

# Not Dying from Disease: A Narrative Analysis of HIV/AIDS in the Film *Rent*

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**Abstract.** Set when AIDS was the scourge of New York City the film adaptation of *Rent* follows the lives of eight characters struggling to live their lives in the early 1990s; four of whom are HIV positive or have AIDS. This research utilizes narrative criticism to analyze the characters' stories as they manage the physical and emotional consequences of AIDS. The platonic and romantic relationships among the characters act as the catalysts for personal growth, encouraging the characters to live their lives fully within the context of AIDS. The rock opera unfolds to reveal how Angel, Collins, Mimi, and Roger individually cope with the virus. Evaluation of the characters experience resulted in the creation of the HIV/AIDS Lifestyle Integration Continuum.

## 1. Introduction

The rhetorical artifact of *Rent* was chosen because it is a unique piece popular culture that addresses the theme of HIV/AIDS and serves as a social commentary for its time. Narrative criticism is used to analyze the “meaningful discursive structures” [1] in the film adaptation of the rock opera, *Rent*. Specifically, focusing on how the characters living with HIV/ AIDS. “Narratives organize the stimuli of our experience so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives” [2]. The characters Angel, Collins, Roger, and Mimi supported by their friends Mark, Maureen, Joanne, and Benny build relationships that serve as catalysts for personal growth.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

### *Research Questions*

- RQ1: How is HIV/AIDS represented in the narrative of *Rent*?
- RQ2: How do the individuals cope with having the HIV/AIDS virus?

### *Methodology*

Data was gathered over a one-month period and multiple viewings of the film. Data collection consisted of comprehensive note taking to determine parts vital to narration and specific dialogue concerning HIV/AIDS. The film was broken down into 10 events integral to understanding the discourse surrounding Roger, Mimi, Collins, and Angel's experience with HIV/AIDS.

### *Results, Discussion, and Significance*

Addressing the first research question, the theme of HIV/ AIDS is woven throughout the film. Character representations act to humanize the virus, allowing the audience to create a shared experience – connecting faces, names, and stories to HIV/AIDS. Additionally the characters living with HIV/AIDS are of different ethnicities and sexual orientation. Realistic characters with complex emotions facilitate the audience's ability to relate the characters and their experiences to their own life. This strategy relays the message that any one may become infected with the virus no matter their race or orientation. Integration of Life Support meetings also allows the audience insight to a more sensitive side of living with HIV/AIDS. Two important themes from the Life Support meetings include the fear of losing one's dignity to the virus represented in the song, *Will I?* More importantly Life Support meetings introduce the mantra for the film, “no day but today,” which encourages the idea of living one's life to it's full extent according to what drives their happiness

The second research question reveals that each of the characters is in a different stage of their HIV/AIDS experience. Their individual experiences are represented on the Lifestyle Integration Continuum below. The continuum has three benchmarks moving from left to right, un-integrated, integrated, and external integration. To be un-integrated is to exhibit little regard for the virus and the lifestyle changes it demands i.e. drug use, or disclosure

