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**Poverty: Through the Eyes of the Beholder**

Poverty defines itself differently in the life of every child who must endure it. Time, length, age, environment, family, and many more affect it. The way that poverty is experienced differs for every soul that must endure it. Therefore, to talk about poverty and its effects on a child’s life in generalities would be a grand oversimplification of a much more complex and heartbreaking problem. There is also the risk that I would lose your interest, and that is something we cannot have when talking about something so serious. So, instead, I am going to introduce you to someone who is very important in my life, and to this story. Her name is Emma. She is eight years old and lives in Rut, Wyoming. She was born to a single mother and has three little brothers and sisters. She lives in poverty, and this is her story.

**Emma**

At 6 o’clock in the morning the loud *weeeooooeeeeoooo* of passing fire trucks wake me, just like every morning. I yawn and moan, not wanting to move. My stomach aches from hunger and I know that when I start moving it will only get worse. But the longer I stay in bed the more mother will yell at me to get moving. So, I get up. The wooden floor is filthy. I can feel bits of dirt grinding beneath my feet, and splinters threatening to stab my toes as I walk. The air is cold. I might as well be outside. The breezes blow through the apartment as it would a tree. The room is dark as I dress myself. My hair is getting long and knotted. I brush it out but it doesn’t seem to help the look of it much. I can’t seem to get rid of the shining glaze forever on my scalp and the cracked palms and feet – all telltale signs of a kid who doesn’t get to bathe enough. (Hooks)

I have to hurry to wake up the others before it is time to leave. I look across my tiny room at my sister, Mia, still completely asleep. I shake her awake as she whines at me to leave her alone. But I ignore her and tell her to get dressed. Then, it’s on to the babies. I hate this more than anything because the babies always cry when they have to wake up this early. Baby Joe lies in his crib beside my bed. Little Cassie lays sound asleep in the bed Mia just occupied. They share it. I start with her first, nudging her awake and sitting her up in her bed. I slowly dress her in her torn, pink dress and brush out her blonde curls. She’s no help at all since she’s still half asleep and moves like a little rag doll. I can hear her stomach growling, echoing mine. I stand her up and tell her to go to Mia. Now it is Joe’s turn. The bars on the crib are bare metal and painfully cold on my arms as I reach in to pick him up. He starts to cry as I lift him out of his bed, but I hurriedly shush him down to a whimper as I quickly dress him and place him on my bed.

Together, the four of us move from our room to the living room where mother sits, reading the classifieds for anything better than “waitress,” which is the position she currently holds. This desperate search for a job is fueled by two motives: paying bills and being able to afford going out. Apparently, mother realized that with no husband, she had to work or be homeless. That could never be allowed to happen, for as long as we had a roof over our heads, mother could justify teaching us to “act middle class.” The only problem is she isn’t sure how the middle class *should* act, having never been around them herself. (Hooks) So, instead, she corrects our behavior as much as she can. No complaining about being hungry. Wake up on time and don’t fuss. Don’t bother mom when she’s tired from work, and so on.

We walk into the kitchen and each grab some cereal. I look and realize there’s an apple on the counter, a luxury in our house. Cassie and Mia smile as I cut the apple into small bites, being careful to avoid the bruises and rotten parts of the fruit. The cereal is then poured into bowls and eaten without milk, since it went bad over a week ago, and mom hasn’t been able to afford more. As we finish out breakfast, we grab tour toothbrushes from the cup by the kitchen sink. We have to brush our teeth under mother’s supervision, to make sure we do not use too much water. (Hooks) We only get small sips to rinse our mouths. There’s nothing else to drink in the mornings.

At 7:25, I ask mother if she’s ready to leave, since the buses come at 7:30. Mom jumps off the couch, yelling “Why didn’t you tell me what time it was earlier?!” In seconds, her shoes are on, she’s lifting Joe, and hustling everyone out the door. Joe, Cassie, and Mia go to the apartment across the hall. A mean old lady, Mrs. Hollen, watches them during the days as a begrudging favor to mom. Mrs. Hollen hates kids. Really, the old woman provides some water, snacks, and a place to stay. Mia watches the little ones, and keeping them quiet. Mia told me she dreams of going to kindergarten or pre-school, but the closest one is an hour away, so mother tells us it’s a waste of time and money. So until first grade comes around, she’s left spending her days at Mrs. Hollen’s, watching the babies.

Mom and I race down the stairs to the bus stop. It’s 7:30. I board my bus, for the hour-long drive to the nearest public elementary school. Mother boards the city bus heading to work. We won’t see her again until well past 11 o’clock tonight.

The ride to school is where I can finally sleep. I sit in the very back, where the other children from my neighborhood sit. Jamie, a girl from the apartment building next door, is already asleep. Her hair looks like mine, straggly and uncut. She leans her cracked elbows against the cold metal side of the bus to help with the stinging. It doesn’t help much, but it numbs them for a while. I sit across from her and quickly fall into a light doze.

