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Who Are You?

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between poetry and one's feelings and understanding with forming their own identity. I am interested in this topic because various people struggle with constructing their identity and figuring out who they really are. The interactions someone has with society, relationships, and experiences may be factors that shape their identity, but are not limited to this. This paper will dive into how reading and writing poetry will help people express who they are and help people explore their identity. I conducted interviews with people who read poetry once in a while and people who read poetry frequently to view their perspectives on how they view their identity when reading a certain poem.

Key words: *identity, belonging, inclusiveness*

Intro to the Pieces of You

All around us are people from different areas who all have a story we do not know about. The rivers that crash with the pebbles, the city lights after 6 p.m., or the smell of tomatoes may be things that someone may cherish in their life. Perhaps the pebbles and river indicate the childhood of someone. Maybe those city lights reminded them of the first time they met their cousin Robert. And the smell of ripe, red tomatoes takes them back to the delicious salad their dad would make on a Sunday morning right before leaving to work. For everyone, the pieces that make us the people we are today are different.

According to their research article "Social Identity Complexity, Cross-ethnic Friendships, and Intergroup Attitudes in Urban Middle Schools," Juvonen and Knifsend (2008) define identity complexity as the concept of how self-definition can become "increasingly complex" to certain individuals when creating relationships with others and when being an active member of the society around them. Grasping the idea of formulating your persona tends to take time since various fragments need to be pieced together in order for one to see the bigger picture. Acceptance of one's self is also a key element in the process of identity building. Because of such concern, some people may have a challenging time discovering who they identify as and what they consider part of their identity.

Reading poetry that revolves around the topic of personal or cultural identity may allow a person to reflect on their own or connect with the poet. Writing poetry may also help someone express their own identity because they have the chance to share mutual feelings with another individual. With that being said, does poetry help people understand and formulate their identity?

Sneak Peak

What do people think about their own identity? I interviewed four people: two students and two instructors. I conducted a mixture of two in-person interviews, one Zoom interview, and one

email interview. Two of the interviewees are individuals who are avid poetry readers, while the other two are those who do not read poetry as often. I shared a part from the poem “Two Names, Two Worlds,” written by a student named Jonathan Rodriguez. I asked them what their perspectives are on this piece of poetry. In addition, I asked them the following questions :

- How would you describe your identity? If you do not know how to depict yourself, why do you think that is the case?
- Does this fragment of the poem relate to you in any way? If so, please describe.
- What do you think is the best way to express your thoughts and feelings? Some examples are the following: by writing, by reading, by the way you dress, by your body image, etc.

These questions were directed at the interviewees who read poetry frequently:

- Do you think poetry helps you understand your identity?
- Can you think of a poem that made you think of your identity or an example of how poetry helps you form your identity?

Aside from the interviews, two poems were be shared with my audience in order to keep the poetic juices flowing. Poems such as “Dimensions” by an unknown author and “Two Names, Two Worlds” by Jonathan Rodriguez.

Anyhow this is a sneak peek of what follows.

How Poetry Connects with Identity

Identity can relate back to culture, body image, and other factors. In the research article titled “In the Looking Glass: An Examination of Body Image and Identity Development Through Research and Poetry,” Melissa Carlson and Rachel Kiemele (2006), graduates of the University of Vermont, illustrate how societal pressures affect body image and identity development of various college students. Within the article, there is a poem that is broken up into pieces. When it is put together, it discusses the feminine beauty standards and overall, revolves around one’s identity, which can be represented via body image. The following image displays the poem:

Dimensions

mirror, mirror
 on the wall
 who
 is the harshest critic of all?
 I don't measure up, you see,
 to a (perfect?) 39:18:33...
 Bust, waist, and hips
 I do possess,
 yet still
 you dare
 profess disinterest?
 Harshesht critic hanging there
 on the wall, this dress is too tight
 your measuring stick,
 too small.
 Your glass
 is cracked,
 the image
 unclear,
 I can't
 see myself
 reflected
 here.

Dimensions. The title itself represents lengths, depths, and other type of measurements. Why pick this word as a title? I may have an answer to that.

