

An Homage to the Working Class

by Kyle Reed

Physical labor is the driving force of progress and advancement. All too often, however, the praise for the work completed is not given to those who actually worked. Despite this, certain individuals will continue to toil, finding satisfaction in their silent role towards progression. In her poem “To be of use,” poet Marge Piercy expresses both an admiration for this persistence and a lamentation for its discredit through her use of metaphor, form, tone, diction, and irony.

Throughout Piercy’s poem, the speaker commonly uses metaphor, particularly in the second stanza. Here she compares the drive of the working class to the brute strength of common work animals. These creatures have been domesticated in order to harness their large capacity for work. Just like their animal counterparts, the people described in the poem are able to work like “an ox [hitched] to a heavy cart” and possess the ability to “pull like water buffalo” (Piercy lines 8-9). It is not the physical strength that is being directly compared but the effort and energy of the animal and human laborers. While these are examples of comparison, Piercy also uses disparity to describe the human work ethic. Those she admires are definitely not “parlor generals and field deserters” (Piercy 15). These people choose either to observe from a safe distance away, so as not to actually partake in the work, or abandon the endeavor entirely. The speaker does not regard these qualities as honorable.

The overall form and structure of the poem is significant to the message that is being conveyed. The opening line immediately sets the purpose for the poem, as the speaker announces that this is an homage to “the people I love the best” (Piercy 1). Everything that follows is now in

the tone of appreciation and empathy. Since the poem is written for and about common people, the diction is noticeably reserved. The speaker is not attempting to sound overly sophisticated, as that could be seen as a sign of conceitedness to the intended audience. Likewise, the poem has no rhyming pattern. The lines are delivered clearly and directly with more of an emphasis on the content rather than some arbitrary rhyming scheme. In the final stanza, the speaker reflects on society's tendency to discredit the worker, by saying "The work of the world is common as mud. / Botched, it smears the hand, crumbles to dust" (Piercy 18-19). With work constantly being performed all across the globe, it is easy for many people to take it for granted. A job well done is expected and often unacknowledged while mistakes are spotlighted and used to discredit the work. The speaker offers a reminder that "the thing worth doing well done / has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident" (Piercy 20-21). Piercy's use of end-stopped lines during this section help emphasize the message, which is to ignore the critics and take pride in ethical work.

In the final stanza, Piercy employs the use of irony to show her frustration with how society views certain material objects. Just as society can dismantle the credibility of decent workers, it can also change the perceived image of work-related items. The speaker touches on this irony in the final lines of the poem by revealing that, "Greek amphoras for wine or oil, / Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums / but you know they were made to be used" (Piercy 22-24). These items were created with a specific purpose in mind; they were designed to perform work alongside their human companions. After the work is completed, bystanders see these tools not for their usefulness, but for their beauty and cultural significance. By placing them in museums to be gawked at, the point of their existence is misunderstood. The speaker relates this struggle back to the human worker: "The pitcher cries for water to carry / and a person for work that is real" (Piercy 25-26). Meaningful work gives people purpose and

direction. Placing a work tool into a museum defeats its purpose, just as denying a worker their ability to perform defeats their purpose.

Marge Piercy shows a deep respect and admiration towards the motivated and driven workers of the world. She admires these people so much because as they perform their own work, they simultaneously inspire and motivate those around them. That is why the speaker wishes to be around these people. The style choices presented in the poem accurately reflect the gratitude and appreciation that hard-working people deserve. If not for the relentless initiative of those who work, life would certainly be more drab and mundane.

Works Cited

Piercy, Marge. "To be of use." 1973. *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, 12th ed., Michael Meyer and D. Quentin Miller, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2020, p. 914.