An hour later, the shaking of the bus as it bounces over speed bumps bangs my head against the window. We’re here. The children at the front of the bus start to gather their things. They’re talking, laughing, and getting excited to get off of the bus. I look out the window at the “Windale Elementary School” sign in silence, waiting until I’m forced to move again.

As I get off the bus, the day begins. I file into Miss Lemon’s room, along with the other second grade students, for our English and reading lessons. I sit at my desk, looking around at the other girls and boys. I can’t help but notice the other kids shining hair and clean clothes. Jessica, a girl who’s native to Windale, looks at me with a pinch in her nose. I know I don’t smell as good as Jessica, who’s basically an over-dressed flower. So what I didn’t get a bath last night? There wasn’t enough water for my siblings and I to bathe - so I let use the water we had. I wouldn’t mind it as much if the other children didn’t have to say something about it. But girls like Jessica always find a chance to look right at the teacher and say, “ewwwwww Emma smells *grrrrross*!” I wish I could keep my cheeks from burning red, or just smack her. But hitting her would just end with me in timeout or, even worse, silent lunch. (Kozol) Hopefully, if I just sit here, I can disappear. They’ll find someone else from my neighborhood to pick on and I can just work on reading.

**Amy Lemon (Miss Lemon)**

Seeing a child chastised makes me ache. I know children like Emma can’t help that they smell a little sour, and their hair isn’t perfectly clean. I also know children like Jessica could afford to spend a little more time learning their letters and less time pointing out what’s wrong with Jamie and Emma. Sadly, as their teacher, I cannot always go to their strong defense. I only play moderator between the different classes of eight year olds I happen to have all in one classroom. (Hooks) These children go through a long process just to get to school every morning. Emma, at eight years old, is the caretaker of her three smaller siblings. Each morning she comes to school with her stomach rumbling, trying to sit as still as possible to stop the hunger pangs. She’s bused an hour away from home, into something like a different world. (Hooks) In Windale, luxurious houses and boutiques replace dirty streets and apartment buildings. This isn’t where she’s comfortable, but it’s better than where she was.

Before this school year, Rut Elementary school was still up and running, albeit, barely. It was one of the poorest schools I’ve ever witnessed. The classes were crammed full of students of many levels, all listening to the same teacher drone on and on about each subject. The children didn’t move around for hours at a time and they definitely didn’t learn anything (Kozol), Many of the teacher’s weren’t even certified, but were hired for lower pay than certified teachers (Kozol). Children were taught, drilled, and scrutinized over the material covered in standardized tests. Grammatical and spelling errors that I, personally, find endearing and part of the children’s learning, were forbidden. The school could not afford the moments taken to enjoy learning and the environment of the classroom (Kozol). The entire school needed free or reduced lunch, but the community, as a whole, couldn’t support it. They were all children from the projects, just like Emma. The teachers both certified and not, had no time to listen to child-like stories. There was no asking of questions or fun games, and if a child couldn’t give a succinct enough answer, their teacher would cut them off and call on someone else. As a result, test scores were low and the joy of learning was nonexistent. The lower the test scores, the more the teachers drilled the kids on the test material. There was no fostering of talents, no encouragement. They taught to increase their own benefits, not the children’s. (Kozol)

Now, these children face an entirely new set of challenges. The foremost being that they are now forced to see a world better than their own, children with things they do not have, and an education they might not be able to truly receive. Being placed into a better school does wonders for their education and their chances at college, right? However, Emma is still looked at with disdain for her rough, cracked skin and her loud, grumbling stomach. The other children from Rut sit down at lunch and inhale every bite of their food, and some of whoever will share. Emma should be doing the same, but her dignity seems to keep her hand slow and her chewing even. That probably comes from her mother. The single encounter I’ve had with her left a bitter taste in my mouth as I watched her hand her two-year-old over to Emma for safe-keeping.

I want to help her. I want to help all of them. At least Windale can manage to provide them free lunch, but that’s not enough. One week, I gave all of the children extra snacks to take home for the evening; just so those little ones could have some food in their stomachs’ for the night. But that does nothing in the long run. I can’t afford to send home food every night. The children of wealthier families will have to throw it out as their mothers call it “junk food”. For Emma, however, it could be all they have.

The advances are small, but significant. Free lunch, along with integrating children from the projects, is two steps this school would never have taken three years ago. Many parents and students who have been at this school for years believe bringing in the children from Rut is a detriment to the school and their children. However, many of these parents are misinformed, or not informed at all, about the struggles these children face. I’ve begun raising awareness and consideration for these children, along with some of the other teachers. Sadly, parents are biased and judgmental. I can’t count the times I’ve heard the words “white trash” in these halls since it was decided that “those” children would be coming here. The judgment and the stereotypes are asinine enough, but blaming the children for an upbringing they couldn’t control? It baffles me, yet it’s how many of these parents behave. There’s still a long way to go to get these children the help and care they deserve.

