

Analysis of still i rise

Sociology, Slavery



Maya Angelou, a presence in United States society, has risen against formidable odds. After being raped at age eight and after withdrawing for a couple years, with the help and inspiration of a grade school teacher, Angelou rose to revert herself. Eventually, she became the first African-American street car conductor in San Francisco. She traveled to Africa and asserted herself in dance. Despite the shortening of a brief marriage, Angelou continued to assert herself, drawing inspiration as the mother of her son. Her presentation to the American public-at-large happened with the publication of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The purpose of this research is to focus on the poem, "Still I Rise" to analyze the significance of Angelou's twofold strategy: the impact of the question she poses to the public; and her assertion of her heritage as a foundation for her perpetual advancement. The impact of the question that she poses to the public can be applied in two ways. The first way that Angelou used it was as a woman, for instance she wrote, "Does my sexiness upset you?", and in a stanza prior to that, she wrote, "Does my sassiness upset you?", she used the fact that she was a woman as a way to let men know sensuality and sexiness was okay and at the same time she demanded respect from them. She also posed the question, "Did you want to see my broken? Bowed head and lowered eye?" which to me sounded like a question posed to the white race from the black race. As a black, educated woman in the United States in 1978 when this poem was written, she was posing questions like as these to let the white race that black people can in fact excel and be successful, despite our history of slavery and oppression. In this poem it appeared as if Angelou was tried to show that despite all the trials and tribulations she had

been through all those years, she still managed to prevail in many different ways. Angelou was raped at the young age of eight, and lived in silence for four years, and became a mother at the age of seventeen. She has been through much more, but she also has written many poems, books, traveled worldwide, and used her previous experiences to help others live a better life. "Still I Rise" is a poem that focuses on the courage, survival, and pride in one's self, which can also be applied to the African-American race towards the white race, as well as personally to oneself. In the first stanza Angelou talked about her relationship with history, and body's relationship with the earth. Angelou wrote about how the body can be beaten down into the ground, but will decompose and turn into the earth just as soil and dust do, meaning that our bodies are just flesh but our spirit is what keeps us alive and going after the flesh is damaged. Angelou also asked the rhetorical question, "Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom?" as a question to people in society, because African-Americans, were not looked at very highly back in those times, and women were considered objects that should be told what to do by men, and so the fact that she was so sassy meant that Angelou wasn't just going to sit back and wait for a man to tell her what to do. Angelou also mentioned how she carried herself like she had all the money in the world, which was different for her because she grew up with almost nothing, but that is how you have to be because otherwise people will take advantage of the fact that you don't have much, but if you don't let it get you down, they'll never know. The second stanza shows how you can carry yourself in a positive way even though you may not be perfect or have everything you want. In the third stanza, Angelou related

her attitude with the certainty of nature, and explained how nature and people's hopes are certain facts that will never end. For example, the sun will always rise just like moons, just like the tides and people's hopes will always rise. Maya Angelou described her ability to overcome anything that happened to her in this poem, for example, " You may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise." Angelou seemed as if she may have been addressing someone in this poem, or she may have written it as something for others to have to able to boost their self-confidence. The three middle stanzas basically were Angelou saying that she did, she can, and she will overcome whatever adversity she was faced with. In a way she taunted the reader, by saying something similar to, " You thought I couldn't do it, but look at me now!", then she asked if her level of pride was offensive, and then went on to say that she didn't care if it was. After all the teasing and taunting, Angelou said that you can try to hurt in any way you desire but she will still overcome it. In the third part of the poem Angelou made a reference to her roots and the slavery era, and used her ancestors experience as a resource for her own strength. She also said she must preserve her ancestor's dreams for success in a free world. In the last three stanzas she used questions to draw the reader in and apply it to their own lives. Angelou made it clear that she would rise above the pain and suffering that her ancestors have experienced in order to fulfill their hopes of African-American's living in a free world and being successful. According to Lynn Z. Bloom, " Maya Angelou's literary significance rests upon her exceptional ability to tell her life story as both a human being and a black American woman in the twentieth century." This supports my thinking of the fact that

