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Maya Angelou Literary Analysis

For a majority of the 1900s, America was a place with abundant racism, sexism and discrimination. African American people had to work twice as hard to achieve their goals, and African American women had to work three times as hard as white males to attain their dreams. Maya Angelou was a prime example of an African American women lived through many hardships and overcame society's unfair bias against her in order to become the incredible, award winning literary success she became.

Maya Angelou (originally Marguerite Johnson) was born on April 4th, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri to Bailey and Vivian Baxter Johnson. Her family then moved to Long Beach, California and lived there for 3 years until her parents got divorced. She and her older brother Bailey Jr. were tagged and put on a train all alone to Stamps, Arkansas where their father's mother, Annie Henderson lived. Ms. Henderson, whom Maya and Bailey called Momma, owned a small merchandise store in Stamps where Maya and Bailey helped out at when they were not in school. This shop was one of the first places that Angelou witnessed the struggles of the black community. African American cotton pickers who worked on plantations would always come into the store, exhausted from their lack of sleep and in pain from their long days picking for a white plantation owner who paid them only a small sum of money. Also, Maya often witnessed her grandmother being humiliated by white people within her own store (MacEachern 36-37). (Shuker 9-13)

As a child, Maya struggled with self confidence issues. She was tall, lanky, and awkward which compared to her brother's athleticism and gracefulness made her feel as though she did not belong (Amato 3587-3588). Furthermore, she thought that her parents abandoning her was

her fault because she was 'inadequate'. When Maya received a white, blue eyed doll from her mother for Christmas she thought that her mother wanted a prettier daughter like the doll instead of her. To the children's surprise, in 1935, their father came to Stamps and brought the children back to their mother Vivian in St. Louis. (Shuker 14-17)

Though exciting at first, St. Louis quickly became a disaster for Maya. At only eight years old, Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend, raped her violently to the point where she could not walk and threatened to murder Bailey if she told anyone what he had done. Even when her mother found out what had happened and they went to trial, Mr. Freeman got off the hook but was found murdered the next day, most likely by Vivian's relatives. This event caused Vivian to ship Maya and Bailey back to Stamps where Maya refused to talk to anyone but Bailey due to her traumatizing experience. Her silence continued for almost five years until a nearby teacher named Bertha Flowers helped Maya find her voice. She introduced Maya to the world of literature as well as many authors such as Shakespeare, Poe, and Hughes. Additionally, Mrs. Flowers discussed the ideas behind each piece of work with Maya which caused her to become interested in writing herself and obsessed with reading. She and Mrs. Flowers spent many days in Stamps reading together and furthering Angelou's love for literature. (Shuker 21-28)

Though life in Stamps had taken a turn for the better, discrimination was still a constant problem. Stamps was still segregated, and at one point Maya and her family had to hide because the KKK were supposed to come and terrorize or kill black people at night. Furthermore, when Maya got a tooth infection, a white dentist refused to treat her and said that he would rather stick his hand in a dog's mouth than a black person's. Additionally, Bailey told Maya about the time he saw the police recover a black man's body and saw that they joked about

his death as though it meant nothing. These racial injustices that Maya experienced at such a young age caused her to develop a deep hatred towards white people to the point that she had trouble trusting a white person until her twenties. (Shuker 28-38)

Again, Maya and Bailey were moved to California to live with their mother where Maya's bad luck persisted. She was stabbed by her father's girlfriend when she went to visit him, lived with a tribe of runaway children for a month, and she was separated from her brother when he was kicked out of the house. Still, Maya overcame her situation and with determination she got a job as the first black woman to be a San Francisco streetcar conductor. When she turned 16, Maya had sex with a neighborhood boy and became pregnant which she kept a secret for seven months until she graduated. When her son, Clyde, was born Maya decided that she had to get a steady job to help support her child. She became a cook, then a madam for prostitutes, before moving back to Stamps with Clyde. But Soon, Maya insulted a white woman who was racist towards her and although she felt proud in herself, her grandmother sent her back to California. On the West Coast, she immersed herself in dancing, singing and acting which not only allowed her to understand rhythm but also got her a role in the musical "Porgy and Bess" as well as other shows which performed all over the country. (Shuker 38, 39, 54, 76,77)

