

# The struggle of african americans to derive meaning and identity in african ameri...

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The period 1900s to the 1950s features an increased volume of works of art by African Americans, with these ranging from music, visual art, dance and literature (Jones 4). Jones refers to this period as “ the Harlem Renaissance”, a period through African Americans literature writers developed and emphasized on the heritage and identity of the African Americans, giving meaning to what it meant to be an African American. Most especially focused on the struggle that African Americans had to face in order to assert their identity and position in society.

This struggle for meaning and identity is strongly expressed in James Baldwin’s short story “ Sonny’s Blue”, Langston Hughes’s poem “ The Negro speaks of rivers” and Lorraine Hansberry’s play “ Raisin in the sun”. All of these work written by African Americans document how various African Americans lived their lives, how they struggled to make their lives better in a world that seemed to be against the progress of African Americans and how they derived meaning from their lives and experiences.

Using a sociological and biological criticism as a way to analysis, it can be noted that each of the three literary works encompass the struggle of African Americans to derive meaning and identity into their lives as African Americans given their disadvantaged position in society. In all of these three pieces of literary works, the authors highlight the struggle that the African Americans faced in society, especially during the Harlem Renaissance period as they struggled to establish their positions in society.

In Langston Hughes’s poem “ The Negro speaks of rivers”, emphasis placed on the resilience of the African American people. Hughes uses important rivers as imagery that highlights the exploitation and slavery of the African  
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America people. It evoked survival, suffering, endurance and achievement for the African American people. For instance, in all the poems, despite the fact the each of the rivers may be giving connotations of slavery and exploitation through colonialism of black people in Africa, these rivers, Leach (12) asserts that all these rivers are described in positive light.

The phrases in the poem, “ I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young” (Hughes 5), “ I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep” (Hughes 6) and “ singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy boson turn all golden in sunset” (Hughes 8-9) highlight these rivers as comforting irrespective of the suffering that each may also be associate with. This also a similar case in Lorraine Hansberry’s play “ Raisin in the sun”, where the core theme that Lorraine explores is the disadvantaged position that African Americans had in society.

Hansberry explored the bad conditions that African Americans lived in ghettos and further the issues of segregation of whites from Black with to equal opportunity for proper housing. Hansberry engages on the merciless urban lives, discrimination and restricted access to services such as education that African Americans were faced with. For instance, Walter notes that “ Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it’s money.

I guess the world really do change. ” (1. 2), where the implication was that although the African Americans were now free from slavery, they still faced other hurdles and problems such as social or financial freedom, all of which have been as a result of societal restrictions on what African American could or could not do. Furthermore, similar Hughes’ poem, it references the Mississippi river to reflect the slavery period, where Mrs. Johnson notes that <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-of-african-americans-to-derive-meaning-and-identity-in-african-american-literature/>

although the turbulent Mississippi days were over, African Americans still faced racism and were treated badly as compared to whites.

However, the play does not fail to show the advancement that African Americans have made, and their continued struggle against the odds in society as the Young family buys a home in an all white neighbourhood due to their insurance windfall. A similar struggle is also reflected in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blue", where although the narrator is a respectable mathematics teacher, he and his family are trapped to live in Harlem an poor surrounding due to the social segregations that would not allow him to live in a better place even if he was able to afford it.

The situation is a bad cycle of poverty for African Americans as they were restricted in their achievements and trapped by their surroundings. For instance the narrator, who is Sonny's older brother, noted that some of math students may be "be popping off needles" and tried to understand why they were doing drugs, hoping it "it did more for them than algebra could"(Baldwin 28). The young men, Sonny, included are mainly attracted into doing drugs due to the hopelessness they have of making anything meaningful from their lives given impoverished and negative surrounding of limited opportunities they lived.

However, in spite of these disadvantages that the African Americans faced in society, each of the literary works show that the characters were developing an understanding of their identity as African Americans and were deriving meaning from their lives and struggles, and becoming proud of who they were. This development of identity and meaning from their lives is reflected in each of the literary works. In Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro speaks <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-of-african-americans-to-derive-meaning-and-identity-in-african-american-literature/>

of rivers”, the Negro brings awareness to his identity as a “ negro” and depicts the identities of African Americans as being both African and America.

This also shows an embrace of the black race, and identification within this race. When Hughes speaks of the rivers, he does not mention of himself but refers to himself as “ The Negro”, something that other African Americans, such as Hughes’ father had not accepted (Leach 12). Hughes position this dual identity as Africans and as Americans through the use of imagery using rivers. The mention of the Congo and it “ lulled me to sleep” (Hughes 6), reflects an almost maternal aspect, showcasing the core identity and birthplace of African Americans as being in Africa.

The usage of Mississippi highlights the means through which they also gained their America identity: first through slavery and then after through freedom and liberation to be American citizens. Indeed Jones (77) asserts that the usage of these geographical markers symbolizes identity and heritage that allows a much deeper understanding within the cultural, social and historical contexts of the African American people. This seeking to understand African American identity is a prevalent theme in Baldwin’s short story “ Sonny’s Blue”.

