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***“No Day But Today:” Life Perspectives of HIV-Positive Individuals  
in the Musical Rent***

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article explores how life perspectives of HIV-infected individuals are portrayed in the musical Rent. A rhetorical analysis of Rent’s script and lyrics reveals that people living with HIV may hold a particular life perspective after learning that they are HIV-positive; they may seek to leave a legacy, to experience life to the fullest or to devote their lives to others. These emergent themes are consistent with those found in previous research. In addition, this analysis revealed one theme that was not consistent with previous research; this theme is connected to the process of grieving. By understanding how people living with HIV/AIDS perceive the world and their purposes in it, we can better learn how to support them as they battle the disease.*

*“To people living with, not dying from disease”*

*– “La Vie Boheme B,” Rent*

**Introduction**

HIV/AIDS is a relatively newly-discovered disease (Singhal & Rogers, 2003), at least in comparison with other diseases of its magnitude. Yet unlike other maladies, HIV carries a social stigma (Caughlin, Bute, Donovan-Kicken, Kosenko, Ramey, & Brashers, 2009; Lapinski & Nwulu, 2008). Often, HIV-positive individuals are shunned from their family and friends, leaving them nowhere to go. Many of them find support in other communities, such as Bonaventure House in Chicago (Adelman & Frey, 1997). Some form their own communities in an attempt to manage their lives and their uncertainty. How do people in these self-created communities view life after being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS? What do they determine is most important in their lives after learning such devastating news? By learning the answers to these questions, we can better understand how we, as a society, can support HIV-positive individuals as they battle this disease.

Jonathan Larson’s musical *Rent* offers a fictional representation of an HIV-positive community. Four of the musical’s seven main characters are HIV-positive, and each appears to hold a different life perspective after discovering that he or she has HIV. This rhetorical analysis

of *Rent's* script and lyrics reveals how each character represents a different view of life. This piece builds on Mohammed and Thombre's (2005) work, which used Internet narratives to find common themes of people's transformations after being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Mohammed and Thombre found that HIV-positive individuals experienced three common life perspective themes: Making a meaningful contribution, having a heightened sensitivity to life, and serving others (p. 355). This study builds on Mohammed and Thombre's work by analyzing life perspectives in the musical *Rent*. Through this rhetorical analysis, four themes emerge: Leaving a legacy, experiencing life to the fullest degree, devoting their lives to helping and loving others, and isolating oneself from others. Three of these themes echo the three themes found in Mohammed and Thombre's study; the final theme has not been discussed in previous literature. In this article, I will examine how each theme emerges in the musical, as well as the meaning that these themes have for communities that wish to support those living with HIV/AIDS.

### Literature Review

Scholars have examined HIV/AIDS in numerous ways. Some research has focused on social support and support communities for people living with HIV/AIDS (Adelman & Frey, 1997; Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Greene Derlega, Yep & Petronio, 2003). Brashers et al (2004) examined the relationship between social support and the management of uncertainty, finding that social support plays an important role in how people with HIV/AIDS manage uncertainty. Greene et al (2003) also studied HIV with an interpersonal communication lens by looking at Communication Privacy Management (CPM), observing how people disclose or choose not to disclose the information that they are HIV-positive and examining the role that social stigma plays in this decision. Furthermore, Adelman and Frey (1997) examined Bonaventure House in Chicago, a home for people living with HIV/AIDS. Through their ethnographic study, they were able to understand how people come to enter a home such as Bonaventure House, how they handle everyday life, and how they cope with death and dying.

Other researchers have examined HIV/AIDS through a social action-oriented perspective. Chambre (2006) not only examined HIV's stigma in society, but also looked at ways of preventing the spread of the disease, noting the ways in which the government, social movements, non-profit organizations, and the medical community have worked towards this goal. Singhal and Rogers (2003) also studied the AIDS epidemic in regards to ways of stopping the spread of HIV. They examined cultural issues and problems that may play a role, how organizations are getting the prevention message out to certain populations, and how various policies have been successful or unsuccessful. Moreover, Cline and McKenzie (1994) observed the differences between men and women in perceived HIV risk, suggesting that women perceived greater risk because women were the most rapidly-growing at-risk group at the time the study was published. They argue that women should be considered a primary audience for HIV/AIDS prevention campaigning.

