, she foreshadowed a disappointment. When the two white men took their place upon the stage, the crowd’s use of “Amen” throughout each speech served as a despondent reminder of the apparent social inequalities between whites and blacks. Angelou commented, “The man’s dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly” (Angelou, 1969, pg. 29), which served to arouse sympathy towards Angelou and the crowd, bringing them closer together, yet emphasizing the potency of the white man’s passive demeaning statements. Angelou accentuates the influence of the African American race and how those who strive to achieve their interpretation of the American dream may be judged, but shouldn’t be prevented from persevering to the end. Finally, graduation culminates from hard work, challenges, and emotional transitions to a new phase in one’s life.