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Importance of Language in African-American Narratives

Language is an integral part of our lives. We use it to communicate, to stand up for ourselves and for other people. Language gives a person power but it can also shut us out and keep us outside of the margins. In her 1993 Nobel Laureate Speech, Toni Morrison claims that “language is the measure of our lives, and death is the meaning of our lives.” This is to say that our purpose in life is not to live, but rather to create language throughout our lives and find ways in which we can use it. In the same fashion, language intends to convince us that the word is a strong instrument meant to break the silence that binds us to not speak and holds us hostage.

For the most part Morrison mentions different types of language that aren't necessarily written. For example, we have oppressive language, diplomatic language, sexist language, racist language, and seductive or mutant language. These types of languages are created to limit people, especially oppressive language. As an illustration, *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, provides a clear example of what oppressive language can do. Baldwin asserts that “the details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure,

does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear” (Baldwin 8). As a result, African Americans are forced to endure the unfair treatment of white folks, and society. For a long time, they’ve been told what they should and shouldn’t do and this behavior and way of thinking can be dated back to slavery. In the like manner, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois establishes the importance of education for the African American man. And again, we see how oppressive language weaves itself. In Du Boise’s experience, the African American man is able to fight against oppression and encourages people to fight against the system that wishes to not involve or recognize them. The African American man is able to reach its full potential, although the white man will always try to stop him from getting to that high point.

The epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* shows a lot of the types of language Morrison speaks about. Such as, sexist language, racist language, and seductive language. An example of racist and sexist language is when Celie’s father practically sells her to Mr.____, and tells him that Celie “ain’t smart either, and i’ll just be fair, you have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man” (Walker 8). Celie’s father knows how to degrade his own daughter, and make her feel worthless, and like she is a nobody. There are many occasions in which he does this, up to the point where he destroys her self-esteem. Not only does Walker use sexist language within the characters, but also places the setting of the novel in a sexist environment. The most compelling evidence is the recurring beating of women that occur, and the stereotypes they are given by men like Pa and Albert.

The word is important, and as seen in *The Color Purple*, words break and limit people. In this context words serve as a border, a border that won't let Celie break free. African-American Narratives provide us a different perspective, and we are able to see through someone else's story how slavery, race or even their identity can affect them. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker introduces us to Celie: a quiet, passive African American woman who mostly writes letters addressed to God. The portrayal of Celie into African American narratives is very important as it shows us the way women were treated during the 1920's. Celie being a woman of color felt forced to remain hidden in the shadows in order to guaranty her survival, and so she was invisible. Her only form of expression was through her diary in which she wrote letters to God and later on to her sister Nettie. Likewise, Celie is an important figure because she represents the oppressed woman but at the same time a strong woman. As readers we receive a personal account of a woman who suffered not only in the hands of white america but also of her stepfather and dominating husband. In the end, Celie comes out as a warrior.

The Fire Next Time is significant to African American narratives as well because for the first time Baldwin becomes a prominent figure that discusses the race relations occurring in America. He refers to the United State as "the nation" and it is possible he does this to infer how things should be between African Americans vs. the rest of society. Certainly, Baldwin brings up "the so-called American Negro who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognize him as a human being" (Baldwin 73). Thus, a person's color shouldn't limit what he or she can't do, yet it seems that this is all this

country sees. With this in mind, Du Bois also mentions the color line-- "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, --the relation of the darker to the lighter races" (Du Bois 9). If we cannot move past this problem of the "color-line," then we cannot progress as a country, and it will always be a barrier for people of color. Which is why it is so important that writers such as Walker, Baldwin and Du Bois share personal and historical accounts of what it means to be Black in this country. Overall, these narratives we've read so far can be pinpointed back to slavery in which a slave wasn't free, and therefore couldn't express himself or herself. In the event that a slave tried to speak it, he or she would suffer the consequences which most likely resulted in death or torture. As i've mentioned, every text we've read in class, whether a novel, epistolary, collection of letters or essays has had a repeated theme of the effects of slavery and racism. It is noteworthy to realize that slave narratives are important for the history of our country as we are able to hear from the oppressed. Besides telling us about African American history, these narratives unveil the communication that existed between blacks and whites, and even some of the novels that were published were written by whites. For instance, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was a first-person narrative written by William Styron. As a whole this confession wasn't from Nat Turner himself and in a way, it is hard to find credibility because maybe the truth was altered.

