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‘Put on my Mask for a Change’ An Ode to Tradition

After reading, ‘Put on my Mask for a Change’ by Marie Annharte Baker, I found that the story clearly illustrated the theme of tradition for a number of reasons. The author's theme was very evident and clear throughout the poem, and clearly highlights Marie's main ideas. We see the theme of tradition in these three subtopics: love of the culture, connection to family, and physical care. In this essay, I hope to clearly emphasize the importance of tradition to the First Nations people referred to in this poem, as well as further educate the reader on how tradition brings a connection to family, a deeper love of the culture, and physical care to those who practice it.

Marie's love of her culture is excellently presented in many ways in her poem; she speaks fondly of the traditions her family upholds, as well as she writes about her hope to continue practicing said traditions in the future. We see this in the lines, “Take this ancient advice and face up to me. / This is not some recent ritual I picked up.” (line 3-4). As well as, “Then you, then me, take turns smiling Jaguar. / The corners above your lips curl in laughter.” (13-14). These quotations clearly express the love and joy her culture brings into her life, and has brought into the lives of all her family and ancestors before her. She talks of smiling and laughing while partaking in traditional activities, along with how these practices in the ritual are not new to her, but were rather in fact a part of her history and identity of self. As is the definition of tradition itself, “the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being

passed on in this way.” Keeping in tradition allows us to showcase and praise our diversity in cultures as human beings. It is why we celebrate events such as Mardi Gras, our appreciation and curiosity for those different traditions allow us to learn from one another. Traditions serve as an outlet for building lifelong relationships and memories for those who practice it with us, such as friends and family, and it offers meaningful self reflection into our own beliefs. This articulates why the love of the culture runs so deep. Overall, I believe the tone of the poem is romantic in the sense of being loving and joyous, as exemplified by how she describes herself when speaking of her traditions.

It is evident in the poem that there is a very clear connection to family. Traditions strengthen and enrich family bonds, the lives they share with each other, and in establishing lasting memories. In the poem, Marie references family numerous times. This is relevant in the lines, “My beloved cave sister let us dab mud together.” (5), and “You be my Zingu mother designing my face. / I the Zingu daughter lift my face from water.” (11-12). In those three lines, the author mentions a sister, mother, and herself as a daughter. The ties to family are clear and distinct, and expressed in a loving and tender tone in this piece. In sharing traditions with our families, we are able to reconnect with each other and reinforce shared values, such as spirituality. In First Nations communities, their families are important for their emotional and psychological health and support, not unlike other cultures. Their family structures mirror the affinity that their cultural values represent. Inevitably when we, as humans, are faced with hardship, having family who follow the same beliefs as you, offers a valuable support system. It is this familial bond that will help us to overcome and conquer those adversities. This is why I believe that our connection to family is so important and is clearly highlighted in the poem, “Put on my Mask for a Change”.

Furthermore, we have the element of physical care presented in this poem in a number of ways. Marie's writing includes many nods to this form of care taken in their tradition. She says, "See the stripe that divides my face in two. / A vermilion dot marks the tip of my nose." (1-2), "Let us meet at the creeks to apply the clay. / Make our healing salves original cosmetics. / Anoint bites, scratches, bumps and lumps." (6-8), as well as, "Let us take back ceremonies to paint our skins. / You be my Zingu mother designing my face." (10-11). All of these quotations reference some sort of painting of the skin, whether that be with clay and mud for cultural design, or ointments for facial imperfections needed for healing. Many First Nations tribes used clay for healing purposes, as they found it was more effective in killing bacteria than Western medicine. Knowing this, it makes sense that Marie would reference healing with the use of mud and clay in her work, as that is a part of her culture's traditions. Additionally, they would wear face paint and red dye that was derived from the clay, in regards to their connection to their spiritual beliefs, and it is also believed it aided them in protection from the insects. They believe that the Creator blessed them with their values and traditions; therefore they use the elements gifted by the earth to them from the Creator.

Marie Annharte Bakers, "Put on my Mask for a Change" did an outstanding job of presenting us with the theme of the poem. It meticulously characterizes her main ideas, and does an excellent job of embodying her passion and connection to her culture. Reading Marie's poem I was able to make my own connections to the story. It was enlightening, as I was able to learn more about the First Nations peoples cultures and traditions, and as a result, I was able to form a deeper appreciation for them. It is important for us as Canadians to read Indigenous works such as this, to better educate ourselves on topics such as First Nations traditions and rituals, as these

are the ways of the people we share our land with. This poem was beautifully composed and written, and I hope others will find the same appreciation for it upon reading it.

Word Count: 1162

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