Scholars have also examined HIV/AIDS in relation to the media. Pickle, Quinn and Brown (2002) studied how the disease was portrayed in the media, specifically looking at how African-American newspapers, such as the *Chicago Citizen* and the *Atlanta Inquirer*, cover the topic of HIV/AIDS. Korner, Hendry, and Kippax (2004) used critical discourse analysis to show how language choices in people's personal narratives reflect the public health discourse concerning HIV/AIDS prevention methods. As previously mentioned, Mohammed and Thombre (2005), in an article published in the *Journal of Health Communication*, examined how people living with HIV/AIDS transformed their self-identities and priorities after being diagnosed with the illness. Conducting a content analysis of 164 Internet-posted narratives written by HIV/AIDS survivors, Mohammed and Thombre found that common themes of transformation included making a meaningful contribution to society, having a heightened sensitivity to life, and wanting to serve others. This piece will add to Mohammed and Thombre's work by looking at the life perspectives of people living with HIV as represented in the script and lyrics of the musical *Rent*.

One may ask, why study a musical? What can theatre tell us about real people's experiences after being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS? Theatre often has served to open the eyes of its audiences to problems or issues in society, and *Rent* reveals truths about HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, love for others, and tolerance. Although communication scholars have not studied *Rent* before, scholars in both rhetoric and theatre arts have looked at the ways in which plays and musicals serve as social commentary. These pieces include Papa's (1999) work on the labor play *Waiting for Lefty*, which serves to identify with the audience and to open their eyes to labor's issues; Aiken's piece on *Oklahoma* that reveals racism and sexism in the show and in society, and the many studies that examined *The Wizard of Oz* (Algeo, 1990; Carpenter, 1985; Littlefield, 1964; Greenberg, 1975; Paige, 1966; Payne, 1989; Ziaukas, 1998) and *Alice in Wonderland* (Grimaldi, 1998; Reed, 2000; Weiner & Kurpius, 1995).

With the exception of a piece by Sebesta (2006) discussing how the musical connects to Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and the carnivalesque, *Rent* itself has not been examined as a rhetorical artifact. However, the popular press has frequently noted *Rent's* societal critiques. In a review in *American Theatre*, Coen (1996) notes the connection between *Rent* and its creator's experience as a struggling playwright. In the same issue, Istel (1996) suggests that the musical uses an optimistic lens to show the dark world of homelessness, AIDS, and capitalism, while critiquing society for its "embrace of superficiality" concerning family values. Tommasini (2002, July 28) critiques current productions of *Rent*, arguing that the producers' decisions to increase the volume of the music in the show prevent Larson's original messages from getting through to the audience. Steele (2005) takes note of the musical's commentary on homosexuality, arguing that *Rent* "helped a whole new generation of young queers to come out" (p. 8). *Rent* serves to critique society through its multiple messages.

In the following rhetorical analysis, I will use excerpts of the script and lyrics to reveal the characters' different life perspectives. By analyzing the words Larson has written for the HIV-positive characters of Roger, Mimi, Collins, and Angel, as well as smaller characters such

as members of the Life Support Group, I hope to add to the literature of both HIV/AIDS communication studies and theatrical rhetorical studies.

