

# Maya angelou: good writer

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While discussing Shakespeare with a friend the other day I found myself offended when he told me that his opinion of the playwright hardly exceeded an “ eh”. After digging a little deeper, I discovered that he was simply not as impressed with the limited selection of Shakespeare that he has read thus far to propel his interest. And I – however begrudgingly – had to consent to his valid opinion of what “ good writing” is. What is good writing, though? Some authors genuinely are unpleasant, some are decent but have no zest in their work. Some are extraordinary and colorful. Whatever our definition of “ good writing” is, that which triggers us into liking certain works triggers us into admiring the authors themselves, even on their bad days.

That being said, a favorite writer of mine, Maya Angelou, hit the nail on the head with her essay “ A House Can Hurt, A Home Can Heal”, coming from her collection of essays *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*. Having high expectations for her work, I was not let down when I found and read this essay of hers. For all intents and purposes, I would classify this essay as “ good”. But, how am I defining good, you may ask? Well, while reading this excerpt of Angelou’s, I found myself most impressed with the voice she wrote with, the message in her story, and her structure. “ A House Can Hurt, A Home Can Heal” is an essay discussing, oddly enough, Angelou’s last marriage.

She describes the two of them as a “ rather eccentric, loving, unusual couple” (Angelou) early on in the essay. This is to make her audience see the ease, comfort, and genuine love that she and her husband shared.

Confessing to being unusual when love is also a strong part of the mixture. Unfortunately, the central theme of this essay are the events that led to their

divorce. I would identify this essay as something of an anti-love story, for later on we do see signs that her husband genuinely loved her back; when he left, Angelou tells her readers that when she “ walked into the darkened house, [she] was greeted by the aroma of roast chicken... (Angelou).

We know that roast chicken, cold wine, and good cutting bread makes up Angelou’s ideal last meal if she should have had to fly up to Mars the next day. Referencing this very personal moment in her divorce begs not only a much-needed “ aww”, but also creates reliability in what she is saying. Clearly, this story can only be told in Angelou’s voice. As a fan of her, I can identify Angelou’s voice quite easily when I read her poetry. She writes colorfully, and somehow slowly; I’m reminded of pouring honey into a cup of tea. So, when I ventured into reading my first of her essays, I was excited to see that same voice; the voice that loves roast chicken.

Angelou is the type of detailed writer who will describe her first home as “ a futuristic condo that thrusts its living room out over a California Canyon with a daring and an insouciance usually to be found only in a practiced drunk pretending sobriety”, and then turn around to say about her second house that she “ realized the house hated [her]” (Angelou). This contrast allows the reader to anticipate the change in her story. Up until this point, Angelou’s writing has mainly consisted of descriptions. Here, however, we see the story change. As readers, this abrupt change hooks us in, making us want to know more. Why does the house hate her? Is it all in her head? What comes next? Why did she choose the words she did? On the one hand, she is able to manipulate her words into a beautiful story that can paint a real picture; on

the other, she can induce dry humor into her writing with the simplest of efforts.

I find this very impressive. Not every writer can differentiate when it is okay to embellish the world around them, and when to downplay it. Angelou is able to do this by writing what she would say. There is no need, in my opinion, to put on airs when writing, and Angelou avoids just this. The reader therefore feels more relaxed and less intimidated by unnecessarily large vocabulary.

Let's look at one of my favorite poems of hers, " Still I Rise". Stanza two reads thus: 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. (Still I Rise 1) Angelou is very blunt in this poem, no matter how decorative with her words. Although there is not a word in this stanza that a child couldn't use, she puts them together in such a dramatic manner. This really knocks the reader back a peg, for typically – especially in poetry – people expect elaborate words and descriptions in writing. There is a clear difference between speaking and writing, and yet authors like Angelou can write in such a way to simplify eloquence.

I've told you a bit about what Angelou's essay is about, but let's look at her underlying message. This message lies in two spots: The title and the last three paragraphs. The title offers parallels; a house to a home, and hurting to healing. The effect of doing so offers a comparison between simple terminologies. We may invite people over our houses or our homes and they

will get the gist regardless. However, try offering a weeping child help hurting, or try to make a smiling man heal.

By saying that a house can hurt, this gives the connotation of pain in a house, whereas by saying that a home can heal we are given the opposite connotation. And this actually makes sense. A house is technically a simply building meant for inhabitation. Anything can go on in a house, from family-building to squatting. However, the definition of a “ home” is “ a place in which one’s domestic affections are centers.” Relating this back to her essay, Angelou found her marriage being torn apart in these big houses; her husband recognized this phenomenon as well, for he says to her that “ we are simple people and [the house] is too damned pretentious” (Angelou).

She says that “ the house was separating us”, but then describes in the last paragraph her excitement of coming home after traveling when “ I know that soon I will be in a car that will stop on a quiet street in Winston-Salem, and I will step out and be home again” (Angelou). Those last three paragraphs of Angelou’s independence are very powerful in terms of describing the things that go into making a home. Her house began with ten rooms, but after she got a hold of it, those rooms multiplied into 18, including a bedroom for her missing grandson (Angelou). She finds comfort even in pain because she knows that the sanctuary of her home will protect her from the “ physical ailments” (Angelou) of the world. Her words make readers feel the same strength she felt.