The use of the word and language is important for narratives in literature, regardless if the narratives are African-American, Mexican American, etc. There are right words versus wrong words, words that are said or written and either way they can have an impact on people. There are words that resonate with us because they speak about

feelings, emotions or experiences we've dealt with in our lives. African American narratives give us the benefits of learning about the oppressed and the problems that still persist. Even though these books were written a while back, the race issues are still relevant and alive. Let's take the example of Black Lives Matter movement. We are still fighting for our rights and our existence. There is a reason we hear about these stories from generation to generation, as a way of not making the same mistakes again.

Altogether, Toni Morrison gives us an account of what censored language can do to our societies and communities and so have the texts that we've analyzed. They don't say it directly but undoubtedly it is implied that these writers have a purpose and a motive to write what they write. Language is universal, free and powerful. Destructive at times, uplifting at others. As human beings some of us use language to speak for the oppressed and that is exactly what African American narratives are doing. Through writing they are starting a conversation, and as the readers we need to continue the conversation.

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Close-Reading Exercises

#1- *Toni Morrison*

1. Bird, blind woman, importance of language, tongue-suicide, self-ravaged tongue, repetition of the phrase "once upon a time", needless death
2. Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting, or refusing to sanctify; whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word, the chosen silence, unmolested language surges towards knowledge, not its destruction. But who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative, discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate? And how many are outraged by the thought of a self-ravaged tongue? (pg. 3)
3. The main theme I found in the passage above is the power language has on a person or a society.
4. Throughout the text, language is central. Language is a powerful tool that we all have but not all of us know how to use. As Morrison notes "she is convinced that when language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat, not only she herself, but all users and makers are accountable for its demise." In a way, this statement is an indicator that humanity is to blame for the death of language. Morrison continues showing us the power of language by saying "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge." How we use language might affect our political views or any type of view a person might have on a particular issue. Everything we do and every action we take can influence someone. Such is the image of the bird the blind woman uses and although should her disability should limit her, she doesn't let it. Instead she uses her voice to teach the two boys a lesson. The lesson can also be a testament as to what humans are capable of doing if we work together and don't let words destroy our mind or fill our ego with ignorance.
5. Hearing Toni Morrison's voice for the first time, I felt a sense of calm and patience. I noticed she emphasized every word and it really helped me understand her point view. The quotations I provided in the paragraph above came to my attention because they referred to an important aspect of humanity and language. I'm a

World Language & Cultures Major, which I think is the main reason Morrison gravitated towards me. I'm a believer that Language is a powerful tool for survival and our capacity to use it and apply it in our lives is even more important. Getting back to the topic, if we are to use language, we must use it in a way that other people can learn from past mistakes. Language is a way to better ourselves and learn more from one another.

#2- *The Souls of Black Folk*

1. Two souls, kingdom of culture, liberty, freedom, promised land, negro, political power, color-line, freedmen, control, "cursed niggers", free labor, the Bureau, the South, unconstitutional, race, assimilation, prejudice, suffrage, Mr. Washington, segregation, Jim crow laws, promise of the future, the Alleghenies, the Veil of Race, slave feudalism, poverty, subordination, Sanctuary of Truth.
2. In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, - darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead- weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half- named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. He felt the weight of his ignorance, - not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries shackled his hands and feet. Nor was his burden all poverty and ignorance. The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home (pg. 5).
3. I have identified *identity* as a main theme based on the passage above. Throughout the book the concept of "the veil" is repeated as an indicator of a double existence between the way society sees the African American and how the African American sees itself.
4. W.E.B. Du Bois makes a major point with "the veil," which is repeated many times and I presume he does so as to make the reader aware that the negro man suffers