### Analysis of the Text

In the beginning of the musical, Larson introduces us to his eight lead characters: Mark, a documentary filmmaker who spends his life observing others; Mark's roommate, Roger, an HIV-positive recovering drug addict who has been trying to isolate himself from others; Tom Collins, an HIV-positive gay man who teaches computer-age philosophy at a university in the city; Benny, Mark and Roger's former roommate, who abandoned his Bohemian principles when he married a wealthy woman; Angel, an HIV-positive cross-dresser with a talent for playing the drums; Maureen, Mark's ex-girlfriend, who is a lesbian and has a flair for performing; Joanne, Maureen's down-to-earth lawyer lover; and Mimi, an HIV-positive drug-addict who dances at a S&M club to make a living. Gradually, Larson reveals which characters have HIV. For example, in the song "Rent," Roger sings "How can you connect in an age where strangers, landlords, lovers, your own blood cells betray?," implying that he has the disease, and also critiquing society in the same breath. Roger may allude to having HIV, but ironically, it is Mark who reveals Roger's HIV status as he films his roommate. "Take your AZT [a drug used to control HIV symptoms]," Mark tells Roger. He then turns to the camera and says, "Close on Roger. His girlfriend April left a note saying 'We've got AIDS' before slitting her wrists in the bathroom." This statement not only reveals Roger's background to the audience, but prompts Roger to disclose his life perspective.

After Mark exits, Roger tells the audience, "I'm writing one great song before I..." and begins to sing "One Song Glory." The song depicts Roger's goal to leave a legacy in the form of a song "before the virus takes hold." He believes that writing this one great song will "redeem his empty life." Roger has chosen to isolate himself in order to write what he considers be his legacy to society, believing that it is the most important thing he can do with the time he has remaining. Roger's desire to leave the world "one great song" before he passes away connects directly to Mohammed and Thombre's (2005) finding that people living with HIV seek to make a meaningful contribution to the world in some way. For Roger, making a meaningful contribution to society means writing an influential song that others will enjoy for years to come.

The next reference to life perspectives of HIV-positive individuals occurs at a Life Support Group meeting. Angel tells us that "Life Support's a group for people coping with life." Angel's word choice here alludes to his own perspective; he could have said "coping with HIV" instead of "coping with life." Angel is focused on life, not disease. He is concerned about helping others (he saves Collins' life at the beginning of the musical), finding love, and experiencing the beauty of life. This perspective is in contrast to Roger's decision to isolate himself from others while trying to create a song that will be his legacy.

In this same scene, Angel and Collins disclose to each other that they are HIV-positive. Angel begins by saying "Yes, this body provides a comfortable home to the Acquired Immune

Deficiency Syndrome.” Collins replies, “As does mine.” This disclosure provides an interesting contrast to Roger’s struggle to hide and avoid his HIV status. Angel and Collins both choose to be open and honest even at the very beginning of their relationship, which connects to their life perspectives of living for love and helping others.

At the Life Support Group, group members sing their credo: “There’s only us. There’s only this. Forget regret, or life is yours to miss. No other road. No other way. No day but today.” The credo advocates for members to live life to the fullest, to believe what many might call a *carpe diem* philosophy. This philosophy echoes one theme in Mohammed and Thombre’s (2005) work: HIV-positive individuals have a heightened sensitivity to life. One of the group members, Gordon, says that he disagrees with the mantra, arguing that he regrets that his T-cells are low and confessing that he fears death. He sings, “Look, I find some of what you teach suspect because I’m used to relying on intellect. But I try to open up to what I don’t know, because reason says I should have died three years ago.” Through this lyric, we see confusion, as well as the potential to turn to something larger than the world (perhaps religion or faith), emerging as part of a life perspective. Gordon’s words suggest that fear and confusion are part of his life perspective.

Another song, “Another Day,” shows two colliding life perspectives of people living with HIV/AIDS. Mimi, who has made it clear earlier than she is romantically interested in Roger, kisses him, prompting him to recoil. At this point, neither character has disclosed to the other that he or she is HIV-positive. After screaming at Mimi to leave him alone, Roger contemplates “I should tell you,” but then changes his mind, convincing himself that it is better to remain isolated. Mimi responds with a different view, echoing the Life Support Group mantra:

The heart may freeze, or it can burn. The pain will ease if I can learn. There is no future. There is no past. I live this moment as my last. There’s only us. There’s only this. Forget regret, or life is yours to miss. No other road. No other way. No day but today.