As evidently seen, this poem depicts the poet's view on their body image. It expresses the poet's sentiments towards how society criticizes one's body and expects certain people to look like. Perhaps society wishes certain females were constructed as flawless, exquisite works of art that are equally dimensioned like an IKEA rectangular table, which is why the poet decided to express her sentiments towards this topic. As mentioned, this poem, in specific, relates back to feminine beauty in society. It elaborates on the poet's view on how she has to physically look a certain way to please others and how she fails to do so. Following this, as seen by the structure of the poem, the words are arranged in a way that creates an hourglass figure, which is one standard society has on the body image of a female in modern society.

In addition, the poet expresses that how she looks is not enough to meet the beauty regulations in society. The mirror itself may represent the views of society since the poet continues to view herself through a specific perspective. Society is the "harshest critic of all" which affects the identity development of this person. She simply wants to be accepted the way she is without any modifications or tweaks. Don't we all want to be accepted despite of our differences?

Poetry is like a person you can vent to; you can say anything on your mind, why you think the blue and red gummy worm is the best, or maybe how the smell of cinnamon makes you feel. It can help the person express how they feel about their own body image as well and how they

perceive themselves in general. In this poem, it is evident that the poet is venting to her audience. Because the poet is unhappy on how she looks, she can't see herself "reflected here" and may develop challenges in accepting that she is not meant to be a perfect being. Such negative views on oneself affects one's identity development because one will have a harder time accepting who they are and their flaws.

Words can have a large impact on its audience, especially if the reader can relate back. At times, what we read relates straight back to our lives which makes us feel a connection with the author or poet. We have the chance to say "I felt that" or "yep, that's relatable."

Just like the unknown poet shared her views on her personal identity and related it back to body image, another individual also utilized poetry to express how his name *is* his identity.

As I browsed throughout the website "Use Poetry To Teach About Identity" by Facing History and Ourselves, I discovered that this organization places emphasis on using poetry to teach students about identity. As stated in the website, a focus of enforcing poetry writing in classrooms is due to the fact that "poetry can help students explore and connect issues of identity, group membership, and belonging." Giving students the freedom to write is basically giving them the freedom of expression to share the stories that have formed their identity.

One student shared his work with this organization, and it was published on the site as an exemplar. Jonathan Rodriguez wrote the poem title "Two Names, Two Worlds," which expresses his reflection on his name which shapes his identity. As expressed in his poem, he illustrates how the way his name is pronounced allows him to be part of "two worlds": the U.S. and Dominican Republic. He clearly states that his identity comes from both of the places he comes from. He admires the beauty of the scenery seen in the Dominican Republic and also appreciates the songs he grew up listening to in Connecticut. The culture he adapted as a U.S. citizen was equally important to him as the Latin American culture he is part of. Here is the introduction of the poem:

Hi I'm Jon.....No—Jonathan
 Wait—Jonathan Rodríguez
 Hold on—Jonathan *Rodríguez*
 My Name, Two names, two worlds
 The duality of my identity like two sides of the same coin
 With two worlds, there should be plenty of room
 But where do I fit?

As seen, Jonathan first struggles with how he should address himself to others. A name has the power to represent a person overall, so of course he did not want to mess this opportunity up. Jonathan wanted his name to be pronounced the way it is meant to be said: with the accent and such, since it gives flavor to his Latin American roots. His name is said in two different ways depending on the area he is at which allows him to be part of "two worlds." Like Jonathan, many of us can relate. We may be from different places. Perhaps your name comes from Mayan heritage or perhaps from the Midwest. It may even be the name of your great great grandfather who was born in Vietnam. Under our name lies everything: our personality, what we love, where we come from, etc. It may reflect our identity just like it does for Jonathan.

Recollections

The following interviewees were people who read poetry often.

Tiffany Vides –*student*

Tiffany Vides, a student studying linguistics at Biola University, said that “it is difficult for me to describe myself because there is a duality in me. I grew up in two different countries, speaking two different languages and embracing two different cultures.” She related to the poem by Jonathan Rodriguez since like the poet, she also came from two worlds.