Because of her horrid experiences with racism she joined the civil rights movement in which she befriended Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Through this movement she connected and married a South African freedom fighter named Vusumzi Make. She moved to Africa with him in 1961, where her writing career took off. She held multiple important positions within newspaper companies in Africa which drew attention to her. Upon returning to the United states she was asked to write an autobiography called *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* which

became a bestseller and compelled her to write 4 more volumes of her autobiography, multiple collections of poems and essays. Because of her success in literature, she was asked to deliver an inaugural speech for a President Bill Clinton, won a Pulitzer Prize, was chosen Woman of the Year in 1976, and appointed chair in American studies at Wake Forest University. Sadly, Maya Angelou died in 2014, but her ability to overcome has inspired countless people around the globe. (MacEachern 36-38)

Being born in the late 1920s, Maya Angelou's position as a poor black woman negatively impacted her status in society's eyes and gave her a disadvantage in life that she had no control over. Her tumultuous family life led to her rape, stabbing, frequent displacement and self-confidence issues. This constant battle with racism and discrimination made a lasting impact on the way she thought about her own culture and the people who discriminate against certain races. Maya Angelou's struggle with self-worth and confidence as well as the tragic occurrences she had to experience in her early life as an African American woman are reflected in some of her most renowned works including "Still I Rise", "Phenomenal Woman" and "The Reunion".

"Still I Rise" demonstrates Angelou's perseverance, confidence, and connection to her African heritage that were not as evident within her at a younger age due to the struggles she faced. This work is a short 9-stanza poem that addresses the oppression and mistreatment of African Americans and repeatedly displays the narrator's resilience through the act of rising up. The narrator, who is clearly female, accuses her oppressors of acting hateful towards her and asks them rhetorical questions concerning their feelings about her attributes. These rhetorical questions are actually quite sarcastic. Although it sounds as though she cares about what they think, her curiosity is only a challenge towards the oppressor to assert her own confidence

through the ensuing metaphorical line, which implies a contrasting positive connotation of her own qualities. After she discusses the negative feelings her antagonizers have towards her she makes them seem insignificant because no matter what they do to/say about her, she repeatedly states that she will rise up. The speaker displays adamant determination to overcome and find success because she states awful things that her oppressor can do to her but simply says “but still...I rise”. Towards the end of the poem, the repression of the African American people as a whole is integrated and their intensified strength as history progresses is acknowledged. Consistently throughout the poem Angelou’s own beliefs and struggles are portrayed through the voice of the speaker. (Bouchard [Database])

Angelou’s courage, determination, perseverance, and strength is comparable to that of the speaker’s. These traits are derived from her immovable belief that one will overcome the unfavorable position they are in (Bloom 54). This faith is derived from her own successful experience of rising up in her life . During her career, she went from living in a small town to becoming a very popular writer, dancer, and actress. In order to find success she had to rise above the racist bias opposed on her by society in a pre-civil rights age. Furthermore, she triumphed over the sexual abuse inflicted by her mother’s boyfriend. Although she did stay silent for around five years, she did not let that one horrible occurrence control her life and take her childhood innocence. Additionally, Angelou rose above racist people who wished to bring her down. Instead of agreeing with their opinion, that she was not worth anything, she was able to believe in herself when others would not, and be motivated by their remarks. (“Explanation of ‘Still I Rise’ [Database])

Also, in the poem, the speaker promises not to surrender in the face of hatefulness. She says “with the certainty of the tides...I’ll rise.” and she repeats “I rise” a great deal which establishes her persistent courageous attitude (Bloom 50) . This persistence is driven by Angelou’s goal of touching the lives of others, especially those who have suffered tremendously like she has. She wants to replace the embarrassment and sorrow in their life with hope and confidence. When faced with dire situations, Angelou uses her inner powers to stay strong and courageous (Bloom 51). Consequently this poem has an empowering mood that convinces the reader that they too are strong and courageous and with a little determination they can persevere like Angelou did in her life. (Neubauer [Database])