Mimi, having what Mohammed and Thombre (2005) would describe as a “heightened sensitivity to life” (p. 355), abides by the living-life-to-the-fullest philosophy, recognizing that she may have limited time to take advantages of life’s opportunities. Mimi’s lyrics seem to echo the word of Jamie, one of the Internet posters in Mohammed and Thombre’s (2005) study, who says:

I stopped using [drugs] and decided to ‘live’ when I found out I was HIV-positive. I pray every night to God that he will give me as many years as I can have. I don’t use drugs anymore and will never again (like I said, I want to ‘live’). Thank you all for listening, I have a lot to be grateful for today! (p. 356)

Both the fictional Mimi in *Rent* and the real-life Jamie from Mohammed and Thombre’s study recognize the value in living life to the fullest. However, in *Rent*, Mimi’s life perspective is countered by another life perspective: Roger’s. Although Roger confesses that if he had met Mimi in a different context (implying that if he was not HIV-positive), things would be different, he serves as Mimi’s antithesis in this particular scene. Roger has given up on life, while Mimi is trying to experience life to the fullest. This becomes even more apparent in the song when the

two begin singing counter-melodies. Mimi declares “I can’t control my destiny. I trust my soul. My only goal is just to be. There’s only now; there’s only here. Give into love, or live in fear,” at the same time Roger chastises himself by saying, “Control your temper. She doesn’t see. Who says that there’s a soul? Just let me be...”

The next scene returns to the Life Support Group, which has vocally separated into a four-part canon and sings, “Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?” The lyrics again represent fear, but it is a different fear than the one previously expressed by Gordon: The characters now fear how others will view them. This is the first time stigma emerges in *Rent*. The Life Support Group sings about the fear of being abandoned and looked down upon, implying that people living with HIV often are afraid of being stigmatized by society.

The musical then returns to Collins and Angel on the street looking at coats for sale. Angel wants to buy a coat for Collins, and Collins is humbled by his lover’s giving nature. He responds with “I do not deserve you, Angel. Give, give, all you do is give. Give me some way to show how you’ve touched me so.” This scene, like others before it, reveals Angel’s life perspective, which Collins is beginning to learn and adhere to. Angel lives to love others and enjoys doing things for other people. He sees contributing to society and loving others as his purpose in life. This parallels another one of Mohammed and Thombre’s (2005) participant’s comments. Marci, who became an activist after being diagnosed with HIV, says, “Fear the virus – but embrace the people” (p. 355). Both Angel and Marci illustrate one of the common themes in Mohammed and Thombre’s work: HIV-positive individuals seek to love and serve others.

In contrast to Angel’s perspective, Roger makes a doomsday-type comment in a conversation with Mark. He suggests, “Let’s go eat. I’ll just get fat. It’s the one vice left when you’re dead meat.” The line reflects Roger’s decision to give up on life. At this point, he believes that life has nothing left for him. He appears to have accepted his disease as fatal and is simply waiting to die.

Roger doesn’t abide by this philosophy for very long. After Maureen’s protest performance, she, Joanne, Mark, Angel, Collins, Roger, and Mimi gather at the Life Café. The café’s name is no coincidence. The gathering is a time of happiness for each character; it is a time where each experiences life: Maureen in terms of success; Collins, Angel, Roger and Mimi in terms of love; Mark and Joanne in terms of support. The characters sing a mock eulogy to Bohemia, which Benny claims is dead. They celebrate “La Vie Boheme” in song, toasting to various aspects of the Bohemian life. Some of the characters imagine that the others are using their talents in a way that celebrates the life of Bohemia. In this imaginary fashion, Angel declares, “Collins will recount his exploits as anarchist, including the successful reprogramming of the M.I.T. virtual reality equipment to self-destruct as it broadcasts the words ‘Actual reality! Act up! Fight AIDS!’” In this statement, Angel reveals that Collins (and perhaps Angel himself) dreams of spreading the message about HIV/AIDS to the general public. This activist approach is implied through the reference to ACT UP, a well-known activist group that is working to “end

the AIDS crisis" (ACT UP, 2009). Taking action for a cause is yet another life perspective revealed by this musical.

