

## An explication of self-discovery in Maya Angelou's Still I Rise

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### Abstract

Angelou's poem deals with racism where writer portrays positive and strong tone throughout the poem with respect to the society. She presents us with an insight into what life was like for a black woman in the society. Angelou skilfully manages to take a subject as dreadful as racism and leaves the reader of her poem feeling both angry and proud at the same time. This poem is very much relevant to the present situation. The Poem arouses a strong emotional response among the readers. The better understanding of the poem enforces us how the human spirit can achieve and "rise" above even the most horrible aspects of life without to be "beaten" or "broken". This paper tries to underpin the theme of hope and confidence within.

**Keywords:** insight, dreadful, enforce, horrible, human spirit

### Introduction

Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" is a poem about strength and endurance, and about affirmation. "Still I Rise" is an African-American woman's response to those who wish her hard and hate her. An inspirational poem symbolizing defiance and her strength to overcome negative criticism and oppression. It is about what is *expected* of a person like the speaker (in terms of controlling her), and what that person is capable of doing *despite* expectations.

### Birth History of Maya as a Black

Angelou was partially descended from the Mende people of West Africa. A 2008 PBS Documentary found that Maya's Maternal great grandmother Mary Lee, been emancipated after the civil war became pregnant by her White Owner John Savin. Lee was sent to a poor house in Missouri with her daughter Named Marguerite Baxter.

### Literary Background

She is a poet, speaker, producer, civil rights activists. Received over 30 Honorary Degrees

According to her autobiographies she married Tosh Angelos in 1951 & Paul de Feu in 1973 and began relationship with vusumzi Make in 1961. Prominent recognitions are Black Women's poet Laureate, Anthems of African Americans-Poems, First Female Poet to give reading at a Presidential Inauguration and Started See Forever Foundation for poor children

Her mentioned works are "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" credited auto-biography in seven volume series which received National Book Award in 1969 and Pulitzer Prize Nomination for "Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiiie" First volume of poetry 1972

### American dream

American dream today has become increasingly convoluted due to personal fears and uncertainties that reside deep inside each and every individual: even in those too afraid to admit and confront these insecurities due to past personal afflictions resulting from tyrannical rule. American dream is the freedom to pursue ones goals and aspirations without

having an obstacle of overcoming an oppressive majority wilfully controlled by the wealthy. This poem shares the concept of freedom relation and importance to American dream.

Rising Up "Still I Rise"; by Maya Angelou is directed towards blacks on how to be proud of their ancestry, themselves, and their overall appearance. The poem is a special and motivating poem that African-Americans (and other races for that matter) should read and take to heart. According to African-Americans, Maya Angelou states that no matter what white Americans (slave owners) say or do to African-Americans (slaves) they can still rise up to make a better life for themselves and their race as a whole.

One reason blacks should rise above their oppression is so they can better themselves and in turn make a better life for their next generation, just as their ancestors tried to do. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Rosa Parks, E.B. DuBois and Thurgood Marshall are all names that bring to mind the struggle that Black America has been engaged in since the times of Abraham Lincoln. All of these people were eloquent speakers who had a great influence on the lives of every American.

The poem still I rise is written by Maya Angelou; an 20th Century African American poet, educator and an important figure during the 50s and 60s civil-rights movement. Maya Angelou was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri as a second child. Mrs. Bertha Flowers, her teacher made her a prominent figure by introducing her literary life with notable authors. still I rise is a short lyric poem published by random house in 1978 in the collection of poetry with thirty two poems entitled And Still I Rise in the third volume

Angelou early experienced the twin forces that would determine the shape of her life and the nature of her career: personal rejection and institutional racism. Angelou's creative passion for his work is demonstrated in her strong talent of weaving similes and hyperboles into her work.

In "Still I Rise," themes of rejection and racism can be seen. The first stanza may well reflect the concept of slavery, seen with the word "history."

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

The first line suggests that the telling of the history of slaves in America has long be controlled by whites who decided what was recorded in books and what was *true* as *they* saw it, but never spoke of the reality of slave life—forced to leave their homes and be treated like property...as if they were no longer people. However, Angelou's theme of perseverance is also present with the use of the word "dust." Dust has often been referred to as "abiding"—something that lasts forever. "Abiding" is defined as...

...continuing without change; enduring; steadfast...

Making this comparison, Angelou affirms that regardless of the abuse the speaker suffers (and the speaker represents *all* blacks), that she will rise: she will *not* disappear, she will not be defeated and she will not be held back.

The second stanza continues with the same tone...the speaker asks if she has upset her listener by not acting as the listener *wants* her act—subdued, repressed, sad, etc.

Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

The speaker notes that she refuses to be downtrodden, and while the listener may be expecting her to be broken, she walks as if she the world's wealth is in her pockets. Her strength and defiance are clear. The images she provides speak of oppression and violence:

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

And...

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.

In light of violence and even death, we now hear the essence of the speaker's spirit entering into the poem: for not even *death* will destroy the speaker's presence, as if it has grown so strong that it will defy the very limits of the passing from this earth.