The tone of “Still I Rise” is very confident and sassy. Her sassiness is portrayed through the lines “Does my sassiness upset you” and “does my haughtiness offend you”. These sassy, somewhat angry questions are meant to call out white, racist people on their racism and force them to acknowledge their biases (Taylor [Database]). This “sass” is also meant to confront the societal structure in which white males are supreme and threaten them through a form of defiance of the system. The confident tone is quite obvious within the poem. The poem consisted of qualities that the speaker admires in herself, for example; “I dance like I have diamonds at the meeting of my thighs” and “I walk like I’ve got oil wells pumping in my living room”. The speaker is able to recognize her power and understands that she has inner resources that make her strong. The dancing quality of the speaker is a quality that Angelou shared and relished in. Angelou knew that she was a good dancer, and that gave her the confidence and the charisma of a performer that was absent when she was younger. The incorporated dancing attribute actually alludes to the rising Angelou accomplished from a self conscious awkward girl into a confident

young woman, giving more insight into the tone's origin and aiding the development of the rising-based theme. Furthermore, the speaker refers to herself as a "a black ocean, leaping and wide". Through this metaphor the reader correlates the vastness, and power of an ocean with the speaker. This constant recognition of favorable qualities gives a confident tone. ("Explanation of 'Still I Rise' [Database])

Finally, "Still I Rise" is remarkably connected to Angelou's race and its history. The "I" in the title and speaker of the poem is meant to be a representative figure for not only Maya Angelou but also her entire race. Also, Angelou once said that the title refers "to the indomitable spirit of the black people." The poem states;

Out of huts of history's shame...

Up from a past that's rooted in pain...

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear...

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of a slave.

I rise.

There is a clear reference to the intense conflict that African people have had to face. "History's shame" and "a past rooted in pain" allude to the disgraceful enslavement of African Americans. Maya believed that African Americans are obligated to continue the fight for respect and proper treatment because so many who have come before them (slaves and civil rights activists) had to endure much more than what current African Americans live with in the present, in order for them to be where they are now. "I am the dream and the hope of a slave" displays the extensive

progress that African American's have made concerning rights since slavery was abolished.

(Bloom 54-55)

The emphasis on African heritage in the poem is impacted by the connection she felt with her ancestors while experiencing the struggles a black person had to face within her own life. The "nights of terror and fear" and "past rooted in pain" could be referring to Maya Angelou's troubled past as well as her race's. Her childhood in Stamps and her observation of southern plantation workers helped her understand what it must have been like being a southern slave plantation worker (Sienkewicz [Database]). Similarly, her incidents with racism--the KKK almost attacking her family, the dentist refusing to touch her, her having to leave Stamps because she insulted a white person, etc.-- made her able to relate to her ancestors and be more driven to try and stop the unjust treatment of her race. The rising of the narrator in the poem may be a singular person rising above her oppressor but it really symbolizes all African Americans' continued efforts to rise above their unfair status in society and triumph in the face of adversity. The poem, "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou was based on her experiences as a child and how they influenced her as an adult. (Bloom 54-55)

"Phenomenal Woman", another poem by Maya Angelou, displays the power and pride in her womanhood that Angelou had gained even though her beauty did not follow the standards of society. The poem is written in first person and it tells the story of the narrator's self confidence. In the first stanza, she explained that pretty women wonder why she is considered so phenomenal because she does not have the size body or perfect face that is expected within people who society considers beautiful. To answer the pretty women's wonders she describes traits about herself that she believes make her phenomenal. In the following stanza, the narrator explains the

power she has over men due to her unique, phenomenal traits. She remarks that men are drawn to her and then lists even more personal traits to explain why. To conclude, she says that she is so confident with herself that her head is never bowed and unlike many others, she is able to recognize the appeal of her attributes. This leads the reader to infer that her power, and her capability to draw attention stems from that confidence and definition of her womanhood. At the end of the poem, Maya states;

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman

That's me.

