

African american literature essay sample

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The earliest African-American literature was focused on the “indelible stain” of slavery on American soil. The writers focused on themes of slavery, emphasizing the cruelty, indignity and the ultimate dehumanization of slaves. They were mostly written by slaves who had escaped into freedom. A saga of African-American life, based on Alex Haley’s family history. Kunta Kinte is abducted from his African village, sold into slavery, and taken to America. He makes several escape attempts until he is finally caught and maimed. He marries Bell, his plantation’s cook, and they have a daughter, Kizzy, who is eventually sold away from them. Kizzy has a son by her new master, and the boy grows up to become Chicken George, a legendary cock fighter who leads his family into freedom. Throughout the series, the family observes notable events in U. S. history, such as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, slave uprisings, and emancipation. Written by Eric Sorensen

Alex Haley Biography

Alexander Murray Palmer Haley was born on August 11, 1921 in Ithaca, New York. He was the oldest child of Simon Alexander and Bertha Palmer Haley. At the time of his birth, his father was a graduate student at Cornell University and his mother was a music teacher.

As a young boy, Alex Haley first learned of his African ancestor, Kunta Kinte, by listening to the family stories of his maternal grandparents while spending his summers in Henning, Tennessee. According to family history, Kunta Kinte landed with other Gambian Africans in “Naplis” (Annapolis, Maryland) where he was sold into slavery.

Alex Haley's quest to learn more about his family history resulted in his writing the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Roots*. The book has been published in 37 languages, and was made into the first week-long television mini-series, viewed by an estimated 130 million people. *Roots* also generated widespread interest in genealogy.

Haley's writing career began after he entered the U. S. Coast Guard in 1939. Haley was the first member of the U. S. Coast Guard with a Journalist designation (rating). In 1999 the U. S. Coast Guard honored Haley by naming a Coast Guard Cutter after him. Haley's personal motto, " Find the Good and Praise It," appears on the ship's emblem. He retired from the military after 20 years of service, and then continued writing.

Out of the service, he tried his hand at journalism in the private sector. His first successful article was an interview that appeared in *Playboy Magazine* in 1962. Haley wrote many well received *playboy* interviews. He next worked on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Published in 1965, it became Haley's first major book.

It was about this time his thoughts then turned back to the family story of the African slave that he heard as a child. His work on the story, which he knew he had to write, became a primary focus of his writing efforts. He details his many years of research in the last chapter of *Roots*. First referred to as *Before This Anger*, it was eventually published in abbreviated form in 1974 by the *Reader's Digest*. The completed version of *Roots* was placed on bookshelves in 1976. The award winning book and 1977 television mini-series introduced Kunta Kinte to the world.

Other Haley publications include *A Different Kind of Christmas*, a 1990 book about the underground railroad, and *Queen*, the story of Haley's paternal ancestors. *Queen* was produced into a television mini-series, which first aired in the winter of 1993.

Perhaps one of Alex Haley's greatest gifts was in speaking. He was a fascinating teller of tales. In great demand as a lecturer, both nationally and internationally, he was on a lecture tour in Seattle, Washington in February 1992 when he suffered a heart attack and died.

Despite his passing, he has left a legacy of international stature. Kunta Kinte has become a cultural icon world wide. And, *Roots* initiated such a widespread interest in genealogy research that Haley is considered to be the father of popular geneal

— It all starts in 1750 , with a birth of a boy in the African village Juffure. Kunta kinte is his name and the first part of the story revolves around him , his childhood , his training to be an adult and you get an idea about the life and culture of a Muslim African village. Then he is captured by the slavers and sold to a plantation. There you get introduced to Bell , Kuntas to be wife and the struggles of Kunta to accept the fact that he is a slave , someone who is owned by someone else. A struggle between his will to escape and be a free man or accept the fact he is a slave. Then Kunta and Bell gets married and Kizzy is born.

Then Kizzy is sold because she commits a crime and the new owner rapes kizzy. This is a powerful passage of the book where it shows how families

were broken up and suffered because of slavery and how slave owners treated slaves like property having their way with them whenever they wanted. Kizzy also marries and has children the most famous of them all Chicken George was fathered by the slave owner Tom Lea. The story of George is mostly about chicken fighting, he marries Mathilda and they save money to buy themselves out of slavery. But tragic events and Chicken George's greed ends that chance. Mathilda gives birth to many children and Tom is the eldest, he turns himself into a fine blacksmith as well. This is the period where the war ends and the slaves are given freedom. This passage takes a look at how they dealt with freedom after living so long as slaves. Tom marries Irene and Cynthia is one of their daughters. Cynthia marries Simon Haley and they give birth to the child named Alex Haley.

Roots: The Saga of an American Family Alex Haley

(Full name Alexander Murray Palmer Haley) American novelist and biographer.

