

"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou: Analysis Essay

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This is an essay analyzing the poem "Still I Rise" by the famous and great Maya Angelou... it was homework about a few months ago... I hope you enjoy it :)

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Still I Rise

The poem still I rise is written by Maya Angelou; an African American poet, educator and civil-rights activist. 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.

The narrator of the poem is a woman. This is proved where the narrator says: "Does my sassiness upset you?" (5), "Does my sexiness upset you?" (25), and "That I dance like I've got diamonds/ At the meeting of my thighs?" (27, 28) Sassiness and sexiness is a quality normally attributed to females, also diamonds are often given to woman as gifts. The speaker uses the second-person pronoun "you" which grabs the reader's attention with an accusatory tone, causing the reader to acknowledge that they may play a part in oppressing others in their own lives. This makes the poem all the more personal and the tone she uses throughout the poem to express her feelings and opinion on the matter supports the accusatory tone of the "you". For instance, although at times the narrator's tone is playful and humorous, it is also very strong and powerful. This transpires when the tone of the stanzas varies from being serious and grave to patronizingly, and confidently playful. For example, in stanzas 2, 5 and 7, the narrator's tone is humorous and patronizing. However, in stanzas 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9 the speaker's tone is more serious and prideful.

For instance, in stanza 2 she asks: "Does my sassiness upset you?, Why are you beset with gloom?'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells, and Pumping in my living room." (5, 6, 7 and 8) The first and second questions seem to be rhetorical, and as though the narrator is amused that her confidence and brazenness is so upsetting. Also, the imagery of "oil wells/ Pumping in my living room" (7, 8) adds another amusing effect because of her enormous self-confidence and sarcasm, as though she were rich enough to own oil wells at home. Then in stanza 5, the same rhetorical question technique as well as peculiar imagery is used to create a sense of patronization. In the seventh stanza, once again, rhetorical questions are used to patronize like they were used in stanza 2 and 5.

However, in stanzas 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9 the significance and severity of her tone overpowers the humour. For example, in the first stanza the narrator says: "You many write me down in history" (1). This gives a feeling of determination, as though the narrator is accepting a challenge; that despite the difficulties, she will still rise. Then in stanza 3 and 4, the tone is once again proud and serious. The third stanza carries the same confident tone, assuring that she will overcome her troubles, "Just like the moons and like suns/ With the certainty of tides" (9, 10). The same rhetorical device from previous stanzas is used in the fourth stanza but in this case, it creates a more dramatic tone, the narrator knowing that her bullies want to see her "broken" (13), with "Bowed head and lowered eyes" (14). In the sixth stanza, the same tone of pride and strength present in the previous stanzas is also present here, the determination the narrator possesses shown through her promise to always rise. In the seventh stanza, although the narrator uses sarcasm, the stanza also conveys a sense of pride; this shows that the narrator of the poem associates her sexuality as something valuable, as though she has "diamonds/at the meeting of my thighs" (27, 28), which upsets her tormenters. In the last couple of stanzas, 8 and 9, more seriousness is added to the tone by using historical imagery and the statement that she is "the dream and the hope of the slave" (40).

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To support the tones the poet used throughout the poem, she also used a great deal of literary devices. For example, there is repetition, rhyme, symbolism, imagery, simile, alliteration, connotation, metaphor, hyperbole, personification and rhetorical question. However, repetition, metaphor, connotation and imagery contribute the most to the meaning of the poem.

The repetition of "I rise" throughout the entire poem expresses the narrator's determination to overcome any obstacles, giving the poem a sense of strength.

The metaphor used in the poem, which greatly contributes to its meaning is, "I am a black ocean" (33). The imagery "I am a black ocean" (33) expresses the thesis of this poem very well as it indicates three main and very important things. Firstly, since the colour black is usually used to indicate negative things, like evil or fear, a "black ocean" (33) could be meant to describe an ocean that is full of cruelty and how things occur unexpectedly. Relatively, this may refer to the narrator's own life; it being full of horrific and unexpected events. Secondly, an ocean would naturally represent power and vastness in its great waves and tenacious tides. This can also relate to the speaker's personality and the tone with which she directs the structure and flow of the poem. Thirdly, the "black ocean" (33) may also be describing her race which allows us readers to understand that the poem is about racism. Overall, I think the last stanza and, specifically, the "black ocean" (33) indicates what the thesis is- discrimination of race and gender; and her confidence in herself that gives out hope to the readers of the poem who are suffering from any kind of discrimination.

The word "trod" (3) is a diction with interesting connotation and in this case seems to imply a sort of detachment in the way that white people discriminate against black people. To "trod" is an action that would more likely and naturally be done by an animal. To say this, there is disrespect in the word because it seems to imply that white people view black people as less than human and not fit to even touch the soles of their shoes and thus they crush and belittle them as they figuratively step on them.

The imagery used in this poem is where it says "oil wells" (7) then "gold" (19) then "diamonds" (27). The order with which these words are located throughout the poem contributes greatly to the message of the poem. For example, all these natural resources are listed in an order where each one's value is higher than the other before it. What they all have in common is that they are all hidden beneath the earth, hidden from sight, and they have to be mined in order to be discovered. The same is true for black women's natural resources like "sassiness" (5), "haughtiness" (17) and "sexiness" (25). Their qualities are not obvious; they are hidden in intensely private spaces; like the "living room" (8), "back yard" (20), and "meeting of my thighs" (28) Just as people must dig to discover the richness of the earth so must we put an effort to discover the richness of our fellow human beings, whatever race, sex or nationality.

The structure of the poem's stanzas is almost completely regular. For example, the overall pattern of the stressed and unstressed syllable is a trochee, except for the last couple of stanzas, which are mostly a trochaic Pentameter. Also, all the stanzas of the poem have four lines, except for the last two stanzas. The rhyme scheme of the stanzas throughout the poem is A, B, C, B; except for the last two stanzas, where it is A, B, A, B, B, B, C, B C, B, D, D, B, B, B. Likewise, with the exception of the last two stanzas, you can see the lines of the stanzas are quite clean, rhythmic, clear, with a range of 5 to 8 words in each line of stanzas, however in the last two stanzas is not as rhythmic and doesn't follow a certain pattern. I think this is the case because

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it signifies a change in persona or voice. She goes from being challenging and pomposity to making a statement with a much deeper meaning. For example, how she begins speaking as a group rather than an individual; when she refers to wider concepts like the ocean, her ancestors, past, history and being the dream and hope of the slave. Also that fact that in the last couple of stanzas she says "I rise" (30, 32, 36, 38, 41, 42, 43) not "I'll rise" like she did in all the previous stanzas, which means that she used present tense instead of future tense. This gives the reader the impression that the narrator is metaphorically saying that now is the time for action. In contrast with this tone of strong determination, the poet's voice while saying the poem was always gentle and amused as she chuckled halfway through her poem. I think this is the case because she was taking on the personality of the narrator of her poem and telling by her amusement and laughter, she did as she had promised others, and most importantly, herself. She rose despite all the obstacles, and now she's at a place where those obstacles are just a laughable memory.

This poem's main message is about people's prejudice against others who are physically different, either because of colour or gender. However, 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 at always fighting back, no matter the obstacle. Relatedly, this poem can relate to the famous quote: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." What the speaker is describing in this poem concludes that after all that she went through; she is stronger than ever and that she has not let the demons other people created inside her destroy her. Instead, she always rose, like dust from the ground, challenging the oppression, believing that she was "the dream and the hope of the slave." What we can learn from this is that we are very strong and have so much potential that we should pride and have faith in to really overcome what haunts us most, like the narrator of this poem has.

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