

# Culturally poetic

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Culturally Poetic Cultural identity is the collective personality of a people usually associated with a certain group or culture, or that of an individual in relation to certain behavior, thoughts, and influences. (Central Michigan University) These beliefs and shared characteristics allow a group to establish a common ground and in turn make them unique to others. A cultural identity may be national, ethnic, or even generational. Our identity is based upon our differences when compared to other groups.

Cultural identity is essentially defined by differences rather than likenesses to others. The identifiable aspects of culture are historical, linguistic, and mental. These three factors may also be found in poetry and are related to the views that an author wishes to express. In my essay, I will seek to identify elements of culture in the following poems: "Bully", "What it's Like to Be a Black Girl", "Self-Pity's Closet", "Rite of Passage", and "The Panther". In Martin Espada's poem, "Bully" cultural identity is evident throughout the length of the poem.

The poem is introduced by way of location, the time period, and the year, "In the school auditorium / the Theodore Roosevelt statue / is nostalgic for the Spanish American War" (713). The poet themes seemingly focus on change within American society. This theme is noticeably identifiable in the following stanza: But now the Roosevelt school is pronounced Hernandez. Puerto Rico has invaded Roosevelt with its army of Spanish-singing children in the hallways, brown children devouring the stockpiles of the cafeteria, children painting Taino ancestors that leap naked across murals. 714) Espada effectively provides contrast between Roosevelt's belief of ethnocentrism and the invasion of the Spanish colonies by comparing the immigration of

Puerto Rican families in a 1987 Boston, Massachusetts. At the poem's ending we are able to envision a revenge of sorts with the children now invading Roosevelt himself. The following stanza is irony at its best and brings the element of culture and change to the forefront, Roosevelt is surrounded by all the faces he ever shoved in eugenic spite and cursed as mongrels, skin of one race, hair and cheekbones of another. (714)

This bit of irony is representative of the fact that change once experienced on the island of Puerto Rico now too is prevalent within America. Roosevelt is declared the “bully” by his conquest and those that were once without power are now empowered through change and assimilation. This poem uses historical factors to establish a cultural identity. Patricia Smith's, “What it's Like to Be a Black Girl” (for Those of You Who Aren't) approaches the idea of a black girl becoming a woman at a time when race matters were still prevalent. The author begins with a direct but conversation like tone to denote the importance of what is being imparted:

First of all, it's being 9 years old and/ feeling like you're not finished, like your edges are wild, like there's something, everything, wrong...(672) The theme here is puberty based changes that takes place according to a “black girl.” The girl feels incomplete because her body is experiencing changes. Smith goes on to describe the girl's desire to fit into society by wanting to have the physical traits of a white woman. The young girl is displeased with being black and seeks to change her appearance: ...it's dropping food coloring In your eyes to make them blue and suffering Their burn in silence.

It's popping a bleached White mophead over the kinks of your hair and priming in front of the mirrors that deny your reflection...(672) She goes on to describe the Black Power Movement and the Motown era by mentioning "it's flame and fists and life according to Motown." As a blossoming young girl approaching womanhood she finds it not only difficult to become a woman, but a black woman. Finally, the girl looks forward to every woman's dream of becoming a bride. This is evidenced in the final three lines: "it's finally having a man reach out for you/then caving in/around his fingers. The girl anticipates a completed transition when she will become married. This poem uses mental aspects to form cultural identity during a time of racial tension. Michelle Boisseau's, "Self-Pity's Closet" focuses on the way that society views beauty, self-image, and self-confidence. Boisseau uses figurative speech, imagery, and perceived sounds throughout the poem to bring light to a poor self image. The theme of this poem is equated to as the poem states self-pity. What seemingly appears as others judging us blinds us to the fact that we judge ourselves far worse than others would.

The closet so to speak is within the individual feelings of: "Depression, loneliness, anger, shame, envy" (999) are the basis of self-pity. Feelings of self-loathing and self-hurt are evident in the following lines: after your vast and painful declarations subtle humiliations creeping up like the smell of wet upholstery, dial tone in the brain, the conviction that your friends never really loved you...(1000) The author seeks to express an inner fight a person struggles with when worried about the way others perceive them. The narrator uses the words, "dial tone in the brain" to describe a continuous mode of embarrassment within herself.

She is unable to part with a feeling of inadequacy and is therefore trapped by her very own self pity. This poem uses mental aspects by associating self-pity with not being able to identify with the status quo of our cultural identity. In Sharon Olds's, " Rite of Passage" a mother examines the behavior of her son and his friend during his birthday party. The title of the poem allows the reader to relate the " rite of passage" being the journey that her son will take toward manhood. Male maturity is the theme of the poem. What makes the poem ironic is her ability to view them as men though they are but six and seven years old.

