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Introduction to Writing

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Establishing an Identity: Past, Present, and Future

Everyone has a story, a past experience that has built them up to be the person that they are today. In both James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" and Zora Neale Hurston's "How it Feels to be Colored Me" the presence of conflicting views in their stories holds a large impact on how they later develop as individuals. While Baldwin's piece demonstrates the ignorance from society which is projected onto him from Swiss villagers, it shares both similarities and differences to the attitudes demonstrated in Hurston's piece influenced by her surroundings. Being that it is difficult to escape the past and the events that have brought strength through triumph, it is important to focus one's attention on the present and into the future. Although the past determines who an individual is, the future determines who an individual will become.

James Baldwin holds the ability to push through negative affiliations in order to reach self establishment. As demonstrated in "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin is simply just a black man who "was motivated by the need to establish an identity" (196). Through his desire of recognition as a human being rather than as an object, Baldwin is willing to look past the ignorance of the Swiss villagers and focus on defining himself. Greeted by the children's calls of "Neger! Neger!," Baldwin unintentionally finds himself reminiscing (191). Although the children's label is not meant in a derogatory fashion, it causes Baldwin to surrender to the racial indifference of his past. Baldwin attempts to disregard his unpleasant reflection and justify the fact that change has been made. In doing so, Baldwin faces a never ending battle to define both himself and his race in the process. Held by the chains of history Baldwin realizes that, "People are trapped in history and

history is trapped in them” (192). Whether or not the children are aware of the power behind their words, those words remain only a portion of the lack of knowledge that James Baldwin encounters in this village. Rather than reflecting back to the times of the past, Baldwin is constantly found redirecting his energy toward the present and the future due to the circumstances of the Swiss society.

Baldwin feels controlled in the Swiss society. He claims that “There is a big difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites” (192). Baldwin feels as though a white man holds the power of superiority over a black man who in return feels consumed and controlled by culture. Although Baldwin stands with both of his feet planted firmly on the ground, he struggles to progress further with the reins of his past struggle restraining him. Putting his determination to the test Baldwin is able to keep his goal in perspective by realizing that even though his emotional escape from the past is not easy, it is possible.

Baldwin hopes to fulfill his desire of seeking change through triumph. Although the European culture holds a great deal of influence over others, everything is subject to change. America has come a long way and strives for equality among races. However, the little bit of hope that is bestowed in Baldwin is often diminished as children guide him back to a distasteful reality. According to the children’s teachings, they tell Baldwin that the devil is indeed black. Baldwin shares how the children “scream in genuine anguish” (194) as he approaches. Just as the children remain oblivious to the power of their words, their actions create a similar effect, sparking emotion in Baldwin’s recollection.

Unfortunately the naïve mentality of a child is not the only contribution to the neglect of equality through establishing an identity. Baldwin believes that “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster” (197). In order to seek change, one must discover the universal truth that the

world has imperfections. Success can only be reached through the triumph of overcoming the battles presented through one's actions. Situations must be approached with an eyes-open mentality in order to receive the best insight and avoid self destruction through ignoring the truth.

In order to avoid self destruction, Baldwin feels people need to come to the understanding that, "this world is white no longer, and will never be again" (197). Even though the hope for change holds importance, it is vital to acknowledge the fact that change has already been achieved and therefore everyone needs to embrace these changes. An identity is not only created based from our past experiences but from how the future will affect us as well. With this said Baldwin is aware that the past has brought him positive change and is now ready to focus upon what the future has in store for him.

Just as James Baldwin is able to see through the transparent wall that stands in his way of progressing toward the future, Zora Neale Hurston directs her energy positively in establishing her future identity. Rather than allowing the color of her skin to restrict her from progress, Zora Neale Hurston comes to terms with the fact that, "At certain times I have no race, I am *me*" (161). In her essay, "How it Feels to be Colored Me," the importance of her skin color and her gender is nonexistent as Zora Neale Hurston works toward establishing her identity. Hurston's main focus exists only in the present as she works toward a brighter tomorrow.

Everyone has memories which have accumulated with the passing of time to create a story. Even though Hurston has the motivation and determination to succeed, the past finds its way into her conscious state of mind, leading her into destruction. The familiarity of different surroundings caused Hurston a great deal of struggle. Although there is a multitude of different instances in which she is engulfed within unpleasant remembrances, the first occurs after she moves to Jacksonville. "I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became

a fast brown” (160). Previously blinded to her difference in appearance, her new location served as a reminder of the truth. Not only does she feel herself encountering an emotional downfall: she is now affected physically every time she sees her reflection.

Despite the constant reminder of her history, Hurston is not ashamed: “There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes” (160). Having met with a great deal of struggle, Hurston benefits from her act of endurance with both strength and focus as time progresses. Behind her eyes she has nothing to hide. Zora Neale Hurston is proud of where she has been and realizes the influence it has had on who she has become. Marching toward central identity music serves as a reminder to her past, causing Hurston to encounter flashbacks. Just as a song is only a song unless the melody is understood, Hurston explains how the white man “has only heard what I have felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored” (161). While the white man may sit and simply listen to a melody, failing to connect the words to their meaning, Zora Neale Hurston allows the meaning to bring her back to a place in her soul. One can so easily allow the meaning behind a song’s denomination to pass on by, while another can receive great insight from the same tune. It is almost as if Hurston’s culture speaks out through the melody of the song in hope for a change, such a change that would create equality and allow the existence of her identity.

Although living a life in the present with the promise of a future is crucial when establishing an identity, the misfortune one has encountered also affects one’s character. Hurston keeps herself in focus, refusing to allow the past to dissolve without consideration. She refers to herself as a brown bag:

Pour out the contents, and there is discovered jumble of the small things
priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of
broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away,

a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for the road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still fragrant (161).

Though the past holds precedent to the future, Hurston keeps her items enclosed within a brown paper bag. Whether the items are of value or not, they each reserve a space on the path she has previously traveled. While the broken glass and rusty knife-blade may serve to symbolize the hardships Hurston has encountered, the dried flower represents life with its everlasting fragrance. Likewise, just as the nail bends under the weight it was not designed to endure, Hurston has bent under the oppression she has unwillingly fought against. Fortunately, there is no weight too heavy to halt one from disposing of the negativity and turning toward the possibility of reaching self establishment.

It is not easy for an individual to overcome past experiences and refocus his or her energy toward the future, however, through the works of both James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston, it is shown to be possible. Through their experiences they worked to develop their identities, and through the present they looked toward the future in order to reach establishment. It is true that everyone has a story; however, it is up to each individual to take that story and make it his or her own by creating an identity for him or herself.

Works Cited

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