

African american humanities essay sample

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Introduction

American literature drew much of its influence from their culture and history. For instance, the African American literature that is, short stories, poems and novels talk much about the Africans Americans' culture, social inequality, slavery, racism, their sufferings and frustrations. These themes were incorporated through oral forms like rap, blues, gospel music, spirituals, or sermons. There were efforts by the Western world to rid off African Americans of the brutal sufferings they faced through slavery, racism, and pogroms. The African Americans were subjected to alienation, disesteem, and rejection to ensure that they never reached to the knowledge of their identity.

It is through this paradoxical status of the African Americans that the African American writers, for instance James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and among others, were in a position to forge their identity based on the travails and the torments they experienced. W Du Bois once stated that African American literature was part of their campaign for political emancipation (Thornton, 734).

Jazz music, for instance, emanated from the tunes composed during this time as they celebrated their hard labor. It was the only time they could celebrate and enjoy since they lived in difficult times of slavery. After the abolition of slavery, jazz music developed from these early tunes and constituted the message of difficult times they experienced during slavery. Another problem that dominated the African Americans was the racial prejudice. It is the attempt of advocating for equal rights and abolition of

racial discrimination that African-American writers developed their themes around.

The African American literary works like the songs and poems have powerful imagery, sublime themes and special vocabulary that is attributed to the significant contribution to the world culture. The double-consciousness of the African Americans prompted the African American writers to discover their true self through various ways. For instance, James Baldwin escaped to Europe just to discover his self that could not be realized in America due to the existing social conditions that subordinated self-determination of the African-Americans. The Negroes encountered difficulties in identifying their ethnicity and cultural orientation because they belong to two races. The rejection of the “ racial uplift” during the Harlem Renaissance by the African American writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay led to the celebration of the African Americans’ color and vividness through cultural essays, poetry, and drama in the African-American fiction (Thornton, 736).

What are some of the ways that African American historical experience is reflected in the works of poems, short stories, and novels?

The historical experience of African-American is reflected in the African American performance in poems, short stories, and novels. The performances helped the African Americans to have a clear understanding of both their past and present through reconstructing and perpetuating their experiences of a mythic past. The performances were carried out in ritualistic and historic continuum. According to Gale (11), rituals, pure

celebration, educating the audience on the meaning of the stories formed part of the performance of the story telling, and creation of the story telling stage. This was represented in the story telling performance as a black church. The juxtaposition of the acts and voices in terms of response and call in the storytelling performance is said to connect with “ a continuum of African to African-American performance” (Gale 11). The African-American literature used the oral traditions, religion, theatre, and folkways to illustrate the transition of the “ African sacred to secular performance” (Gale 12). This was reflected in the storytelling performance through weaving or collage of story in efforts to relay meaning and recognition.

The use of specific symbolic patterns of words and actions in the story telling performance exemplifies the recording and telling the history of African Americans, and acknowledging and coping with their present worldview of duality for cultural survival. The African American literature is characterized by creation and sharing of various forms of art like the folklore, autobiography, and spirituals and blues. The literature exemplifies the African cultural philosophy that is rich in symbolic acts and texts, as well as its own grammatical, ordinal, and ritual structure.

Gale (12) that symbol systems of Africa were evident in black performances during events like Southern burial markers and religion, Pinkster, in carnivals, indicate it in the linguistic dozens, in the religious witness, susus, and secret orders, and jubilees. The symbols in the African-American literature encoded a circular philosophy of life, correlative conception of divinity, and community creativity. The symbols also encoded conception of the empowering and ordering force of rituals. The memories of the old world

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were brought into the new world through the performance of pan-African poetries.

Why were African American poets drawn to musical models such as jazz and blues as a source of inspiration in their writing?

The African American poets collaborated with musicians as well as composers in the creation of choral works, tone poems, opera, jazz, and other forms of songs. The reasons behind the connection of jazz and poetry can be explained in terms of seeking connection between the values in the jazz lyrics and the definitions in the traditional poetry. A number of people rate songs in terms of its lyrics, that is, poetry. The creation of the song, “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday, was derived from Lewis Allen’s original poetic work.

According to Hayden Carruth, who is a poet, indicates that poetry and jazz connection is a twentieth century spontaneous improvisation of personal and conventional determined style. He states that Jazz is a random, open-ended, indeterminate and improvised poem.

It is also important to note that the twentieth African American poets collaborated with musical models such as jazz because Jazz is significant in the American culture through its influence in the poetic dictions. Musical models also set the mood for the poetic themes. Poetry is embedded in musical lyrics. This connection of jazz and music originated from the church services that were conducted by plantation blacks. The electric nature of Jazz talk inspired the writing of the African American poets because the jazz was “highly electric” and combined well with jargons of prostitution, gambling,
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dance, music, gambling, and larceny. The incorporation of jazz and blues as an inspiration for the writings by African American literary works was because these forms of music reflected the spirit of complicated experience of the Negroes, the African spirit (Benston 339).

How did Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison use elements from jazz and blues as a base for their literary styles?

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) used elements of jazz music in the recording of a number of his poems. An example of Amiri Baraka's poetic jazz combination was the infamous "Black Dada Nihilismus" that was described to be didactic, apocalyptic, and brutal work of the 1960s. Amiri Baraka's literary work was characterized by overwhelming rhythms, strong imagistic sense, and sophisticated hard message. Amiri Baraka indicated that the poetry was a form of music (Wallenstein 613).

Ralph Ellison in his literary works incorporated Euro-American structures, the blues, the chanted sermon, the folktale and other vernacular forms. The backbone of the literary works by Ellison and Baraka was the collaboration with black music, especially, the blues to bring about the Afro-American cultural matrix. The African spirit in the blues prompted them to use jazz and blues as a basis for their literary styles (Benston, 339).

How were the political changes taking place in the 1960s and 1970s reflected in the poetry of the Black Panther Party?

The political changes of the 1960s and 1970s were reflected in the poetry of the Black Panther Party because the literary works were inspired by

revolution concept. The poetry was tailored towards the themes of redefinition, war and rage influenced by Malcolm X. The African-American poetry of the 1960s insulted, and sought for compensation of the historical injustices that meted on them by the whites. The poems were constructed in free verse, to create a difference between the Whites and Negros. The Black Panther poetry served as an educational entertainment art in print, on stage, as well as in the community (Jennings 110).

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