The end of the song creates a pivotal moment for Roger and Mimi, as the two characters finally disclose their HIV status to one another. Roger confesses that he's "got baggage," and Mimi replies that she's "looking for baggage that goes with" hers. Here, "baggage" is a metaphor for having HIV. When Mimi's beeper sounds, alerting her to take her medication, the two characters reveal their HIV status and appear to fall in love instantly. This marks a turning point for Roger, who now has found a reason to live.

The last reference to HIV in the first act occurs in the reprise of "La Vie Boheme." The seven characters again celebrate the Bohemian life, toasting to "people living with, not dying from disease." This seemingly simple phrase says much about the characters' views on life. They do not see themselves as victims waiting to die; they view themselves as managing the disease as part of life. Even Roger sings this line, implying that he has become more optimistic about life after falling in love with Mimi. The characters, at least in this scene, see HIV as simply something one must live with, almost as if it were a harmless inconvenience, instead of a potentially-fatal disease.

Act II opens with the message of the musical: That everyone should "measure [their] lives in love." The song "Seasons of Love," suggests that the purpose of life is to love other people. Each character sings part of the song, implying that each has chosen this view as his or her own perspective at this point in the musical. The characters are celebrating life and the love they have for each other. Mimi illustrates this point of view by suggesting that she wants to go back to school, and that finding love has made her want to become a better person. Even Roger declares, "Last week, I wanted just to disappear. My life was dust. But now, it may just be a happy new year." Later, Mimi further illustrates the importance of love by singing "Life goes on, but I'm gone, because I die without you." Living for love appears to be a central, defining life perspective in *Rent*. This perspective is similar to Mohammed and Thombre's (2005) theme of serving others.

Unfortunately, this optimistic life perspective is challenged when Angel becomes sick as a result of the virus and passes away. At the memorial service, some of the characters share stories that show how Angel viewed life. Mark tells a story of how Angel helped some frightened tourists out of Alphabet City, even allowing them to take a picture with him, since they had never seen a drag queen before. Mimi offers a story of how Angel stood up for himself against a "skinhead" who was threatening him, and Maureen tells of how Angel was the most "original" person in the group, making his own dresses which eventually caught on as fashion trends. The three stories offer insight into Angel's life perspective: living life to the fullest and for others. Collins then sings the reprise of "I'll Cover You," the song that he and Angel sang earlier when they first fell in love. The song advocates the idea of living for love: "I think they meant it when they say you can't buy love. Now I know you can rent it: A new lease you were, my love, on life."

Outside the church, however, the characters seem to forget to follow Angel's advice on living life. Joanne and Maureen argue over making a commitment to each other. Roger and Mimi have a similar fight when Roger suspects Mimi of seeing Benny behind his back. Mimi and Joanne, criticizing their partners, sing, "I'd be happy to die for a taste of what Angel had: someone to live for, unafraid to say I love you!" The two characters reveal that they, too, have decided to live life as Angel had: For love. Grief-stricken Collins responds with a line that reveals his disappointment with his friends:

You all said you'd be cool today, so please, for my sake... I can't believe he's gone. [To Roger, who leaving New York for Santa Fe] I can't believe you're going. I can't believe this family must die. Angel helped us believe in love. I can't believe you disagree.

With this line, Collins shows a need for community during his time of grief. Losing a partner to AIDS is a traumatic experience, and Collins is looking for support from his friends to get through this difficult time. Noting that Angel left a legacy to his friends by helping them to "believe in love," Collins expresses his disappointment that they have rejected the legacy.

This issue is reiterated through a seemingly private conversation between Mark and Roger after the funeral:

Roger: How could we lose Angel?

