



Still I Rise

by Maya Angelou

Content Synopsis

Written in 1978, “Still I Rise” is a poem of pride and protest in which the speaker says that despite the history of oppression for Blacks, she will rise. The poem begins with the speaker saying, “You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies . . .” to acknowledge the prejudice that has pervaded American history. She continues that no matter what she is subjected to, she will always overcome.

The poem is nine stanzas long and is filled with accusations and rhetorical questions directed at the oppressor. Questions such as “Do you want to see me broken?” and “Does my haughtiness offend you?” challenge the oppressor. Meanwhile, the speaker asserts her confidence and strength in spite of, or perhaps because of, the challenges in her life and the life of her people with statements like, “I walk like I’ve got oil wells pumping in my living room.”

The first seven stanzas are each four lines long and the second and third lines rhyme with one another. This gives the poem a rhythm and consistency that reflects the speaker’s unyielding determination to succeed. The last two stanzas, however, break from this pattern. The eighth stanza is six lines long and ends in a couplet, while the final stanza is nine stanzas long with five of the lines repeating the words, “I rise.” The break from routine and the growing length of the stanzas achieves the effect of the speaker rising out of the

poem and give her final words more weight and greater impact on the reader.

Angelou also incorporates anaphora, similes, and metaphors throughout the poem to illustrate the resilience of the speaker regardless of what befalls her. She says, “You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes . . .” but she laughs in the face of this hate because she knows that like dust, like hope, like air, she will rise. She compares herself to a “black ocean, leaping and wide,” an indication of the infinite power of her resilience. She closes the poem claiming that she is the “dream and the hope of the slave” followed by the thrice repeated phrase, “I rise.” Angelou captures the both the repression and the progress of the African American people over the course of history.

Symbols & Motifs

Much of Angelou’s poetry possesses a lyrical, jazzy quality and “Still I Rise” is no exception (Cecil). This quality is no surprise as Angelou admits to being heavily influenced by the works of poets such as William Shakespeare and Langston Hughes as well as Negro spirituals and Bible hymns (Bartow). Likewise, Angelou often centers her work on themes of Black discrimination and oppression (Cecil).

Throughout the poem, Angelou refers to earth, air, and water. She compares herself to dust, air, and the

ocean. She says that “with the certainty of tides” she will rise. Angelou makes a connection with nature and its ability to persevere throughout eternity.

Historical Context

In writing this poem, Maya Angelou is able to honor the hard work and strength of her ancestors who suffered through slavery. She is also able to acknowledge the many years of discrimination and subjugation that followed. From slavery to the present, African Americans have told stories out of the need to express their feeling and be heard (Moss). Topics often revolve around sadness, anger, hard work, and discrimination, but also about unity and persistence (Moss). Angelou incorporates all of these emotions into her poem. Stories were often told through song so Angelou’s use of rhythm in “Still I Rise” pays respect to that tradition.

Societal Context

“Still I Rise” is a poem that addresses the plight of American Blacks, but has a message that can traverse racial and cultural boundaries because it is about overcoming adversity. Although written in the 1970’s, the poem has a timeless quality because of the universality of its conflict and the optimistic, determined nature of its message. In one interview, Maya Angelou explained that even though she writes from personal experience, she does not necessarily write about her own life. She is instead, “thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people . . . I used . . . myself—as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times” (Cecil).

Religious Context

“Still I Rise” does not have a specific religious context.

Scientific & Technological Context

“Still I Rise” does not have a specific scientific or technological context.

Biographical Context

Maya Angelou was born as Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928. When she was three years old, her parents divorced and from that point forward, she spent much of her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas living with her grandmother whom everyone called “Momma.” In Stamps, she learned what it was like to live as a black person in a white dominated society (Cecil). She returned to live with her mother in St. Louis for a short time and returned to Stamps after her mother’s boyfriend (Cecil) raped her. At age fifteen Angelou moved to San Francisco and became pregnant at age sixteen with her only child, a son named Clyde. Her experiences were later captured in her first autobiography, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.” She continues to tell her story in three subsequent autobiographies.

Angelou has published multiple collections of poetry including “Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diiie” in 1971, “Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well” in 1975, “Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now” in 1993 and “A Brave and Startling Truth” in 1995 (poets.org).

In addition to writing, Maya Angelou is also an actor, singer, dancer, director, and civil rights activist (poets.org). In 1959, she was asked by Martin Luther King Jr. to become the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (poets.org). Two years later, she spent one year in Egypt with a South African activist to whom she was briefly married (Encyclopedia Britannica). She worked as an associate editor for the only English news weekly in the Middle East. From 1964 to 1966, she edited the *African Review* in Ghana (poets.org). Maya Angelou broke new ground in 1971 as the first black female director in Hollywood. She was nominated for a Tony award in 1977 for her performance in the renowned epic “Roots” (poets.org). In 1993, President Bill Clinton asked her to write and deliver a poem

that became “On the Pulse of the Morning” at his inauguration.

Jennifer Bouchard

Works Cited

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Discussion Questions

1. What is the tone of the poem?
2. Who is the “you” in the poem?
3. Who is the “I” in the poem?
4. How does the reader distinguish between the private “I,” and the collective “I,” the representation of all Afro-American women?
5. Identify the sensory details that Angelou uses to help strengthen her message.
6. What are some of the things that Angelou compares the speaker’s hope to? Why?
7. What is the effect of Angelou’s use of parallelism and juxtaposition of the words “you” and “I”?
8. What is the effect of the repetition of the last three lines of the poem?
9. What is the message of the poem?

Essay Ideas

1. Write an essay in which you analyze how Angelou’s use of tone, personification, metaphor, and allusion help the reader to understand and enjoy the poem’s message better.
2. Evaluate Angelou’s use of sexuality in the poem and an element of power and confidence. Discuss the effect of this on the overall message and tone of the poem.
3. Write your own poem using the same title. What obstacles are you overcoming and how will you rise above them?

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