One of the core theses in Baldwin’s story is hopelessness. For instance, the narrator in the story notes that “ these boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. ” (Baldwin 23), reflecting the hopelessness that African American youths would amount to much, and that they victims of unfair social rules that stifled African  
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American ambitions. Yet even within this environment, Sonny is able to overcome the negatively and develop his own identity and ambition.

Although the narrator as an older brother and guardian of sonny had refuted Sonny's efforts to pursue music as a way of coping with the negative social conditions that African Americans lived in, eventually, when he heard the blues, he is intrigued, and the songs play an important role in repairing their relationship. The blues here have a strong significance to African American identity, as it soothed and made the ghetto live and suffering and far off issues. Reilly (231) asserts that the Afro American music used in the story extended the meaning of how Blues in this story to become a core identity of the black community in this story.

Through Sonny's Jazz music, the narrator of the story gains insight into the identity of Sonny, and his focus on defining himself in a world where his position has already been defined by restrictive and discriminatory social rules. Much similar to Hughes' poem, the story is that of seeking for identity, where African American identity is being stifled. This is also reflected in Hansberry's play " Raisin in the sun", where the home bought by the Younger family signified the socio economic struggle that the African Americans faced in society and the home helped them have a sense of place to call their own (Matthews 556).

Although the Younger family tried to be forced out of the good neighbourhood home they had bought within a white neighbourhood, they instead chose not to move out and live there since a home is something they had always wanted, and despite the segregation of blacks into poor neighbourhoods, they did not let themselves get defined by their race or <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-of-african-americans-to-derive-meaning-and-identity-in-african-american-literature/>

fears and threats of violence. Abdelmawjoud (30) asserts that the Younger family affirmed their identity and build their dignity in the American society as they refused to go back to squalor living as if they did not deserve a decent home.

All these books highlight the development in identity and the derivation of meaning the characters derived from their lives and struggles. The authors' lives strongly influenced their thought processes and ideas about what being an African American meant, and how they expressed their ideas in literary works. For instance, much of Hansberry's work on " Raisin in the sun" Was strongly influenced by her earlier life, where coming from a middle class African American family, their family was also faced issues of segregation when their family moved into a white neighbourhood.

Gordon (121) asserts that as a young playwright, her earlier life experiences, where her family had legally battle a segregation of blacks from white neighbourhoods, shaped literary works and much of the " Raising in the Sun" is reflective of her actual life. Arguably, the setting of the play derive much from the Chicago urban which was the core area of resistance and oppression where African only lived in ghettos and those who attempted to move into white households faced violence.

This was also similar in James Baldwin's story where his step father's rejection despite his brilliance, intelligence and obedience strongly influenced how he wrote his work. For instance, Bloom (25) asserts that Baldwin's personal story in being a child born out of wedlock and who was rejected by his step father reflects itself in the alienation and dispositions

with which he highlights as an identity for the African American people who disadvantage in society and faced.

On the other hand, Langston Hughes, wrote him poem as he going to visit his father in Mexico, and had just crossed the Mississippi river. This reminded him of the great significance that the river had on the life of African Americans and how far African Americans have triumphed over adversity. Although, Hughes identities with being a Negro, his father had not, and this gave him even more resolve to pursue writing, although his father did not think that an African American would amount to much within the hugely segregated society (Leach 12).

These experiences in their lives strongly shaped their literary works, especially where developing an African American identity was concerned. In conclusion, it can be noted that each of the three literary works encompass the struggle of African Americans to derive meaning and identity into their lives as African Americans given their disadvantaged position in society. In all of these three pieces of literary works, the authors highlight the struggle that the African Americans faced in society, especially during the Harlem Renaissance period as they struggled to establish their positions in society.

Hughes emphasised on the resilience of the African American people and through his works evoked survival, suffering, endurance and achievement for the African American people. This is also a similar case in Lorraine Hansberry's play where the core theme is the disadvantaged position that African Americans had in society. Hansberry engages on the dehumanising urban lives, discrimination and restricted access to services such as education that African Americans were faced with. A similar struggle is also <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-of-african-americans-to-derive-meaning-and-identity-in-african-american-literature/>



reflected in Baldwin's story where social segregations would not allow him to live in a better place even if he was able to afford it.

However, in spite of these disadvantages that the African Americans faced in society, each of the literary works show that the characters were developing an understanding of their identity as African Americans and were deriving meaning from their lives and struggles, and becoming proud of who they were. This development of identity and meaning from their lives is reflected in each of the literary works. Hughes brings awareness to his identity as a " negro" and depicts the identities of African Americans as being both African and America.

Furthermore, even with hopelessness being prevalent in Baldwin's short story Sonny is able to overcome the negatively and develop his own identity and ambition, and in Hansberry's play the Younger family chose to keep their home as it helped them have a sense of place to call their own. In all these, the authors' lives strongly influenced their thought processes and ideas about what being an African American meant, and how they expressed their ideas in literary works. This reflects their strong focus in attaining identity as well in their personal lives.