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How Authors Portray Their Identities Through Literary Art

The Harlem Renaissance was a turning point for African American culture throughout the North and Midwest regions of the United States, but most significantly in Harlem. During the 1920s, African American artists reclaimed their identity and racial pride against prejudice and discrimination. Countee Cullen was an African American poet, novelist, children’s writer, and playwriter, predominantly known during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Contrarily, Notorious BIG worked during the 1990s. He modernized rap through his storytelling talents, focusing on crime and hardship. In “Juicy”, Biggie focuses on portraying his experiences as an African American rapper. **Cullen’s poem “Yet Do I Marvel” and Notorious BIG’s song “Juicy”portray two distinct perspectives of life as an African American. Cullen uses allusions of Greek Mythology to represent his education as a writer and as an African American.In contrast to this, Notorious BIG had an adversative lifestyle. As he grew up through poverty, he dreamt of becoming somebody. In “Juicy” he uses allusions to express his admirations towards African American rappers and DJs with anticipation to become one himself. Furthermore, one learns from “Yet Do I Marvel”and“Juicy”, the significance of the allusions an author may choose to illustrate in respect to their identity.**

Countee Cullen, born in 1903, was recognized as an award-winning poet by his high school years. After graduating with honors, Cullen began to earn a national reputation for his traditional poetry. As he attended New York University, then Harvard University to pursue a masters in English, he published his first book *Color*, which revealed literary influence from English poets William Wordsworth and William Blake. Cullen’s poem “Yet Do I Marvel” focuses on the tremendous and dreadful powers of God relating to human and animal life. This traditional sonnet reflects Cullen’s concerns as to why God takes the actions he does, against those He created. Cullen begins “Yet Do I Marvel” by evidently stating that he believes God is good**:** “I do not doubt God is good, well-meaning, kind” (Cullen line 1). He refers to Greek Mythology to compare historical context to the challenges one faces in life. Firstly, He alludes to Tantalus, a Greek Mythological figure who was sentenced to be continuously tempted by food and water that could never be reached. Secondly, he uses the allusion of Sisyphus, who was sentenced to roll a boulder up a hill until eternity; t**herefore,** illustrating his wonder as to why God would create such disturbance for mankind. In addition to this, Cullen uses these specific allusions to portray his proficient education as an African American artist. His tone of frustration reveals his wonder as to why God would allow himself to achieve such success: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black, and bid him sing!” (Cullen line 13-14). He marvels how God could allow one to express himself, while creating discrimination and prejudice against African Americans as an entire, which further shows the reader how Cullen’s identity differs from Notorious BIG.

 Notorious B.I.G was born in New York City in 1972. He worked hard despite poverty to become a rapper, song writer, and actor. Biggie was famous for his loose and easy flow, semi-autobiographical lyrics, and storytelling abilities focusing on crime and hardship. Biggie uses “Juicy” to illustrate a story, focusing on his journey through poverty to an incredibly successful career. “Juicy” begins with the phrase, “It was all a dream” (Wallace line 1), which speaks about reflecting back to when his passion was nothing but a dream. He sees that he has met his dreams of becoming an artist have come true. He uses allusions to portray who his admirations are: “Salt ‘n’ Peppa and Heavy D up in the limousine/Hangin’ pictures on my wall/Every Saturday Rap Attack, Mr. Magic, Marley Marl” (Wallace line 3-5). By doing this, Biggie describes who he wanted to become one day as he was living through poverty. He continues to paint a luxurious lifestyle to illustrate his success in exceeding his goals, becoming rich and famous. Biggie’s identity is portrayed through the use of allusions to the people he admired, all African American rappers or DJs; thus, showing this is who he aspired to be, and who he became. Biggie’s tone throughout the entire song also indicates his identity. He expresses pride and a sense of arrogance which was rightfully earned**; therefore,** his identity as an individual who worked hard to earn what he has is displayed in “Juicy”.

 In conclusion, Countee Cullen reflects his identity by alluding to Greek Mythology. This allusion along with the traditional sonnet structure of “Yet Do I Marvel” show his background as an educated, well-respected African American writer. Furthermore, Notorious BIG uses allusions of African American rappers and DJ’s to illustrate who he aspired to be, as he was living through poverty. Biggie’s use of pride in his tone portrays a story of how his once life in poverty, has become that of his dreams. Artists reflect their identities in their work by the use of allusions, tone, and structure.

Works Cited

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Wallace, Christopher. “Juicy.” *Ready to Die,* Poke, New York, New York, 1994.