

Family heritage and self-identity argumentative essay examples

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Introduction

An individual first begins forming her self-identity based on the characteristics of her immediate family. She has nothing else to refer to except what she knows; that is her immediate family's ethnic identity, religious/spiritual identity, and socioeconomic identity. As she begins to interact with the world outside her immediate family, the individual begins to notice discrepancies between the identities of her immediate family and those outside of it. An individual can choose to explore and assimilate outside identities, but she remains tied to her first impressions of identity. Margaret Walker's "Lineage," Robin D. G. Kelley's "The People in Me," and Adrienne Rich's "Delta" all express the idea of an individual's identity becoming multidimensional; that is both rooted in her heritage and her own self-expression. For instance, an individual that grew up in a Protestant Christian family may not identify as a Christian, but retain respect for specific aspects of the Christian religion. As a consequence of the multitude of influences and choices an individual faces within her lifetime, portions of her self-identity are either expressed in agreement with or in opposition to her family's traditions and cultural heritage.

Literature Review and Analysis

In her poem "Lineage" Margaret Walker describes the strength of her grandmothers and the actions that caused others to see them as strong. Walker says "they followed plows and bent to toil" (451 ln. 2) and "they touched earth and grain grew" (451 ln. 3). It is apparent to the reader that Walker is describing a family heritage of manual labor and perhaps slavery.

The strength of her grandmothers is a piece of their identity they obtained through hard work from Walker's perspective. She says " my grandmothers are full of memories, smelling of soap and onions and wet clay, with veins rolling roughly over quick hands, they have many clean words to say" (Walker 451 ln. 7-10). These lines further cement Walker's tie of her heritage to the work her grandmothers did in and outside of their homes. She ends the poem with the lines " my grandmothers were strong. Why am I not as they?" (Walker 451 ln. 11-12).

In Walker's case she identifies who she is by observing that she is not like her grandmothers. Whether the author is alluding to the fact that her life circumstances are dissimilar to her grandmothers or whether she does not possess the same strong characters they did is moot. What the reader knows is that Walker forms a significant portion of her self-identity by stating it is in opposition to her family's heritage. With her ending, Walker could be alluding to the fact that she is about to embark on a journey to become strong like her grandmothers but perhaps in a different fashion. Since her grandmothers presumably lived under dissimilar circumstances than Walker, she will have to express the character trait of strength in a different way. What is noticeable about the poem is that Walker does not mention the strength of her mother or aunt(s). This gives the reader a further clue that the cultural traditions in Walker's family heritage have drastically changed following her grandmothers' generation. Walker must formulate a self-identity that is largely independent of her heritage.

Adrienne Rich follows a similar theme in her poem " Delta." Although her descriptions are vaguer and abstract, Rich alludes to the concept of self-

identity being something that is in opposition to one's heritage. The author opens "Delta" with the lines "if you have taken this rubble for my past, raking through it for fragments you could sell, know that I long ago moved on, deeper into the heart of the matter" (Rich 445 ln. 1-4). Her second stanza states "if you think you can grasp me, think again: my story flows in more than one direction" (Rich 445 ln. 5-6). Like Walker, Rich is affirming her self-identity is simultaneously connected to and disconnected from her family heritage. Not only is her self-identity multidimensional (e. g. flowing in more than one direction), but it cannot be completely traced to her past (e. g. heritage). At some point, Rich has assimilated portions of her self-identity that stem from sources outside of what she was born knowing. Neither can a stranger assume who she is by her origins. This point is cemented with the poem's closing imagery and metaphorical association of "a delta springing from the riverbed, with its five fingers spread" (Rich 445 ln. 7-8).

Robin D. G. Kelley's essay "The People in Me" further expounds on the idea of self-identity being multidimensional. Society has struggled to attribute an ethnic identity to Kelley due to the diverse characteristics of the author's immediate family. Kelley's perspective is that all inhabitants of Earth are "mixed" and it is through this multidimensionality that all inhabitants of Earth are one people (Kelley 476). The author closes the essay by stating profoundly "next time you see me, don't ask where I'm from or what I am—I've got some people in me'" (Kelley 476). Although Kelley expresses the idea of self-identity being in agreement with one's heritage, the author still recognizes self-identity as having the capacity to branch off from one's immediate influences.

Conclusion

It is Kelley's explanation of self-identity that fully encompasses how it is formed in relation to one's family heritage. Unlike Walker and Rich, Kelley sees differences in self-identities as harmonious and integrative. The former defines self-identity as something that moves in opposition to or in different directions from one's heritage. The latter believes all expressions of self-identity come from a single, multidimensional origin. Regardless, an individual must use heritage as a reference point when forming her self-identity. As her life progresses, her self-identity may expand, keep the same characteristics of her reference point, or discard them.

Works Cited

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