**Emma**

When lunch comes around I get really excited. As we get into lines, the teacher as us walk towards the cafeteria slowly. We have to stop at the end of every hallway to make sure we stay in line. I hate every single stop. I just want to get there and get something to eat. The walk down one hallway takes forever. I dream of warm pizza and fish sticks as we make our way to the cafeteria. I get my food and we all sit down at the tables. The other project kids eat so quickly I can’t even see them swallow. It’s gross. Mother always told us we should never eat like animals, no matter how hungry we are. If we ever take less than ten seconds per bite, we’re eating like low-class kids, and that won’t be tolerated. I’m starving, but I count every bite. *One, two, three, four, five.. sixseveneightnineten.* I couldn’t help it. I’m starving. And so goes my lunchtime. I don’t talk to anyone; I might lose count and give them even more reason to hate me. The city kids all talk amongst themselves, looking at us and laughing or pointing. Jamie gets angry and threatens to throw peas at them, but I don’t mind it. I’m getting food. Yes, the pizza’s cold and the peas are crunchy, but it’s food. I won’t complain.

I like the rest of the day much more than I like the beginning. Miss Lemon has us read a story on the “magic rug” in the middle of the room. The story is about a witch who’s trying to find little piggies and make them into pies. We all get to read along on certain pages and the draw our own version of the ending. It’s fun. Recess is next. As usual, the city kids all play together leaving the project kids and me to our own devices. I prefer this to the hitting that usually went on at my old school. Everyone hated each other when we were there, even more than they do here. At least here, with the city kids hating us, we have a common cause. Jamie and I play tetherball and swing on the swing set until the return bell rings. After recess, the day passes quickly. Before I know it, it’s time to pack up and load onto the bus.

The ride home is a struggle. I start my homework while we drive because once I get home there won’t be time. Jamie does the same, but she gets really carsick. She can only write one word before she has to look out the window for a while. At least it’s a long drive. The teachers always disapprove of how messy our homework is. Miss Lemon always says, “I know you can do better than this.” But the bus is bumpy. It’s not our fault.

Once we get home, I head up the stairs to get Mia, Cassie, and Joe from Mrs. Hollen’s apartment. The stairwell always smells like pee and cigarettes. (Kozol) Mom says it’s because of the guys upstairs. They’re always screaming late at night. The smaller children from the other apartments run up and down the stairs with bare feet, carrying little bouncy balls and rocks. Mother calls them the “low-class children”, but we play with them anyways. There’s nowhere else to go play. When I get to Mrs. Hollen’s door I knock as loud as I can and wait until Mia opens the door. She looks tired and her eyes are red. Joe is lying on the floor crying and I know Mrs. Hollen must have been yelling at them. I quickly help Mia get the little ones’ things and we hustle into our own apartment. I give Mia my Fruit Rollup Miss Lemon slipped into our cubbies as we left today to make her feel better. Cassie and Mia go play with the other children on the stairs while I give Joe a bath and sing the song we learned in school today. It’s Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, but it’s the second verse not the first one, which *anyone* could sing.

When they’re done playing, Mia and Cass come inside, complaining about being hungry. I tell them to shush, what would mother say if she heard them fuss? But I quickly make two things of EasyMac for us all to share. I realize we only have one left, but by then it’s too late. I decide not to tell mom about it. She can find out later.

When it’s time to get everyone ready for bed things get crazy. Joe is tired but hungry, so instead of sleeping he cries. And cries. And cries. Mia and Cassie want to take baths, but they can’t tonight. It’s my turn. To get back at me they don’t do anything they’re told. They don’t put on their pajamas, they don’t brush their teeth, and they yell and fuss. Mother gets home past 11 and no one is asleep, including Joe who is still screaming from his crib. Mom yells at me, telling me she works hard all day and just needs some peace and quiet, but there’s nothing I can do. The babies yell because their stomachs hurt. My stomach hurts. My head hurts and I just want to sleep but I can’t. I start to cry. My mother yells more. She doesn’t understand…

Three hours later, I’m finally in my bed. Joe sleeps soundly in his crib. Mia and Cassie snuggle together in their sleep to keep warm. I wrap blankets around myself, hoping my body heat will thaw my toes. “The day’s finally over”, I tell myself. But then I realize it will all start again tomorrow.