from an identity crisis. The veil could have multiple interpretations but re-reading the passage I see it as a comparison between the outside world and how the African American sees himself. Moreover, the veil is like a curtain that divides the experience of the black soul and its self-awareness. Du Bois goes on to explain “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (pg.2) as a way of documenting how the negro can feel an American with two identities and how he’s always competing with the other world in order to be accepted. In the first chapter: “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois asks himself “how it feels to be a problem?” (pg.1), and often times criticizes society for making African Americans feel like a problem and as if somehow, they are not worthy for being part of white america, and its contributions. In spite of the clash of races, the American negro does not wish to “bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (pg.3). In other words, the Negro does not feel shame for being Negro, although America was taught him, he should be ashamed and should hide himself in order to not have knowledge, power or a voice. Therefore, white America has worked tirelessly to make the Negro feel all opportunities are being closed for him. Returning to the passage, the Negro carries “the burden on his back of being a problem,” (pg. 5) which continuously interrupts his way of life and puts him in a place of competition among the white masses.

5. Taking everything into account, the identity of the African American has remained prevalent throughout history. America has made the Negro soul feel as if he will not make progress in this country if he doesn’t know who he is, and America would rather wish he did not realize his full potential because if he does then he’ll be a woke man and make other Negroes aware of their power and knowledge. If the Negro had remained ignorant, then no progress would’ve been made and there would be more corruption than we’ve dealt with. Furthermore, the concept of the veil divides the individual, but it also brings forth the separation of a nation. As long as the veil exists, we will not be equal because race and racism is still an ongoing problem in our communities. Although segregation is not a problem today and blacks and whites co-exist, I believe racial equality will never be completely abolished. We live in a different white America now but these “color-line” issues still persist, even more with our political climate.

#3- *The Fire Next Time*

1. Acceptance, innocent country, equality, love, integration, freedom, religion, white world, other people, loneliness, salvation, God, they, you, faith, power
2. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason...* you were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity... you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and *how* you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your country men do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, "you exaggerate." They do not know Harlem, and I do. So, do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine-but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go (pg. 7-8).
3. Recurring themes: Acceptance and oppression
4. Baldwin admits that this "innocent country" has put limitations on African Americans because of their skin color and nothing more. The "ghettos" are a place which society has pushed the African American man, and where he should remain. Without a doubt, James is supposed to "make peace with mediocrity," and just accept that he cannot and should not dream of moving forward in life. Afterwards, Baldwin foresees and knows that white men don't agree with his point of view and they'll say "you exaggerate." As it can be seen white men/white america don't understand the African American experience, and they don't see the problem they're actually causing. All in all, Baldwin insists if James "trusts his experience... there is no limit to where he can go." In essence if James knows who he is & if he understands his history then he'll understand his power. Furthermore, Baldwin goes on to say that to be accepted in the "white world" one must not pretend to be like *them*, "there is no reason for you to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*... *you* must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand" (pg. 8). Whites have made African Americans feels as if they are the problem, and they don't know what they are doing, and should follow the rules but the truth might be that whites are suffering an identity crisis and living in a part of history which they don't comprehend. They've come to believe they are the superior race, and they make it clear there is no room for any other race.

5. To summarize, there is no real reason why whites should hate African Americans but they do simply for their skin color. Altogether, I believe whites are afraid that African Americans will gain power and use it against them. They are afraid they won't be the superior race, and that they'll no longer be able to control groups of people who are not like them. White people have a hard time coming to terms with change, and they want to limit the black man by not recognizing that they can also succeed. Whites are not innocent, but rather ignorant because they are failing to see that they are not the only ones. All they've done is make African Americans feels as a weight over this country's shoulders, treated them inhumanely, and made them feel worthless but when a black man recognizes his power, that's when change will occur.

Grade 10.00 / 10.00

**Feedback
comments**

Excellent. You demonstrate deep engagement with each text and great fluency with important themes from African American literature, history and culture. Well-conceived and well written.