

Shoot me down, but i
won't fall

Business



As the famous poet, Maya Angelou, once wrote, “ 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.” (1-4) Angelou’s quote, from her poem *Still I Rise*, is more than just about herself, but rather about a whole race of people in America. The eloquent stanza of poetry sums up the whole African-American civil rights movement: that the Black people of America have made much progress in fighting racism and oppression and that they won’t ever stop the battle to end the bias. Throughout the history of the African-American civil rights movement, poetry has kept track of people’s emotions during the tumultuous time.

From Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *Sympathy* (1899), to Angelou’s *Still I Rise* (1969), black poets have shown the progress the black community has made in creating equality for themselves through expressively written poetry. *Still I Rise* provides a message that is applicable to the African-American civil rights movement as a whole: that no matter what happens to her people, they will never conform to being sub-human, that Caucasians view them. Angelou has taken the key theme, breaking free from others’ views, and she has incorporated the idea into the very foundation of the poem, from the poetic meter to the placement of words. The first six stanzas of *Still I Rise* are written in iambic quatrains, a traditionally European form of poetry. The poet has taken a very strict meter and transformed it into a more African-American perspective, incorporating themes of oppression and rising against it. This transformation can be interpreted as a form of appropriation, as she is taking what is customarily a European type of poetry and molded it into something that fit her views.

The following two stanzas are free verse, which is most certainly not a white staple mark. This change shows that she is indeed showing that her people will not conform to what is thought of African-Americans. The usage of the words " I Rise" is also a very important part of the poem. As the poem increases in intensity, so does the usage of the two words. During the first six stanzas of the poem I Rise is used three times: at the end of the first stanza, third stanza and sixth stanza.

In the following two stanzas the words are used seven times, twice the amount they were previously. When the usage of the words I Rise increases, so too does the progression from mostly negative words to more positive ones. As Angelou ' breaks free' of the Caucasian view of black people, she uses the words I Rise more as if calling to her people to rise against oppression and be free. Another aspect of this poem is the multiple usages of natural metaphor. From " Just like moons and like suns / With the certainty of tides" (9-10) to " I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide" (29), Angelou constantly uses the ever rising and falling of natural things to represent African-American people.

Though the moon and sun may disappear, they will always return and similarly, so will her people, she seems to say. She also contrasts the clarity daybreak brings and the terror and fear the night gives and uses them to perhaps represent both the good and the bad times black people have suffered throughout the black civil rights movement. In order to further her ' breaking free' message, Angelou also juxtaposes upwards and downwards imagery to create an effect similar to the natural metaphors. In the first stanza, she uses words such as " down" and " trod" to create a downward

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effect, countering with the word “ rise.” The poet continues this juxtaposition in the fourth stanza, with the words “ bowed head,” “ lowered eyes,” “ falling down” contrasting the word “ rise” once more. Though there may seem to be a lot more downwards imagery than upwards, putting the word rise at the end puts extra emphasis on the importance of the word, making the positive language mightier and more powerful than the more abundant downwards words.

As the African-American civil rights movement progressed and evolved, so too did the poetry that was written during that time. However, there was always one constant: the poems always spoke about freedom. Poems which came from the early and mid 1900's were all about wanting freedom, but not actually receiving it. It was not until Angelou's *Still I Rise* that poetry appears which actually talks about attaining freedom. In poems such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Sympathy*, birds are used extensively to portray the need for freedom.

As quoted from *IKWtCBS*, “ The caged bird... sings of freedom” (15-23) as well as, “[The caged bird] sings / With a fearful trill / Of things unknown/ But longed for still” (38-41). In the earlier stages of this historic movement, the birds (and thus the black people) were only talking about freedom as something they desperately wanted, not something they could achieve.

All the hard work and effort the African-American people put into creating equality leads up to the line “ I am the dream and the hope of the slave” (36) in Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*. Angelou is now the epitome of a slave's hopes and dreams, all because she is free to do whatever she wants with her life.