In fact, her words make readers experience the same growth that, say, her house underwent while becoming a home. By reading about the

empowerment of someone else, people vicariously feel that same strength well up inside them themselves. Most importantly, she, like many others, loves being settled in a place to call her own. More space for loved ones makes a home; love, even in a divorced woman, makes a home. These factors having been discussed all formulate “ good writing” through the Greek concept of pathos, which plays on emotions to spark a reaction in readers.

Angelou, throughout her essay, describes the effort both she and her husband gave to their dwindling marriage because they truly loved each other. However, when that did not work, neither of them rolled over and gave up. And although we do not know her ex-husband’s story, we know that Angelou remained strong on her feet with a steady head. This is clearly an emotional story, which Angelou’s readers feel sympathy for. As an author of personal experience, she would naturally want her readers to not only become emotional but also relate to her experiences. I think good writers should do this, for it creates a bridge between reader and author through shared emotions.

Therefore, Angelou ignites these emotions in us which cause us to be proud of each other, have empathy for each other, and admire each other. Lastly, and potentially the most superficial yet enjoyable, is the structure of her essay. Angelou is able to pack details into each paragraph, yes, but she knows where to make her cut-offs before the paragraph becomes overwhelming. What’s more, she does so almost comically. I had two favorite instances of this occurrence. The first I mentioned previously, when Angelou states that her second house hated her.

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She ended the paragraph prior to that by describing now only how beautiful, but how accommodating their new house was to their styles of living; specifically Angelou talks about how her art ties the rooms together, how her furniture fits properly in the house (something it did not do in their first home), and how she and her husband take advantage of the spacious living room by adding game tables to entertain guests. The paragraph following this directly begins with, “ Within a month I realized the house hated me” (Angelou). Her readers are left with no other choice but to laugh at the sad irony of her futile attachment. Secondly, the 15th paragraph, however short, adds comic relief to her sad situation as well as a comforting perspective on her search for a new home. The 15th paragraph says thus: “ When I walked into it, the woman who was selling it had the good sense and the wit to be baking gingersnap cookies and fresh bread.

The place reeked of home. The aroma reached out to the landing, put its arms around me and walked me through the front door” (Angelou). By making this warm scene its own paragraph, Angelou provides no distractions to the warm vibe she felt in this house – the house that would become her home. Likewise, the “ good sense and wit” of the realtor was not perturbed for Angelou by anything due to these embracing scents. By this paragraph, we as readers are struck most dramatically by Angelou’s choices as a writer, and how they help to make this essay “ good”. Referencing again her voice, Angelou writes conversationally.

We can almost imagine a voice for her – it sounds like crinkling leaves to me, but that’s just me – due to the relaxed nature of her writing. This is more than “ good” in my opinion; this is beautiful. As a poet, Angelou needs to be <https://assignbuster.com/maya-angelou-good-writer/>

able to hit nerves in her readers that trigger not only those emotions, but also some form of understanding and relatability of her own writing. It is only natural, therefore, that she may do the same in her essay. Thus far I have discussed ways in which Angelou's writing was pleasing – through voice, central concept, and structure.

However, there are ways in which this essay is not as satisfactory as it could be. First of all, there doesn't seem to be any question being answered here. Angelou seems to be writing for the sake of writing. From an unbiased viewpoint, this ambiguity can lead readers array, with no set path of what's going on to follow. This being a non-academic piece of writing, arguably she would not require a question that needs answering.

However, that did not stop Lance Morrow in his essay “ Hoy! Hoy! Mushi-mushi! Allo!” He very clearly stated his point as being, “ The greatest invention in the history of the world was – is – the telephone” (Morrow). The question “ what is the greatest invention ever?” can clearly be assumed, along with other implications, all pointing in the same direction. Morrow's essay is not academic, and yet he still has this question to base his paper on. Moreover, he has some form of a thesis, even if it does merge with the second paragraph; theses need not always be strictly limited to the introductory paragraph. Angelou, however, has no thesis, no idea of what is to come in her paper except a warning of divorce. In fact, she spends what would be her “ intro” as a brief history of her husband's early life before they wed.



That is arguably distracting and irrelevant. But, what makes this ambiguity “good” is its fluidity which allows Angelou to go wherever she wants with her paper. Despite not having any question to focus her essay on, Angelou still answers what it means to be happily divorced. All in all, this is a good piece of non-fiction writing. It invokes emotion, is well-written, relatable, and it makes us readers think. We think of the difference between a house and a home.

We think of the types of people we love and how, no matter how deeply we love and are loved, those people are capable of falling out of our lives. We think about the good and bad in the world, and how these things are classified as such, like Angelou’s divorce. Personally, I can say that my mother, although a divorced woman, finds her greatest happiness in the home she’s building, the children she’s raising, and the dreams that are coming true. Angelou, Maya. “A House Can Hurt, A Home Can Heal.” *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*.

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