**…**

A world like Emma’s is just one example of millions of hardships children in poverty must face today. There are 16.2 million children in the world today living in poverty (ResearchonPoverty). Many are given responsibilities no child should have to carry. They are looked down on and given no help. Those who do not understand them judge them for the actions of their parents or guardians. However, there are countless ways to help and fight for the wellbeing of these children. It does not lie solely on the child’s parent or guardian, who might be in just as much trouble, if not more, than the child is. Our ability to make a difference in these children’s lives can be on a large or smaller scale. The community, as a whole, came have a profound effect on a child’s life, whether it is by offering to help a single family, or establishing an after-school program for children in the projects. There are countless ways. We can all make a difference in these children’s lives, just as Miss Lemon worked to make a difference in Emma’s. Emma’s story is just one example. It is one drawn from research and reading, but also from what I have seen through my own eyes, in other children’s lives and my own. There is no magical solution to eliminate poverty, but there is always something that can be done to help those who suffer from its affliction. We, as individuals and as a society, just have to find the courage to act.

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**Inquiry Paper Reflection**

1. **What was the most interesting thing you learned in this inquiry process?**

The most interesting component of my research was the analysis of schools and children’s lives that I found within the works I read. In Kozol’s *Shame of the Nation*, he presented research on how the schools were run and what each classroom was capbable of. However, he also had a strong personal connection with these children he was representing. He went to their homes (apartments much like Emma’s), he knew their dreams, he wanted the very best for them. In Hook’s *Where we Stand*, there was much of the same personal investment in the topic, but that is because it was her story. Her struggle to move from lower class to fitting in and succeeding in an upper-class school highlighted many of the powerful differences between the two classes. It showed, first hand, what each looked like through the eyes of someone who actually experienced it. Granted, Hooks had a powerful bias throughout the book, but she was still able to portray much of the world that’s unknown to many who do not live in it.

1. **What did you struggle with during the research and/or writing process? How did you overcome this obstacle?**

The most difficult part of this essay was that I changed topics a week before it was due and my sources became books sources rather than online sources. Getting my information gathered and usable in a way that would portray my inquiry and passion for the topic was also extremely difficult. To move past this, I just barreled through it. I read the books every second I could. I took good notes and organized them as I went. When it came time to write (finally), I was able to let the paper write itself. I could let the story form in its own way while also letting the sources information flow through. It was actually very rewarding, once I got to that point. However, up to there it was pretty miserable.

1. **Did your inquiry question change over time? If so, how did it change, and why do you think it changed?**

The biggest change my inquiry question went through was from focusing on international business and elementary education as a double major, to child poverty. That change was drastic, however I believe it to be extremely worthwhile. I discovered a topic I was passionate about instead of just vaguely interested. I also found a way to portray my research and knowledge in an interesting way that could really reach out to the reader. My new topic of child poverty also evolved, slowly, into the paper it became. I originally was looking into poverty in schools and how those differences manifested. Then I thought I could look, more specifically, into standardized testing. However, I realized that to keep myself from simply spitting out facts and research I would have to come at this in an interesting way. A personalized approach seemed like the most potentially successful route to go down. Once I realized the style of writing I wanted to use, I realized I could go into the mind of the child and describe their life and daily struggles and joys. This could give the reader something to connect with, rather than just listening to me talk. I also really enjoyed getting to create Emma’s world.

1. **Why is it important to look at a historical view of your topic/question?**

The history of the topic is important to giving context. It allows the reader to understand how this problem began and what’s been done to try and solve it, if anything. It also helps the reader compare the viewpoint you are portraying to past views and opinions.

1. **Do you think your analytical/evaluation skills have changed as a result of the inquiry project? If so, how?**

Yes, I do. With this paper I was able to take a whole new approach to analysis and evaluation of dry research and long reports. I was able to take this information and create a world from it that could put the numbers into an emotional, realistic context. This was entirely new to me. Previously, I was prone to boring, recitation of facts when it came to research papers. I’ve just never been able to create something passionate out of something so dispassionate. With this topic, though, the research came alive to me in ways I never expected. It was kind of fun, underneath all of the stress.

1. **What are you most proud of in this process?**

I am most proud of the emotion, analysis, and impact that my writing created from my research. I was able to create Emma’s world in a way that could provide information and invoke thought from my reader. It was also interesting. I got to immerse myself in the world of a child I created. Her struggles and joys were genuinely interesting to me and her story seemed to write itself. I’ve heard that’s the mark of an amazing paper (hint, hint) In all seriousness, I am proud of how I found a way to use Emma’s story to portray a bigger picture and a bigger call to aid children in poverty. It was a world I felt I could truly enjoy continuing to expand in the future.

1. **What more would you like to know about this subject?**

What *wouldn’t* I love to know more about this topic? I would love to read more case studies and personal descriptions of children in poverty. I would want to read and compare the challenges rural children face as opposed to urban children. I would love to know how those class differences affect their actual schoolwork, and not just the classroom setting and relationships. I could go on forever. Child poverty is a passion of mine; understanding it, working to help those afflicted, and working to put a stop to it are all things I am deeply invested in and could (and will) continue to learn about indefinitely.