

# [The coming: language and identity](https://assignbuster.com/the-coming-language-and-identity/)

“ This was the Coming” is arguably one of the most impactful lines in Daniel Black’s The Coming, mostly because it captures everything that the novel is dedicated to, which is “ the memory and celebration of African souls lost in the Atlantic Ocean.” This common theme of the novel is loosely based off a Sonia Sanchez piece, in which Sanchez constantly repeats, “ It was The Coming that was bad.” What makes this idea intriguing is how a phrase as open to interpretation as ‘ the coming’ can represent a period of history that changed West Africa and the Americas forever. The reader easily becomes aware that Black’s language throughout this novel and the way it is organized is used in a powerful way that is not normally recognized in other historical fiction novels. Specifically, what stands out the most in this work is Black’s unique structure, combined with his immersive usage of imagery and constant repetition; language plays a vital role throughout The Coming and Black manipulates it in a way that makes this novel one of the most powerful narratives centered around African lives throughout the Middle Passage.

The first thing that the reader notices about The Coming is Black’s immediate use of collective pronouns and imagery. The novel begins with the words “ We didn’t know we wouldn’t return” (1); Black starts off the book by introducing how he refers to everyone in this novel as we, since he is an African-American male who believes that this story is one that resonates with all other African-Americans because it is the story of how their entire culture changed in a few years’ time. He also spends the first twenty pages or so building an authentic image of Africa that most readers are unaware of. For example, Black says that “ We were warriors and hunters, poets and jali, farmers and soothsayers…We were lovers. And we were home. We loved the land and it loved us…. We knew our strengths and our frailties, and we knew much needed improvement. But we were home” (Black 3). Black then lists some of the hundreds of tribes that African-Americans today descended from, some are familiar to the general public while others are not as recognizable. This first section in particular brings up so many new pieces of information to the lives of African people before they were enslaved. Black brought an entirely new voice to a narrative that the general public thought that they knew so well. This idea is very reminiscent of what Jacqueline Royster discusses in an article entitled, “ When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own.” In this brief testament to common audiences in an academic setting, Royster writes about the importance of telling our own stories without letting an authoritative voice dictate them.

In regards to the creation of The Coming, most historical programs dedicated to the education of students in terms of slavery were not written nor taught by people of African American descent, which is what Royster discourages in her article by highlighting that, “ we have been forever content to let voices other than our own speak authoritatively about our areas of expertise and about us” (Royster 11). It almost seems as if Black’s work in particular is tied to another statement made in Royster’s work where she says, “ It is time to speak for ourselves, in our own interests, in the interest of our work, and in the interest of our students” (Royster 11). Essentially, this is what Black is doing through language in The Coming; with such immersive and fluent imagery, he is able to tell a story that is often told by people who have diluted it to something that was not as serious or as horrifying as it truly was. For example, Black provides a descriptive metanarrative in which he explains how the enslavers felt threatened that the enslaved Africans would plan another mutiny. As a result, “ They grabbed one of our sisters and bound her with thick ropes. They lifted her…and lowered her body. When they lifted her again, her lower half was gone. Some monster of the sea had taken it” (58-59). In typical literature, intense imagery is assumed to involve long sentences based upon the five senses, creating a specific scene for the reader to imagine. But, Black refrains from this by creating shorter, direct sentences that do not only get his point across but also accomplishes the same scene creation of its more complex counterpart. Black is using language to bring his audience to the realities of what occurred throughout the Middle Passage, no matter how harsh they got; he is telling a story for the community that Royster talks about in her article, and Black uses intricate language techniques to get his point across. Black’s imagery and his attempts to include his audience in this narrative is what propels this work. But, what accentuates his work is Black’s usage of repetition and his unique structure of The Coming; combined, these two create an emphatic atmosphere as the novel is read, especially as the lead narrative progresses.

As mentioned before, the concept of ‘ coming’ is based of a Sonia Sanchez piece in which she constantly repeats certain phrases and words, most notably, “ It was The Coming that was bad.” Black emulates this technique by repeating words and adding new phrases of detail. In The Coming, when all of the Africans are in the slave ship, Black repeats, “ We hummed a melody so dark it sent us into a trance. We hummed all night long. We hummed until we knew our little son or daughter was home.. We hummed…We hummed” (71). Black continues to emphasize the images he is trying to create with this repetition, still exposing the realities of this time period and how it affected the community he is trying to speak to. The other technique Black usages to emphasize this text is it’s odd structure. It can easily be assumed that uniform processes seen in novels such as a rising action, climax, falling action, etc. are vital in order for the text to make sense. However; Black purposefully goes against that concept and solely uses his words to get his points across, which is the main purpose of writing or sharing a text in the first place. Without the presence of these so-called necessary components, it almost feels unsettling to the reader because they are unaware of what is to occur and for how long. Black most likely wanted the reader to feel this way just so that he can show the harsh atmosphere enslaved Africans were in; there was no protagonist there to save all of them and turn the boats back around to the western coast of the African continent, this was the coming of African-Americans, it is not a glamorous story, and Black wants the reader to realize that in every single facet. Black takes out the logistics of planning and placing a novel but he does this in a way that does not make the book come off as unorganized. Therefore, it is important to recognize the presence of structure, or lack thereof, how it correlates to this heartbreaking narrative and how it continues to affect the African-American community.

What makes The Coming so exceptional is how Daniel Black strips the novel of all of the typical logistics found in almost every single novel and replaced it with just his words in order to spread this narrative. With that being said, the role of language throughout this novel is much more important than it was before. The reader easily becomes aware that Black’s language throughout this novel and the way it is organized is used in a powerful way that is not normally recognized in other historical fiction novels.