

Student Name

Dr. Paul Marchbanks

English _____

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Humans as Creepy Crawly Things

“One death is a tragedy; a million deaths are a statistic.” Joseph Stalin once articulated this disquieting truth about human nature. In “The Caterpillar” (1825), Anna Laetitia Barbauld utilizes elaborate, hyperbolic metaphor and vivid imagery to offer her personal testimony concerning what she calls “the weakness of a virtuous mind” (l.42).

The numbers are staggering. Almost 500,000 deaths have been attributed to genocide in Sudan. The people of Iran have lost 1/50th of their entire population to war in the last ten years. One out of every two people on planet earth does not have access to a clean glass of water. War, genocide, and famine continue to plague much of our modern world, so why do we fail to act? Journalists call it “compassion fatigue”, meaning that we humans are simply incapable of devoting the emotion, compassion and introspection normally associated with the loss of individual life to the deaths of thousands. In “The Caterpillar”, Barbauld mourns the loss of an insignificant life, and offers her perspective on this paradox of human nature.

The poem itself is essentially a contrite monologue describing in detail the author’s interaction with an individual caterpillar, truly, a “helpless thing” (l.1). From the opening lines of the poem Barbauld develops an apologetic voice, confessing that she “cannot harm thee” (l.1), despite the fact that in the past she has eagerly destroyed an abundance of caterpillars with “sharpened eye and persecuting zeal” (l.17). This remorseful tone continues throughout the poem and serves to dramatize the interaction between a human being and an insect, allowing the

reader to abandon the normal perception of a caterpillar as a being whose existence is trivial at best. Also, at no point in the poem does Barbauld employ any type of rhyme scheme: this use of blank verse enhances the reader's sense that this is truly a personal, non-formal inquiry into values, a genuine apology to an organism previously thought to be inferior.

Anna Barbauld was well-known for her politically charged writings; she was a harsh critic of British aggression during the French Revolution, a bloody conflict that claimed millions of European lives, and it is this abhorrence for warfare that likely inspired the real message behind "The Caterpillar," a meaning which becomes clear when one examines the metaphorical imagery located predominately in the second half of the poem.

Barbauld continues to personify not only the individual caterpillar, but the entire species in line 14, when the author confesses that . . .