Angelou's poem promises that *nothing* will destroy her will, and here we have an even greater sense of the promise of the survival of the *race*—the rising is like the air: it is everywhere and cannot be contained. The last section of the poem speaks directly of the path from slavery to the modern day: reciting life in *huts* and a past "rooted in pain." This race has achieved power as great as the mighty oceans that cannot be contained. Angelou speaks of her ancestors: their pain, their work, their sacrifice—and their *legacy*.

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

This line provides closure to this age-old battle. This is a poem of challenge to those who wish to place a person of color into the limited confines of the past, and a declaration of freedom—after a *very* long journey—bringing the black race to freedom *and* dignity: at last. A new image emerges out of dark nights into the brightness of the day, carrying with the legacy of her ancestors. It is a hopeful new day that fades away the past and looking hopefully to the future. She is the epitome of the dreams and indomitable spirits of the past to rise again, again and again. With the poem, *Still I Rise*, by Maya Angelou, she describes the basic feelings and descriptions of a person that does not need loathing or people to try and lift her up. She shows us that she and all those

oppressed in general are strong. *Still I Rise* is a sublime, straightforward poem that acknowledges that we need not depend upon anyone else's opinion but our own. Maya expresses not only her good qualities, but also her unfavourable ones, yet even these are turned into positive ideas. This poem can only be read by us now because she has confidence in herself, her writing, and can express it so freely.

This poem can be interpreted as a call to assertiveness and pride for coloured people. It is an outcry to the humiliation, prejudice, and constant drubbing this group was subjected to. Parallels can be seen between (black) slavery, drug addicts, racism and other groups that face constant thrashing by oppressors. *Still I Rise* has the uncanny ability to incite these groups to rise, and stop pining in sorrow while another tries to bury their soul. Literary devices such as similes frequent this poem, such as Maya rising like dust or "Just like moons and like suns, With the certainty of tides, Just like hopes springing high " we are confirmed of the beauty and assurance of hope she has. Especially imaginative was the comparison of "shoulders falling down like teardrops", offering the image of shoulders sagging down in a depressed sort of way. (To Maya, this will never happen because she is better.) Figurative language abounds, with images of her dancing with her thighs, eyes and head lowered (spirit), etc. The poem's literal meaning is a sarcastic response towards the people who look down on the speaker. To the narrator, the poem metaphorically describes her strength to always survive the battle against people's criticism of her and her ancestors. Globally, this poem delivers the message of the human's incredible strength and ability to overcome hurt. However, the main and most important message this poem provides is the narrator's strength to retaliate against discrimination of races and gender; which offers hope for others who suffer from the same ordeal.

Maya Angelou is addressing the pain of slavery. She has had to overcome the historically-entrenched oppression and cruelty inflicted on Africans. It is this dark past that her ancestors had to endure, and now she has also found a way to "rise" above the collective pain. In the poem, she has found a new sense of awareness and has become a black woman who has risen above "history's shame." It is a poem of self-discovery and passion as she taunts her readers to come to grips with who she has become. Angelou feels that she will not fall victim to further discrimination because she has found her true worth as a black woman. No one will ever be able to subjugate her again because she has risen above the hatred and pain of history.

Maya Angelou has combined several poetic devices in the Poem 'Still I Rise' to paint a vivid picture of endurance, hope and strength. It consists of seven quatrains followed by a 15-line stanza. The most obvious poetic device it uses is repetition, specifically of the words "I rise." The quatrains are rhymed ABCB, although some of the rhymes are slightly irregular. "Welling and swelling" is an internal rhyme.

The devices include:

Alliteration (Huts of History's Shame)

Simile (like I've got diamonds, shoulders falling like teardrops)

Metaphor (I am a black ocean, leaping & wide)

Rhyme (Ies/Rise, gloom/room, hard/yard)

Repetition (I rise I rise, you may)  
Personification (Black Ocean leaping)  
Imagery (you may trod me in the very dirt)  
Hyperbole (You cut me with your eyes" and "You kill me with your hatefulness".)  
Rhetorical Question (In Stanzas 2,5 &7)  
Symbolism (Symbols of Wealth)

### Conclusion

This poem's main message is about people's prejudice against others who are physically different, either because of colour or gender. Maya Angelou's poem, 'Still I Rise' chronicles her ancestors' feelings and the legacy of slavery and oppression. The narrator points a positive light on the subject with her sarcasm and in the determined and prideful manner with which she uses to express her strength of fighting back, no matter how the obstacle is. To conclude, Maya's Still I Rise offers inspirational value, urging others to think more highly of themselves. Literary techniques are used well, providing us with an accurate way of understanding her thoughts.

Thus right till the end Maya maintains her tone of victorious and proud defiance, while speaking up for the rights of African-American women all over the US of her time. This pays tribute to the African American race for experiencing worst circumstances and serves as an Inspiration and instilling confidence This poem is related to the famous quote: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." As *nothing will keep a person down if he/she keeps on trying* Maya Angelou Quotes that "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

President Barack Obama says "a brilliant writer, a fierce friend, and a truly phenomenal woman had the ability to remind us that we are all God's children; that we all have something to offer"

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