Mark: Maybe you'll see why when you stop escaping your pain. At least now if you try, Angel's death won't be in vain.

Roger: His death is in vain.

Mark: Are you insane? There's so much to care about. There's me, there's Mimi.

Roger: Mimi's got her baggage, too.

Mark: So do you!

Here, Mark alludes to Angel's legacy. Roger, however, feels that this optimistic perspective is a ruse and sinks back into his isolationist view. He argues that he has nothing to live for, and that therefore, Angel's death is in vain. But Roger's words hint at another issue: fear. He notes that "Mimi's got her baggage, too," implying that he may be trying to avoid a relationship with her because he is afraid that she will die, too. After accusing Mark of hiding behind his camera to avoid living life, the conversation continues:

Roger: You pretend to create and observe when you really detach from being alive.

Mark: Perhaps it's because I'm the one of us to survive.

Roger: Poor baby!

Mark: Mimi still loves Roger, but is Roger really jealous? Or afraid that Mimi's weak?

Roger: Mimi did look pale.

Mark: Mimi's gotten thin. Mimi's running out of time. Roger's running out the door.

This part of the conversation further reveals Roger's fear of losing Mimi. He is trying to leave in order to escape the pain of losing her in the future. He feels that if he detaches now, he won't feel as much pain when Mimi passes on. In an interesting parallel, Mark reveals his own detachment from his friends, admitting that he hides behind his camera in an attempt to separate himself from his HIV-positive friends, whom he knows he will one day have to live without.

This detachment is part of the isolationist life perspective that Roger adhered to earlier in the musical.

This conversation, which Roger and Mark believed was private, has been overheard by Mimi. Mimi, who is obviously hurt, muses to Roger, "You don't want baggage without lifetime guarantees. You don't want to watch me die. I just came to say goodbye, love." Roger, who is still trying to escape the pain of saying goodbye to a loved one, returns to his search for his legacy song, murmuring, "Glory, one blaze of glory...have to find..." as he exits. Benny enters the stage in an attempt to comfort Mimi:

Mimi: Please don't touch me. Understand, I'm scared. I need to go away.

Mark: I know a place, a clinic.

Benny: A rehab?

Mimi: Maybe...could you?

Benny: I'll pay.

Mimi: Goodbye, love. Hello, disease.

In this scene, we see that Mimi is clearly in a weakened state, perhaps due to her advancing HIV, or perhaps due to the fact that her lover just walked out on her. In either case, the last line is revealing: Love is her salvation. Without love, she feels she will succumb to her disease. Here, we see that Mimi has adopted Angel's life view: That love is what really matters in life.

Later in the same scene, we see a new aspect of Angel's life perspective emerge: The importance of forgiveness. When the pastor at the church, who is screaming homophobic slurs, kicks the grieving friends out because they do not have the money to pay for Angel's funeral, Benny graciously pays for the memorial service. Touched by Benny's gesture, Collins makes his own confession: "I think it's only fair to tell you, you just paid for the funeral of the person who killed your dog" (Earlier in the musical, Angel was paid by a wealthy lady to play his drums all night so that Benny's Akita, which refused to quit barking, would bark itself to death). Benny responds to Collins' honesty with "I know, I always hated that dog. Let's pay him off [referring to the pastor], and then get drunk." Benny forgives Angel for killing his dog and forgives Collins for hiding the information, and in return, Collins appears to forgive Benny for abandoning his friends and his Bohemian principles. The concept of forgiveness is part of the living-for-love and living-for-others life perspective; one cannot love others until he or she learns to forgive them first.

The last scene of the show brings multiple life perspectives together. Mark sets the scene for the audience again, noting that Roger has returned, but that Mimi is now lost. Roger announces that he has finally found his much-sought-after song, which is based on his love for Mimi. As Mark, Roger, and Collins settle in their cold apartment to watch Mark's film footage, Maureen and Joanne bring a sick, weakened Mimi into the room, noting that they found her in the park. The characters struggle to help Mimi, but she begins to fade, whispering "I love you" to Roger. Roger, afraid that Mimi will die before he can play his song for her, sings "Your Eyes," which reveals how he truly feels about Mimi. At the completion of the performance, Mimi falls limp, and appears to have died. Roger shouts out her name in agony.

