

# Linda Pastan's Poem Ethics

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Linda Pastan's poem "Ethics"

In Linda Pastan's poem "Ethics," the speaker recounts a moral dilemma that her teacher would ask every fall, which has been haunting her for a long time. The question was "if there were a fire in a museum / which would you save, a Rembrandt painting / or an old woman who hadn't many / years left anyhow?" and the [speaker](#) tells us through the theme that [ethics](#) and moral values can be only learned from the reflection which comes through experience and maturity. In this poem, imagery, diction, and figures of speech contribute to the development of the theme.

The speaker in the poem uses images to help to support the theme. For example the statement that "sometimes the woman borrowed my grandmother's face" displays the inability of the children to relate the dilemma to themselves, something that the speaker has learned later on with time and experience. In this poem, the speaker is an old woman, and she places a high emphasis on the burden of years from which she speaks by saying "old woman, / or nearly so, myself." "I know now that woman / and painting and season are almost one / and all beyond saving by children." clearly states that the poem is not written for the amusement of children but somebody that has reached the speaker's age, thus

supporting the idea of the theme that children cannot help or understand her or anybody of her age. In addition, when the speaker describes the kids in the classroom as "restless on hard chairs" and "[caring](#) little for picture or old age" we can picture them in our minds sitting, ready to leave the class as soon as possible, unwilling and unable to understand the ethics dilemma or what the speaker is feeling.

The choice of words of the author also contributes to the development of the theme. For example, the use of words like "drafty," "half-heartedly," and "half-imagined" give the reader the idea of how faintly the dilemma was perceived and understood by the children, thus adding to the idea that the children cannot understand the burden the speaker has upon herself. In addition, referring to a Rembrandt as just a "picture" and to the woman as "old age," we can see that these two symbols, which are very important to the speaker and to the poem, are considered trivial by the children, thus contributing to the concept that the children cannot feel what the speaker is feeling.

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