The following entry presents criticism on Haley's novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). INTRODUCTION

Roots: The Saga of an American Family (1976) is an historical novel that purports to trace the African American ancestry of its author, Alex Haley, back to a tiny village in Gambia, West Africa. Within two years of its publication, more than eight million copies of the book had been printed in twenty-six languages, and *Roots* had won 271 awards, including the Pulitzer Prize. Published in 1976, the volume also inspired a generation of ancestor-

seeking Americans and led to one of the most ambitious and most-watched television productions ever undertaken. Biographical Information

Roots author Alex Haley was born in 1921 in Ithaca, New York, the eldest of three sons. His father was a college professor; his mother a schoolteacher. Haley grew up in the small town of Henning, Tennessee, where his early memories reportedly included stories from elderly relatives about an African ancestor who refused to respond to the slave name “Toby.” The tales of his childhood eventually inspired the search for his past that led to the writing of Roots. Although Haley’s reputation in the literary world rests primarily upon this much-acclaimed historical novel, he is also remembered for writing Malcolm X’s “as told to” autobiography in 1965. Haley wrote many articles for popular magazines, appeared on countless television shows, and lectured throughout the country until his death in 1992. Plot and Major Characters

Roots is the story of Kunta Kinte, a Mandinkan from the small village of Juffure, Gambia, in West Africa, and his American descendants. Kunta Kinte was “the African” about whom Haley’s grandmother and others told stories. Roots imaginatively recreates the life of Haley’s ancestor in Africa, his capture into slavery in 1676, and his experiences as a slave in Spotsylvania, Virginia. Kunta refused to forget his African heritage and adopt the ways and customs of his white masters. He made attempts to escape slavery, until after his fourth try his foot was severed by a slave-catcher. He later married Bell, the slave cook in the big house on the plantation, and they had a daughter named Kizzy. Kunta spent Kizzy’s childhood teaching her the sounds of his native African language and imparting tales of her African

ancestry. At the age of fifteen, Kizzy was sold to a master whose rape of his new young slave resulted in the birth of the third generation, George, who in turn learned of his African heritage through the stories of his mother. This was the most famous of Haley's ancestors, after Kunta Kinte. George, known as "Chicken George" for his success as a gamecock trainer, fathered eight children with Mathilda. His fourth son, Tom, was the father of Haley's maternal grandmother, Cynthia, who was taken to Henning, Tennessee, on a wagon train of freed slaves. In Henning, Cynthia met and married Will Palmer and had a daughter named Bertha, who married Simon Haley: these were Haley's parents.

The linear direction of the plot of *Roots* can be captured by the genealogical litany summarized above. The saga, however, incorporates the violence and degradation experienced by slaves at every turn in the story, from the inhumane capture of young men and women on the shores of West Africa and the unspeakable horrors of the subsequent Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean, to the beatings, rapes, mutilations, and brutal living and working conditions to which slaves were routinely subjected, when they were not being bought and sold in marketplaces. Each generation from Kunta Kinte on preserves memories of the ancestral past while achieving incremental and aching slow progress toward the day when they would be slaves no more.

Major Themes

Roots riveted public attention on one of the most painful chapters of American history, and yet it was read—and in its television version, watched—by millions of Americans, black and white. In addition to treating the

obvious subjects of slavery, black identity, and the power of oral history, *Roots* celebrates resiliency, the triumph of human spirit over cruelty, and the strength of family connections, both within and across generations. Families work together to protect their members. Children are taught that principles are worthy of risk. Ancestral memories are preserved and passed on through the telling of stories to one's children, and humankind's universal search for its identity is given a personal face. These themes cross racial and ethnic boundaries and help account for the book's immense popularity. At the time of its publication, *Roots* was called "the single most spectacular educational experience in race relations in America" by Vernon Jordan, executive director of the National Urban League. The creative revelation of one family's story opened doors that had long been locked, in individual families and in American culture as a whole.

Critical Reception

Although critics generally lauded *Roots*, they seemed unsure whether to treat the work as a novel or as a historical account. While the narrative is based on factual events, the dialogue, thoughts, and emotions of the characters are fictionalized. Haley himself described the book as "faction," a mixture of fact and fiction. Most critics concurred and evaluated *Roots* as a blend of history and entertainment. *Newsweek* applauded Haley's decision to fictionalize: "Instead of writing a scholarly monograph of little social impact, Haley has written a blockbuster in the best sense—a book that is bold in concept and ardent in execution, one that will reach millions of people and alter the way we see ourselves." Some black leaders viewed *Roots* "as the most important civil rights event since the 1965 march on Selma," according to *Time*.

Not all the attention accorded *Roots* was positive, however. In 1977 two published authors, Margaret Walker and Harold Courlander, alleged separately that Haley plagiarized their work in *Roots*. Charges brought by Walker were later dropped, but Haley admitted that he unknowingly lifted three paragraphs from Courlander's *The African* (1968). A settlement was reached whereby Haley paid Courlander \$500, 000. The same year other accusations arose, alleging that Haley had altered data to fit his objectives, fabricating ancestors and changing timelines or geographic details to make the story into the one he wanted to tell. These charges were never proven or resolved, but Haley's supporters maintain that the author never claimed *Roots* was a factual document, calling it instead a work of "faction," fiction based on the facts of his ancestry, as he discovered them. Despite these controversies, the public image of *Roots* doesn't seem to have suffered. It is still widely read in schools, and many college and university history and literature programs consider it an essential part of their curriculum.

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