

Identity and race as expressed in poetry and rap

### **How do spoken word artists effectively reveal and explore identity and race in Western Societies?**

Many writers choose to use their writing to express identity and race through a use of figurative language. The use of writing as a form of expression for spoken word artists to explore and express identity and race has been effectively conveyed through the use of figurative language as well as poetic techniques. Poetry and Rap are two examples that employ a range of poetic techniques to enable writers to effectively explore and illuminate ideas of identity and race in Western societies. This essay will explore this through a comparison between Tupac's song "changes" and Benjamin Zephaniah's poem "Dis poetry", comparing the figurative language used, the vernacular and dialect, the rhythm and rhyme, and the difference in form.

Throughout the poem "Dis Poetry" by Benjamin Zephaniah, the use of a range of figurative language is a prominent feature used to convey his identity and culture. The use of similes throughout the poem such as "Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops" are used to explore his identity as well as give the audience a sense of his culture by comparing it to something the audience is familiar with. Benjamin Zephaniah also uses symbols throughout the poem such as "dreadlocks" which are used to represent his culture and race. Dreadlocks are a prominent feature of black Jamaican culture and Benjamin Zephaniah is using them as a method of exploring his identity. Additionally, Benjamin Zephaniah uses alliteration and assonance in his poem for example "Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops" which uses the repetition of the letter "D" to help effectively convey his identity.

Similarly, Tupac uses figurative language in his song "Changes". He uses figurative language to explore and express his experiences as a black male living in the US. Tupac uses onomatopoeia such as "Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat" to express and reveal the reality that black men similar to Tupac face in America. Additionally, Tupac uses metaphors to compare the crime and fighting on "the streets" to the war and terror in the Middle East. "It's war on the streets and the war in the Middle East". The metaphor adds impact to the song by giving the listener the ability to visualize what "the street" would look like. The song also uses situational irony to emphasize the differences between his world and the world we're used to. "Give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares?, One less hungry mouth on the welfare". One would normally think that selling drugs to kids would be a sin and a terrible thing to do but the use of situational irony shows how in this context, giving drugs to the kids is a good thing as it's the only thing they have to eat. This adds to the impact of the song, showing how their society has normalized giving drugs to kids for their desperate need for food. Both Tupac and Benjamin Zephaniah use figurative language to help explore their identity and race through their literary work. However, figurative language isn't the only language feature Tupac and Benjamin Zephaniah used to effectively convey their identity and race. They both use their culture's vernacular to further explore their identity and culture.

The use of black Jamaican vernacular is a prominent feature of Benjamin Zephaniah's poem. Benjamin Zephaniah uses words like "Dis" and "Dat" to effectively explore his culture and identity. The use of the "d" sound is a prominent feature of Jamaican identity, being incorporated in Benjamin Zephaniah's literary work. The words "Riddim", "dere", "de", "dose", and "yu" are all examples of black Jamaican vernacular that would not be used elsewhere. This style of Jamaican dialect is known as "patois" by Jamiacans, which is a mix between European and black english. The use of it helps convey and explore Benjamin Zephaniah's identity and race.

Similarly to Benjamin Zephaniah, Tupac uses non-white vernacular in his music to express identity. However, these dialects are not the same, being from different parts of the world. Tupac uses vernacular that is found in black American communities. Tupac uses large amounts of slang such as "em" instead of "them" or "things'll" which is not commonly used by white communities. Additionally, Tupac uses phrases such as "I made a G" which is slang for making \$1000. The use of vernacular expresses his identity and shows his heritage and cultural upbringing. Both spoken word artists use their culture's vernacular to express and reveal their identity and race. Furthermore, the form of expression used by the 2 artists to convey the ideas of identity and race play an important role in the effectiveness of the exploration of these ideas.