Suddenly, to the surprise of the characters and to the disbelief of the audience, Mimi awakens, describing her near-death experience in which she claims to have seen Angel, who told her, “Turn around, girlfriend, and listen to that boy’s song.” Mimi appears to have been saved by love, suggesting that her earlier comments about choosing between love and death were not unfounded. The final scene brings closure and also reiterates the message of the show: That the purpose of life is to love and be loved.

The last song, which is a montage of three other songs previously appearing in the musical, brings together various life perspectives. Half of the company sings “No Day But Today,” revealing the carpe-diem life perspective, while the other half of the company sings “Without You,” which implies the living-for-love life perspective. At one point, a small group of male vocalists sing a verse of “Will I Lose My Dignity,” which is associated with HIV-positive individuals worrying about how others will view them, connecting to the importance-of-community theme. *Rent*’s overall message appears to be that we should all live life to the fullest by loving others in our community, as indicated by the final song in the show. This message directly connects to the three themes found in Mohammed and Thombre’s (2005) study, and this connection will be discussed in the following section.

### Discussion

This analysis of the lyrics and script of *Rent* has revealed multiple ways in which HIV-positive individuals view life. Some people choose to live life to the fullest, experiencing everything they possibly can in the time that they have remaining, as suggested through Mimi’s character in Act I. Others, like Roger, choose to isolate themselves in an attempt to avoid the pain of losing loved ones. Some, like Roger and to some extent Angel, feel the need to leave some sort of legacy, which will exist for others to enjoy long after they have passed on. Still others, as represented by the members of the Life Support group, may experience confusion at their own survival, fear death or the social stigma attached to having HIV, feel like giving up, or develop an inclination to turn to something larger than themselves, such as religion. Finally, the most prominent life perspective emerging from *Rent* is the idea that we should live our lives to love and care for others, as revealed through the character of Angel, and others towards the end of the musical.

Three of these life perspectives are consistent with the life perspectives discussed by Mohammed and Thombre (2005). Mohammed and Thombre offer three life perspectives that emerged from their study of HIV survivors’ stories on the World Wide Web: Making a meaningful contribution to society, having a heightened sensitivity to life, and providing service to others. The first corresponds with the idea of leaving behind a legacy, such as Roger’s determination to find his song. One participant in Mohammed and Thombre’s study, Sarah, particularly embodies this theme:

I am at this time pursuing a master’s degree in the hopes that I can bring complementary therapies (i.e. art, movement, music, meditation, and prayer) into the mainstream areas of

medicine connected with special populations, such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, the physically disabled, along with their support groups. I'd like to research the possibilities of using these therapies, with Western and possibly Eastern medicine to take a holistic approach to a circulatory way of addressing diseases...especially those that change lives radically. I know what they have done for me, and I'd like to help others also...with God's grace, mercy, and help. (p. 354)

Sarah, like Roger, wishes to improve her society by leaving behind a legacy. For Sarah, this legacy involves different types of therapies that could help people fighting disease. For Roger, a musician, this legacy is a meaningful song for others to enjoy.

The second perspective, having a heightened sensitivity to life, corresponds with the living-life-to-the-fullest philosophy, and is a parallel to Mimi's perspective during the first act. Mimi is trying to experience as much of life as possible during the first act; she is looking for love and to have a good time. She is appreciative of what life has to offer her. Jamie, a participant in Mohammed and Thombre's (2005) study also feels this way. Jamie says, "Since I found out I have HIV my life has changed incredibly! I have my family back and have a wonderful housing program" (p. 356). Like Mimi, Jamie experienced a heightened sensitivity to life after being diagnosed with HIV.