Poems about the African-American civil rights movement featuring non-human characters diminished as the movement faded because the African-Americans themselves were becoming the main figure in their own poetry. Black people no longer needed the crutch of a non-human protagonist in order to portray their feelings because they may do so in their own skin. If you were to look at several titles of poems from the civil rights movement, you would notice that poems written earlier have much more depressing and negative titles.

Poems such as *Dreams Deferred*, *The Weary Blues* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are all examples of this negativity in titles of poetry. Once more, as time moves forwards, the titles of poems become much more positive, shown in poems *Still I Rise*, and *Praise Song for the Day*. This change from negative to more positive titles most definitely shows that the civil rights movement does progress and change for the better. Though there are several differences between poems from both the early and late stages of the civil rights movement, all of the poems have contrasting ideas between being free and being oppressed. Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* the principal theme of the poem centres around comparing and contrasting the life of a free bird and the life of a caged bird.

The comparison is constantly brought up with the usage of ' the free bird...' or ' the caged bird..

.' at the beginning of almost every stanza. Even the most modern of this collection of poems, Angelou's *Still I Rise* (1969), contains contrasting lines between freedom and being oppressed for having a different skin tone. The

poet writes that she rises “ Out of the huts of history’s shame” (25) and “ Leaving behind nights of terror and fear / I rise” (31-32). Angelou is using words which contrast each other extremely to give the reader a sense of being freed from imprisonment and fear.

Still I Rise is a successful accumulation of all that the African-American people have worked towards in equality and freedom, making it the perfect poem in which to end a civil rights unit. An important part of this evolution came from education. After slavery was abolished and schools became integrated, education became much more accessible and important to the African-American population, and Caucasian people were able to get used to being around people of a different skin tone. Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem We Real Cool is set in the 1920’s, shortly after the 13th amendment was created, uses the line “ We leave school” representing the lack of importance schooling has for black people during the time. Later on, Langston Hughes says “ I am the only colored student in my class.” The progression shows that, in the very least, education has gained some value with time.

Eventually, education became standard for the average African-American, to the point that in Angelou’s Still I Rise, she uses white symbols of power and wealth and its able to make them her own. For example, Angelou says ““ Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells / Pumping in my living room.” The poet would not have been able to do that without the schooling she received. This also may show students in their own classrooms how important knowledge and the ability to learn is, so as to not remain ignorant about matters that may affect oneself. As time passed on during the African-American civil

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rights movement, people went through a flood of emotions, which in turn showed in their poetry. These emotions originally started off hopeless and negative, and as the Black people resisted oppression and eventually overcame it, African-American poetry started to become empowering and positive.

A good example of such a evolution are both Dunbar's poem *Sympathy*, and *Still I Rise* by Angelou. *Sympathy* contains a lot of violent imagery with descriptions of "[red] blood ... on the cruel bars;" and the bird beating his bars in attempts to free himself. Approximately seventy years later, the civil rights movement has progressed so much that Angelou is able to control her own fate without having to resort to any violence. Similarly, as African-Americans are slowly introduced to freedom, they write about it very differently than the once might have. In *Sympathy*, the bird is imprisoned and is longing to leave its cage and fly free, but cannot do so. This shows that the poet view freedom as something very desirable, but ultimately unattainable.

The poem *The Weary Blues*, the black man playing the piano is in fact a free man, although he feels utterly hopeless because the Caucasian people still treat him as though he was still 'caged.' When Hughes writes *Theme for English B*, African-Americans are starting to become more hopeful, as they are beginning to be treated not quite as badly as before. Finally, in 1969, Angelou poem *Still I Rise* is both hopeful, and extremely empowering as she is finally equal to any Caucasian man or women. These experiences of freedom show the progression to equality that the black people have ever so deliberately progressed towards, and that they have finally achieved it. As <https://assignbuster.com/shoot-me-down-but-i-wont-fall/>

society has progressed and evolved, so too has their view on African-American people.

This change in view is a result of the massive steps black people have made in opposing racism and oppression. Black poets have been instrumental in documenting this difficult time and *Still I Rise* a perfect example of the successful African-American civil rights movement and how Angelou and her people will never stop fighting oppression. The poem is both empowering and sanguine, also making it a perfect poem for Explorations 9 to end their current unit on Civil Rights Poetry.