

African american vernacular essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the definition of vernacular is “ of, relating to, or being a nonstandard language or dialect of a place, region, or country.” In terms of African American history, the evolution of vernacular is very important and a very unique part of the culture. The African American vernacular has aided the development of a distinct culture in terms of what African Americans were subjected to from the installation of slavery. The African American vernacular was used as a way to expose the atrocities that African Americans were imperiled to through songs and language. “ Go down Moses ,” a spiritual and “ Strange Fruit,” performed by Billie Holiday are two songs that represent the vernacular of African American culture. “ Go down Moses,” was a song that had a Christian religious theme that spoke of the Israelites being enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt’s land. Spirituals had ambiguous meanings that included a reverence for Christianity and a desire to be free from the bondages of slavery. “ Strange Fruit” was a song originally written as a poem that exposed racism against African American and called for a social change. Although they bear some similarities, the differences between “ Go down Moses” and “ Strange Fruit” include setting, meaning and cultural impact.

According to The Norton Anthology of African American Literature by Henry Louis-Gates Jr, Spirituals were a very important part of African American culture during the time of slavery. And still are today, although they are widely known as gospels. Spirituals have a Christian religious theme and are usually performed a cappella with a single melody. (Gates Jr, 2003) African American Spirituals are the predecessor to the blues, gospels, jazz and rap/hip-hop. Spirituals are also referred to as Negro spirituals, Black

spirituals, folk songs and jubilees. Spirituals were sung to provide comfort and ease the pain of the harsh daily tasks that slaves were submitted to. They were also seen as an expression of spiritual devotion and a yearning for freedom from the bondages of slavery. (Gates Jr, 2003) They were also a means of releasing pent up emotions and expressing sorrow. More importantly, they served a subversive purpose. Songs like “ Steal away to Jesus,” “ Swing low,” “ Sweet Chariot,” “ Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel?” and “ Go down Moses” served a dual purpose during the times of slavery. Spirituals were used as a code between the slaves to aide with the task of attempting to escape slavery or the thought of escaping from bondage.

“ Go down Moses” first recorded by Paul Robeson, is a song riddled with ambiguous tones. On the surface, this song tells the story of the Israelites as slaves, which is found in the books of Genesis and Exodus. Moses was called by God to instruct Pharaoh to free the Israelites from the bondages of slavery. “ Go down Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, tell old Pharaoh to let my people go” is one line from the song. African slaves forcefully bought to the Americas were converted to Christianity and although they weren’t taught to read or write, they were taught the teachings of the bible. White slave owners used the stories of the sufferings of the Israelites and the affirmation of “ life after death” which is seen throughout the bible, to justify slavery. (Gates Jr. 2003) In the song, “ Go down Moses,” Pharaoh represented the White Slave owners, Israel represented the African American Slaves and Egypt represented the Americas or the United States.

“ Strange Fruit” is a song most famously recorded and performed in 1939 by Billie Holiday. The song was written as a poem by Abel Meerpol, a teacher. According to The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, the poem exposed racism in the United States. It shed light on the lynching of African American men in the South. Lynching’s occurred in other regions of the United States, but mainly in the South. “ Strange Fruit” is commonly known as a song of social change. As mentioned before, this poem helped to expose racism in the U. S. During this time, many people were fighting for the civil rights of African American that had been stymied by institutionalized racism. Jim Crow laws of the South are an example of institutionalized racism. Jim Crow laws limited the civil rights of African American and deemed them second class citizens. Even during the days of slavery, there were many efforts made that helped to expose the atrocities that occurred against African Americans. This included photographs and written works such as books and newspaper articles.

During the early 20th century, racism against African Americans was exposed via songs that called for a change of societal practices and views. “ Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root, black bodies swinging in the southern breeze...” are some of the lyrics of the song “ Strange Fruit.” “ Here is fruit for the crows to pluck, for the rain to gather, for the wind to suck, for the sun to rot, for the trees to drop, here is a strange and bitter crop” are more lyrics to the same song. Imagining a black body swinging from a tree, it can be viewed as a strange fruit or a bitter crop. Hearing the song performed, makes the lyrics and the meaning

more ominous. As mentioned before, Billie Holiday recorded the song in 1939 but almost 25 years later, Nina Simone also recorded the song.

Concerning the sub-genre social change music, there are many songs written and performed that exposes the way of life for African Americans. This includes “ The Revolution will not be televised” recorded by Gil Scott-Heron in 1970 and “ The Message” recorded by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five in 1982. Both these songs are considered important to the evolution of African American vernacular because just like “ Strange Fruit” it exposed the racism, prejudices and discrimination that African Americans were subjected to and how it affected their lives. Both the songs “ Go down Moses” and “ Strange Fruit” have an abundance of differences as was mentioned. However they differ in setting or time, meaning and cultural impact. Spirituals were originally sung during the times of slavery, during the 18th and 19th century. They were seen as a reverence to the Christian religion while at the same time, they were also seen as a yearning for freedom from the bondages of slavery. Spirituals developed into gospel songs which are a main staple of the black church in the United States.

“ Strange Fruit” was written, recorded and performed during the 19th century. And although slavery had been abolished for maybe 80 years, African Americans still dealt with prejudices, racism and discrimination. These social change songs were developed to expose those prejudices. The lyrics of “ Strange Fruit” mention the “ black bodies swinging... from the poplar trees.” Unlike spirituals, social change had no ambiguous meaning. It meant to directly display the ugliness of what was going on at the time. One

more similarity that should be mentioned which highlight the uniqueness concerning African American vernacular in the way in which both these songs were sung. The tone in which Paul Robeson performs “ Go down Moses’ is similar to the way Billie Holiday and Nina Simone performed “ Strange Fruit.” You can see, hear, and feel the soul, essence, pain, and significance of both songs when they were performed. That sense of soul is the one unique component of African American vernacular that sets us apart from all the others.