The following lines are quite imaginable to any mother noticing the machismo nature of young boys: As the guests arrive at my son's party they gather in the living room— short men, men in first grade with smooth jaws and chins. Hands in pockets, they stand around jostling, jockeying for place, small fights breaking out and calming. One says to another How old are you? Six. I'm seven. So? (811) In the last line we experience a typical conversation between two boys that are likely " sizing" each other up; the six year old responds to the seven year old " So? The mother then goes onto visualizing the boys as men with careers by stating, " They clear their/throats a lot, a room of small bankers/they fold their arms and frown..." One cannot help but to envision the boys as men at a table matching wits at an older age. The birthday boy as if chairman of the bank settles the dispute between his friends in the following lines: " speaks up as a host/for the sake of the group. /We could easily kill a two-year old,/he says in his clear voice. " The group agrees and the children return to playing or as the mother describes, "...they relax and get down to playing war, celebrating my son's life. Just as

Smith's "What it's Like to Be a Black Girl" focused on a girl approaching maturity so did Olds' "Rite of Passage." Olds uses mature language and terms to equate the behavior expressed by the boys as being their way of coming into manhood. The boys feel a need to intimidate each other with physical threats which showcases their immaturity on their way to adulthood. This poem identifies with the culturally defined behavior of a male having to prove he is a "man." In Rainier Rilke's poem "The Panther" the poet uses the panther a wild animal to express personification and similes to express confinement.

An obvious reason for the panther being the subject is because its color represents a seemingly dark nature and contributes to the poem's tone. A panther is also known to be a solitary creature that stalks its prey. The use of the panther represents a theme of entrapment that most readers are able to identify with. The panther's discontentment and longing to be free from his troubles is expressed as the cage's bars. He has become so accustomed to seeing the bars that he no longer sees anything but what appears directly in front of him it is as if he has lost himself. The panther's desperation in a sense mirrors human personality.

Rilke's offers her interpretation of this poetically by saying, His vision, from the constantly passing bars, has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else. It seems to him there are a thousand bars and behind the bars, no world. (674) Rilke's makes us aware that although the panther is confined we are still able to see its power and its beauty. Though caged he is still himself though he feels "paralyzed" by the cage; this feeling is interpreted in the following lines, "As he paces in cramped circles, over and over/the

movement of his powerful soft strides/is like a ritual dance around a center/in which a mighty will stands paralyzed. The idea of confinement is relatable to a prisoner or anyone trapped in a situation with seemingly no way out. The panther yearns for more and this is evidenced by his pacing and boredom with his life. In the end the panther has lost his soul and his excitement is reduced to the opening of his eyes ever so slightly. It seems that the panther takes his final glance that touches him inwardly to the point his body becomes tense and his heart is excited for a split second until he realizes his situation and no longer bothers to react. This idea is well expressed in the final stanza.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly—. An image enters in, rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles, plunges into the heart and is gone. Rilke in “ The Panther” and Boisseau in her “ Self-Pity’s Closet” both convey the message of an inner struggle within their subjects. The poems are able to speak to the reader on a personal level and make the connection of human emotion with their dark but personal nature. “ The Panther” embodied a feeling of weariness and surrender that human often time encounter in not one but within all societies and cultures.

Often times we find ourselves staying within the box or the status quo instead of stepping outside of the box-in this case the cage. In comparison, the five poems that I have chosen to review are full of impact and take on a deeper meaning. They touch on outward appearances as well as inner feelings. They were all able to bring out identifiable aspects that we are all able to connect with through either personal or secondary experiences. In contrast, “ Bully” came from a historical standpoint, while “ What it’s Like to

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Be a Black Girl” and “ Rite of Passage” focused on what is accepted by society.

Lastly, “ Self-Pity’s Closet” and “ The Panther” dealt with inner struggles and the way that we tend to view ourselves when we take an inner look. Works Cited Central Michigan University. Cultural Identity as an Instrument. 8 May 2006. 3 November 2009 . Boisseau, Michelle. " Self Pity's Closet. " Mayer, Michael. The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 999-1000. Espada, Martin. " Bully. Mayer, Michael. The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 713-714. Olds, Sharon. " Rite of Passage. " Mayer, Michael. The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 811-812. Rilke, Rainier Maria. " The Panther. " Mayer, Michael. The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 674. Smith, Patricia. " What It’s Like to Be a Black Girl. " Mayer, Michael. The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 672-73