Vides stated that she enjoys reading poetry; she thinks “it is such a beautiful form of art” because “it reveals something that cannot be seen, but only felt. There are no boundaries in poetry, there is only pure raw freedom.” A poem that made her think of her identity once was “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” by Emily Dickinson, which reminded her of an inner twin that she has. She said she feels as if her inner twin is “whispering to her in the dark” since she described the poem as simple and meaningful. Vides also mentioned that she had memorized this poem years ago since it was impactful to her; she knows the poem line by line.

Naomi Janowitz - *professor*

After interviewing Professor Janowitz, a religious studies professor at UC Davis and Brown University graduate, I discovered that a person may identify with multiple identities. She stated that she identifies as a professor, a woman, a student, etc. Like Jonathan, she also had more than one identity and “pertained to two worlds.” On the other hand, Professor Janowitz said that there is no “best way” to express your feelings or thoughts. She specifically said that “poems are mostly for when you are sad. They pertain to sad feelings. Dancing is for happy feelings. It is very individual. People choose their own way to express all types of feelings.” She later came to say that “it depends on your feelings in which you choose how to express yourself.”

When I asked her if she thought poetry helped her understand her identity, she said, “Yes. I write every day and write poems every Saturday.” She thinks poetry causes individuals “to have a relationship with their unconscious” since with poetry, you have more access to inner you, meaning you release the thoughts and feelings within you. The poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost reminds her of her identity since her mother was from a rural area just like the poet. The anthology *No More Masks!* by Howe and Bass, reminded her of the importance of being a woman in the 70s, which is one of her important identities; as the title says, Janowitz thinks that there is no need to conceal who you are, thus it is important to show the authentic you in a world where many individuals act like what others want them to be.

The next two interviewees were people who did not read poetry often.

Richard Valdez- *high school teacher*

Richard Valdez, a marine veteran and English teacher at Alliance Collins Family High School, stated that “[his] identity is complex like everyone’s.” Once he read the poem by Jonathan Rodriguez, he said, “Yes, I can relate to what is expressed in the poem. No one perfectly fits into one box, and I am no exception. I have been so many things over time. Sometimes, it's strange

for me to think that I was in Afghanistan 10 years ago. That was such a big part of defining me and so many people will never understand it. I sometimes feel very extroverted and other times I'm convinced I'm a complete introvert." He also stated "that writing or typing my thoughts and feelings leads to me coming to a better understanding of how I think and feel. Speaking is good too, but things don't seem as clear. Writing keeps me focused somehow."

Loc Tran - *student*

Loc Tran, a student studying biological sciences at UC Davis, stated that "I do not know how to identify myself because I am still figuring out who I am." After reading the poem by Jonathan Rodriguez, Loc said, "I can relate. With every path you choose, you may find parts of yourself who help you find who you are or identify as."

Loc thinks the best way to express his thoughts and feelings are by reading, writing, and dancing. He writes his thoughts down in order to see them more clearly. He said that "you can see your thoughts and feelings in third person when you write. You can see them in a different perspective or in someone else's shoes. Then I can see what the problem is and identify why I feel a certain way." Although Loc does not read poetry often, he stated that "poetry is art that constantly grows."

Ending Note

After seeing the results of the interviews, I was surprised to see that even the people who did not read poetry often acknowledged the idea of writing to understand one's self; they had nice comments to say about poetry which was intriguing to see. I also noticed that all interviewees wrote down their thoughts or feelings either for enjoyment or to better see what is on their mind which made me realize that writing can be a healing process or understanding process depending on the person. It is evident that most of the interviewees identify with multiple identities and are continuously figuring out who they are. Identity may be a complex idea since it varies person to person. It usually consists of many other components, not only one. In addition, it was interesting knowing that the interviewees who read poetry often had specific poems in mind that reminded them of their identity, which illustrates how impactful certain pieces of poetry may be to an individual; words truly can speak to you.

Poetry is a safe space, a space of freedom of expression for anyone who wishes to say what is bottled up within them or everything they are afraid to say out loud. It is a no judgment zone where it is just you alone, facing the inner you.

I encourage you to consider writing someday. Maybe write down what you are feeling before you sleep or any thoughts crawling on the walls of your mind anytime you want. Read a poem or write one. By reading poetry you may connect with the poet. By writing poetry, you have the freedom to write anything. You have the chance to understand yourself better and understand and figure out more about your persona.

Let the words flow. You will find new parts of yourself you never knew existed.

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