The form of both these literary pieces help develop the ideas of identity and race of both artists. The poetic style that Benjamin Zephaniah uses in his literary work is traditionally connected to his Jamaican identity. In his poem, Benjamin Zephaniah says "Dis poetry goes wid me as I pedal me bike, I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere, But did is de stuff I like" which shows that is able to acknowledge and respect white poets such as Shakespeare but prefers his own culture's style of poem. Additionally, verbal riddim, which is the style of this poem, has Jamaican roots and is largely popular in Jamaica. Benjamin Zephaniah says in his poem that "Dis poetry is Verbal Riddim, no big words involved, An if I hav a problem de riddim gets it solved, I've tried to be more romantic, it does nu good for me, So I tek a Reggae Riddim an build me poetry" showing his preference for verbal riddim, further exploring his identity as a black Jamaican.

Rap is often considered a black American form of expression due to its popularity in black communities, meaning the use of rap by Tupac shows his identity and relation to black american culture. Rap is a literary form especially popular by black males due to it being a relatively simple literary form. Both of these spoken word artists use literary forms that are connected to and popular in their culture and race, further revealing their identity and heritage. A major component of both of these literary forms is the rhyme and rhythm that is incorporated in the spoken word tradition that both of these literary forms use.

The use of rhyme in Benjamin Zephaniah's poem helps express and convey the spoken tradition that is often apparent in Jamaican literature. Rhythm is also a prominent feature in Jamaican verbal riddim and reggae riddim. His poem utilizes rhyme on every other line, a feature of most Jamaican riddim. For example, "drops" and "shots", "rantin" and "chanting", "sleep" and "sheep", as well as "political" and "critical". Benjamin Zephaniah also uses rhythm in his poem, reading the poem to a beat, similarly to traditional Jamaican riddim. This further explores his identity as a black Jamaican male.

Similarly, Tupac uses rhyme and rhythm throughout his songs. The use of rhyme and rhythm are prominent features of black American rap. He raps to a beat that is customary to rap. The use of rhythm and rhyme helps explore the form expression that is popular in his culture. Another major distinction between ben z and tupac is the tone and intended purpose of the literary pieces.

In the poem "Dis poetry" by Benjamin Zephaniah, he explores and compares his culture with white culture and expresses his beliefs that black culture is better fit for him, while still acknowledging white culture. He shows that his poetry has equal validity to Shakespeare. He has no intention to be political and isn't claiming to be a revolutionary. In his poem, he says "Dis poetry is not Party Political, Not designed fe dose who are critical, Dis poetry is wid me when I gu to me bed, It gets into me dreadlocks, It lingers around me head, Dis poetry goes wid me as I pedal me bike, I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere, But did is de stuff I like". It shows that he doesn't want to be political but rather just wants to express and explore his identity and race.

However, unlike Benjamin Zephaniah, Tupac shows the reality of black communities in the US and uses aggressive language. He expresses his frustrations as a black male in the US to show there is no future for black males. For example, the use of onomatopoeia "ratatat" to represent the sound of gunshots shows us that Tupac has the intention of showing the bad that black American communities face unlike Benjamin Zephaniah who had the intention of just exploring his race and identity. Additionally, Tupac uses parts of his song to paint a picture of the societal norms of black communities. "Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero" This shows the complete disregard that white Americans have to black communities, coming to the point where killing black Americans can make someone a "hero". "Give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares?" This shows the societal norms that have been incorporated into these communities due to how common it is. Tupac uses his song to bring attention to the racial inequalities found in America as opposed to Benjamin Zephaniah who uses poetry to show his culture and identity.

In conclusion, spoken word artists employ a range of language features to effectively explore race and identity. Poetry and rap are 2 examples of spoken word literary forms that incorporate poetic features to explore and reveal the ideas of race and identity. Some of the language features used by spoken word artists to effectively communicate race and identity include rhythm and rhyme, tone, literary form, vernacular, and figurative language. Overall, poetic techniques are powerful methods of exploring and illuminating ideas and concepts in literature.