many of Angelou's writings came from life experiences, and were not just fictional. This is one reason why I believe her literature is so powerful and affects so many people, because really can feel what she went through, instead of thinking that it is some fictitious writing. It seems as though " Still I Rise" has become a poem of empowerment not only to minorities that are trying to make it out of where we once were, but also a poem which can give people the boost of self-confidence that they need, whether they be white or black, or oppressed or not. It could also help people who may be addicted to drugs as encouragement to know that they can recover from their addiction. " Still I Rise", has become a powerful tool for many people mainly because Angelou wrote it in such a way that made it applicable to so many different situations and people, even though when she wrote it initially it was for the people who tried to hold her down in the past, and to the white race for holding black slaves down for so many years. Angelou used questioning in the poem as a way to tell whoever she was directing the questions to as a way to say, " I know what you think of me, and I don't care, because I know what I'm about to do, which is overcome." She used the black and white issue as a way to let the white race know that slavery is in fact over, even though in many areas in society our black community is still very much enslaved, mentally if not physically. But as a personal testimony, Angelou wrote about her own personal struggles as an effort I believe to get our people to wake up and realize that if we just keep on going no matter what come or what goes, we will overcome, we have to overcome because of all the things that our ancestors went through and endured so that our generation could have a better life as African-Americans in this country.

Lyman B. Hagen wrote, " She speaks not only for herself but also for her gender and race. Moreover, Angelou implies that the black race will not just endure, but that in the words of Sondra O'Neale, " will triumph with a will of collective consciousness that Western experience cannot extinguish." This supports my position that Angelou wrote this poem as a way to let the white race know that African-Americans were ready and willing to do whatever they had to do to excel, no matter what. This poem also can be looked at from a feminist point of view because many times women are considered weak or not as strong as men, because of certain stereotypes that our country has given into. But Angelou made it clear that she didn't need a man to validate her life, she was divorced twice, raped by her mother's boyfriend as a child, so it can be assumed that many of the men in her life never had a positive affect, but even though they affected her for some time, she overcame that situation and it made her a stronger person. In a review of " Still I Rise", R. B. Stepto wrote, " But the I of Angelou's refrain is obviously female and, in this instance, a woman forthright about the sexual nuances of personal and social struggle." This supports my thought that the much of the poem is a feminist point of view to men who just take woman as sexual beings, and therefore treated women in that manner for so long, and with this poem she stood up to the male gender and fought back. So overall Maya Angelou used a two fold strategy while writing " Still I Rise", and even though I only discussed two ways that you can look at the poem, it can be viewed in so many different ways. She used the backgrounds of slavery, and the suffering that African-Americans went through to say that we have overcome that and we are continuing to proceed successfully. Angelou also applied the

gender twist to it when questioning about her sexiness, as if it could possibly be a threat to the men, because women are supposed to be so submissive and listen to the man, but Angelou did not and she came out successful and prosperous without the help of a man. The poem was also very appropriate for addictions and struggles that people battle with when many times nobody else knows about them. And most of all Angelou applied it to her own life, and when people see what someone like Angelou has gone through, and then see what she has still managed to accomplish it makes us feel and know that her words are in fact very powerful and there is truth to it. I think that the personal aspect of the poem was more necessary than anything else because if you haven't lived it than how could you possible talk about something you haven't experienced. When Angelou wrote this poem I'm sure she didn't expect it to have the impact that it has had, or affect that it has on so many different types of people. So overall " Still I Rise" was a poem that Maya Angelou used two different strategies on to get across her point that no matter what happens she will overcome it. But then she also wrote it in such a way that black people could relate to, women could relate to, other minorities other than blacks could related to, and anyone else who was facing adversity could also read that poem and feel like they could make it. She took her own problems, dilemmas, and issues, and wrote about them as an effort to let people know that they can make and to also give them hope during whatever they were going through. Endnotes