Finally, Mohammed and Thombre's emerging theme of service to others corresponds with the musical's main message: that the purpose of life is to love and help others. Two participants in Mohammed and Thombre's study, Kay and Leslie, hold this life perspective. Kay notes, "Some people say that GOD (emphasis Mohammed and Thombre's) dealt them a bad hand. I don't feel that way. God is using me to tell others that it can happen to them, too" (p. 355). Similarly, Leslie says, "I now have become active in trying to get my story out to as many teens and adults that I possibly can. There are still so many people who think IT CANNOT HAPPEN TO ME (emphasis Mohammed and Thombre's, pp. 355-356). In *Rent*, this theme is illustrated through Angel's, and later Collins', Mimi's, and eventually Roger's life perspectives. Throughout the musical, Angel helps others; for example, he saves Collins' life at the beginning of the show. Collins illustrates this commitment to others in multiple ways as well, such as when he forgives Benny after Angel's memorial service. Finally, Roger and Mimi show a commitment to others through their romantic relationship; at the end of the musical, it is clear that both characters are committed to making their relationship work. The emergent theme of living life to love and serve others ultimately serves as the primary theme in the musical.

Although the theme of isolating oneself is not one of the themes noted in Mohammed and Thombre's (2005) work, it does appear in their study in a comment from Liza, an HIV-positive individual, who says "I often stay home alone and cry about the things I can't change" (p. 354). In *Rent*, the character of Roger embodies this theme in both acts. At first, he chooses to isolate himself because he has given up on life, and then in Act II, he tries to isolate himself because he is afraid to watch his lover die. The decision of HIV-individuals to isolate themselves after being diagnosed with the disease is a perspective that communities wishing to help HIV-positive individuals must take into account.

The isolation theme appears to relate to the process of grieving. Lindemann (1965) suggests that an individual experiencing grief has distinct symptoms: He or she may experience physical ailments, a preoccupation with the deceased, guilt, anger, and disruptions of daily life. Harper (1995) adds additional symptoms to this list, including feelings of loneliness, abandonment, fear, disbelief, and vulnerability. Neimeyer, Keesee, and Fortner (2000) offer more symptoms as well, such as experiencing denial, anxiety, depression, and hostility. In *Rent*, Roger exhibits many of these symptoms: He frequently becomes angry with Mimi and Mark, and does not participate in everyday activities, unlike Angel and Collins, who attend Life Support meetings and enjoy each other's company outside of the apartment. While Roger does not experience any physical ailments, he seems to be obsessed with thinking about his disease, as illustrated through his comments and his lyrics. His feelings of loneliness and abandonment manifest themselves in his decision to isolate himself from his friends and the outside world.

Bosticco and Thompson (2005) suggest that grieving does not take place in a vacuum; rather, grieving occurs through both psychological processes and communication processes. In *Rent*, Roger, though initially preferring isolation, makes the transition to grieving with his friends. It is with his friends' help and through communication with them that he is able to move on from his doomsday perspective and learn to live with HIV. It is my hope that by understanding the life perspective of isolation and how it relates to grief, we, as members of society, can emotionally support individuals living with HIV and other terminal illnesses.

Examining rhetorical texts such as the musical *Rent* allows us to see how various concepts are portrayed in the public. It is my hope that this analysis has offered insight into how the musical portrays the life perspectives of people living with HIV/AIDS. A comparison with Mohammed and Thombre's work suggests that these emergent life perspectives correspond with how people really view life after being diagnosed with HIV. However; this piece is not without limitations. Because *Rent* is a fictional work, it does not include quotations from real people. Furthermore, the scope is limited to *Rent's* lyrics and script; it does not examine visual or musical cues that may contribute to the musical's message. Future research may involve interviews or focus groups that ask HIV-positive individuals about how they perceive life and the world after being diagnosed with the disease. Future research may also include rhetorical, thematic, or narrative analyses of other texts concerning the same issue. By understanding the changing life perspectives of people living with HIV, we can better understand how we, as a society, can emotionally support them as they live with, not die from, disease.

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