This excerpt is also repeated multiple times throughout the work which reinforces the display of confidence.

Similar to “Still I Rise,” it is not actually stated that Maya is the speaker but she could easily be considered the same person. Analogous to the narrator, Maya is an impressive sized woman at around six feet tall so she has a definite presence wherever she goes. The speaker also is said to “not have to talk real loud” because when she is in a room, she becomes the focus of everyone’s attention. Furthermore, as an adult Angelou developed a potent personality and a formidable sense of confidence in herself. The speaker shares these traits and is not afraid to be unique. (Bloom 48-49)

This poem addresses the personal issues of insecurity and appearance that are discernable in many women. At the beginning of the poem it is obvious that she knows that she does not fit the ideal model of beauty in society. It is not her “prettiness” that makes her have

such a high self esteem, it is as though she has something within her that is worth more than physical appearance, something that expresses her individuality. She defines this ‘special something’ with the term “inner mystery” and is aware that it is this trait that makes men drawn to her even when they do not know themselves why they like her. The “Phenomenal Woman” in the poem has overcome insecurity and obtained a strong sense of unwavering self confidence. This confidence is exhibited as she does not find it necessary to “shout or jump about or have to talk real loud”, which are usually ways that insecure people draw attention to themselves. She does not care what other people think because, even if pretty women question her position as a “Phenomenal Woman,” she understands just how phenomenal she really is. By acknowledging the positive attributes she has, the narrator aims to inspire others to also find their positive qualities. She hopes that other people disregard the beauty standards that their society has in place and join her in her personal pride and expression of individuality.

(20th Century-African American Poetry [Database]).

“Phenomenal Woman” also focuses on the power of a woman who is aware of her abilities. The narrator says that when men see her, “they swarm around me, a hive of honey bees.” This illustrates the effect she can have on a man and the control she has over him. She is the metaphorical queen bee of all men and women alike. Just as royalty has power, Angelou also has power and understands the extent to which she can control people. (Explanation of: ‘Phenomenal Woman’ [Database]) Also, the speaker says “now you understand why my head’s not bowed.” This bowed motion alludes to the gestures of a slave when in the presence of a white person; defeated and submissive. This is Angelou’s way of rebelling against subconscious

opinions of the way a black woman should act in a white male dominated society while connecting with her heritage. (Neubauer [Database])

The music-like rhythm of this poem was inspired by the influence of Harlem Renaissance style and writers. The Harlem Renaissance was a period during the 1920s in New York City of advanced creative production of literature as well as other types of arts. A modernistic view of African spirituality was a common theme throughout and chant-like forms were heavily used in poetry. Though Maya Angelou was not even alive during most of this period, major writers of the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes influenced her work in the 20th century. The irregularly patterned yet consistent rhyming within the poem gives it a sort of tune which keeps the reader interested. Also, the repetition of a four-line excerpt after every stanza in “Phenomenal Woman” was formulated from Langston Hughes’ use of repetition in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”. The rhythmic poem, “Phenomenal Woman” expresses Angelou’s standpoint on the importance of self confidence pertaining to characteristics and the power that someone can develop through individuality. (20th Century-African American Poetry [Database]).

Finally, “The Reunion” by Maya Angelou gives insight into Angelou’s life and stance about social injustices through the strikingly similar main character. “The Reunion” is a short story that takes place in a Chicago cafe where a woman by the name of Philomena Jenkins is playing piano with a jazz band as entertainment. As she is introduced by her fellow band member, she sees a familiar face in the crowd-Miss Beth Ann Barker. Miss Barker is the only white person in the club, and with her blonde hair and blue eyes, she stands out. As soon as Philomena sees Beth Ann, she is overcome with hateful, terrible memories of her childhood. It turns out Beth Ann was the daughter of the family that her family worked for as servants as she

