



POEM ANALYSIS

“Phenomenal Woman” by Maya Angelou

Essay by Holly L. Norton

Author: Maya Angelou

Born: April 4, 1928; St. Louis, Missouri

Died: —

Country: United States

Culture: American; African American

ABSTRACT

This essay presents an explication of Maya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman.” Written as a celebration of the powerful physicality and spirituality of women, “Phenomenal Woman” is a lyric poem whose attention to rhyme and rhythm shows Angelou’s musical background. She begins with a description of how others do not see her as a woman who fits society’s standard of beauty, then shows how she expresses her confidence and belief in her own beauty, and ends by proclaiming that she is indeed a phenomenal woman.

KEYWORDS

- Alliteration
- Hyperbole
- Irony
- Lyric Poem
- Repetition
- Shakespearean Sonnet

TYPE OF POEM

Lyric; Sonnet

APPEARS IN

And Still I Rise by Maya Angelou

Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women by
Maya Angelou

The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou by Maya
Angelou

Maya Angelou: Poems by Maya Angelou

Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou

When “Phenomenal Woman” was first published in 1978, the women’s movement was in full force. That year, Congress passed the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which banned prejudice in the workplace against pregnant women, and women’s rights groups were urging state legislatures to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. By the time the poem was published in *And Still I Rise*, Angelou’s third book of poetry, she had earned a reputation as a “global renaissance woman” for her work as a poet, scriptwriter, playwright, performer, actress, and composer. Before becoming famous with her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she had also been a streetcar conductor in San Francisco (where she was the city’s first female, black conductor at the age of seventeen), a dancer, and a fry cook. She even held a job in a mechanic shop, where at times she removed the paint from cars with her hands. As she became involved in the civil rights movement during the early 1960’s, Angelou lived for periods of time in Cairo, Egypt, and Ghana, where she worked as a freelance writer and editor for the *African Review*.

In “Phenomenal Woman,” Angelou employs a modified sonnet structure, combining elements of the traditional Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets to create an organic form in which the traditional fourteen-line stanzas is reduced to either twelve or thirteen lines. Angelou also varies the form’s rhyme scheme. In each stanza of a Shakespearean sonnet, the first and third lines

rhyme as do the second and fourth lines; in the first and second stanzas of a Petrarchan sonnet, in contrast, the first and fourth lines rhyme as do the second and third lines. The remaining six lines of each form have either two or three rhyming sounds and can be arranged in a variety of ways. The rhyme scheme of "Phenomenal Woman," however, is more irregular than those of the traditional sonnets, as is the case with most modern sonnets. Instead of ending with the couplet that typifies the Shakespearean sonnet or the sestet of the Petrarchan sonnet, Angelou ends with the repeated triplet, "Phenomenally, / Phenomenal woman, / That's me."

Beginning with the line "Pretty women wonder where my secret lies" (1), the speaker of the poem speculates on the nature of beauty, describing how she defies cultural standards of attractiveness by not being "cute" (2) having the figure of a model. Instead, the "secret" (1) of her beauty lies in her "arms" (6), "hips" (7), "step" (8), and "lips" (9), giving the impression that it is not her physical appearance but the way that she uses her body that makes men "swarm" (19) around her like "a hive of honey bees" (20). The "fire" (22) in her eyes, the "flash" (23) of her teeth, the "swing" (24) in her waist, and the "joy" (25) in her feet, make her as irresistible to them as nectar is to bees. In this manner, Angelou uses metaphor to illustrate the appeal the speaker has to men, even though, as the speaker acknowledges in the third stanza, they cannot say why they find the speaker so attractive and do not "see" (36) her "inner mystery" (34) even when she explains it to them. Throughout these stanzas, Angelou uses alliteration, as in "fire" (22) and "flash" (23) and "sun" and "smile" (39) to emphasize the force of the speaker's charisma. Further, her use of end and internal rhymes in the poem—as with "knees" (18) "me" (19) and bees" (20), or "see" (36) and "mystery" (34), for example—creates a rhythm and resonance that almost makes the poem sound like a lyrical song. However, Angelou's poem is distinct in that its variations of rhyme and rhythm keep the poem from becoming as repetitive and predictable as many songs can be.

The speaker continues her self-description in the third stanza, returning to listing her physical attributes by naming the "arch" (38) of her back and the "ride" (40) of her breasts as qualities that contribute to the

"grace" (41) of her style and make her "a woman / Phenomenally" (42–43). The abstract quality of grace is made concrete with these references to the body, allowing readers get a vivid image of a woman who is confident in herself. She is "Just as cool as you please" (15) as she walks into a room or along the street. Having described the way her body moves, her self-confidence, and the magnetism created by this combination, the speaker concludes, "Now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed" (46–47). She is not ashamed of herself, and doesn't have to yell or raise her voice to get attention. In fact, when the speaker says, "It ought to make you proud" (51) to see her passing, readers get the sense that it is not herself that she wants readers to be proud of, but themselves, since they, too, can cultivate in themselves the beauty that Angelou describes.

Concluding with more references to the body, the final stanza mentions the "click" (53) of the speaker's heels, the "bend" (54) of her hair, and the "palm" (55) of her hand, as well as the "need" (56) for her care. Angelou convinces her readers that being beautiful is not a matter of having "ideal" physical features, but of having confidence and pride in oneself.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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