was growing up. This hatred fuels her and she loses herself in the music temporarily, thinking of all the things she wants to say to Beth Ann and her family in retribution of the suffering she experienced as a child. After they finish their performance, Philomena goes to the bar and Beth Ann comes up to her and starts talking. It turns out Beth Ann is happily engaged to a black man, and her family disowned her for doing so. Beth Ann talks about how she is now being discriminated against too and she tries to make it seem as though she and Philomena have shared the same experience with discrimination. Philomena has suspicions that Beth Ann is only using their biracial relationship to upset her parents, and that angers Philomena even more. At the conclusion of their conversation, Beth Ann actually invites Philomena to the wedding and Philomena replies by saying, “Good-bye Beth. Tell your parents I said go to hell and take you with them, just for company.” (Jay [Online]) After Beth Ann leaves upset, Philomena experiences a turning point where her hatred turns to sadness for Beth Ann because Philomena realizes that she has much more value than they do, even if they have more money (Peck [Database])

The similarities between Philomena Jenkins and Maya Angelou are remarkable. Like Philomena, Angelou went through discriminatory experiences as a child that made her life a hardship. Philomena has memories of “years of loneliness” from childhood when she was called names as though she was the property of the Bakers. These painful memories and her lasting resentment towards her oppressors was also in Angelou’s life through her inability to trust white people due to the racism she witnessed/experienced. Furthermore, Angelou’s rise to success as a female artist (both literature and performing) in a male dominated world is a trait shared with

Philomena. Philomena takes pride in her musical ability and uses it to express her feelings just as Angelou uses her Literature (art) to voice her own opinions (Ducksworth [Database]).

The most crucial part of the story is Philomena's epiphany concerning her feelings towards Beth Ann and her past oppressors. Beth Ann is just a symbol of all the people who had so much more than her and treated her horribly. This is a turning point, although she cannot get rid of all the pain she has suffered in the past, she suddenly becomes not as weighed down by her experiences. Philomena undergoes a self realization that she is more true to herself than Beth Ann, and that is more important than the social inequality between Beth Ann and her. It progresses to the point where she was crying, not for herself, but for the people like Beth Ann who will never know who they truly are. (Ducksworth [Database])

Art is also an important piece of "The Reunion". When comparing herself to Beth Ann, she says:

She had the money, but I had the music. She and her parents had had the power to hurt me when I was young, but look, the stuff in me lifted me up above them...

I would always be the song struggling to be heard

To Philomena her music was a source of wealth, and her inner wealth is more valuable than actual wealth. Her music can put her on a higher level than Beth Ann and all that she represents. Additionally her music, as well as anyone's 'art' can help them overcome the injustice and pain that they have suffered in the past. Philomena will always fight to stay true to herself and through this quality Angelou hopes others will follow her example and keep struggling to be heard (Peck [Database])

Angelou went through a similar ‘turning point’ as Philomena did, with her struggle to define herself as an African American woman. As a child she was self-conscious about the way she looked, and felt as though she was inferior to the white people because that was what she was told. After she immersed herself in her art she was able to appreciate her self-worth and gain much more confidence that made her the unique writer she became. It was Angelou’s experience with overcoming adversity and insecurity through her literature that influenced the development of the protagonist and conflict of “The Reunion”. (Ducksworth [Database])

In conclusion, Angelou’s unique life experience with racism, and self-doubt as well as her ability to overcome the social inequalities she faced directly affected the attributes of her literary works “Still I Rise”, “Phenomenal Woman”, and “The Reunion”. The poem “Still I Rise” establishes a deep connection with her heritage, illustrates her perseverance, and consistently shows her unwavering confidence. “Phenomenal Woman” gives insight into her literary influences of the Harlem Renaissance, her standpoint on the beauty standards of society, and the definition of her womanhood. Finally, the protagonist in “The Reunion” shares many qualities of Angelou such as a past filled with racism, the effect of her art on her life, and the realization of her true self. Angelou’s writing has the ability to impact countless people’s lives, and the incorporation of her personal experiences/feelings adds to the deep messages that her literature portrays.

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