Dylan Rainey

Professor Anderson

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“And Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou was a famous American poet, autobiographer, and civil rights activist who lived from 1928-2014. She lived in Winston-Salem, NC in her later years, the same city I grew up in, and ever since I can remember I felt a sense of wonder and fascination whenever I heard her name. My childhood friend lived right next to her and I would always stare at her house as we drove by, imagining her sitting at her desk still writing poetry, even though she had already accomplished so much by then. Growing up in the southern United States in the 1930s and 40s as an African-American woman, Angelou experienced racism and discrimination throughout her childhood, and quickly found the value of the spoken word and poetry as an avenue for her to promote hope and reform in a prejudiced society (Poetry Foundation). Having written many impactful poems and autobiographies throughout her life, there are many powerful ones to read, but I chose to analyze her poem “And Still I Rise” as it highlights the fortitude of the human spirit and the perseverance that is especially found in African-Americans, who have historically fought for justice and equality throughout modern history. As we have seen in the past months, despite the continued murdering of African-Americans by police officers, African-Americans continue to stand up against this racism and peacefully protest against these injustices rather than back down and accept these actions as the status quo.

In “And Still I Rise”, Angelou discusses racism in society but is able to use a positive tone that allows her African-American readers to feel pride in their life despite the society that seeks to undermine them. As I noted above, the poem is very relevant to the present day as African-Americans continue to rise above the racism in our country and push for reform (Sangeetha). In the poem, it is clear that Angelou has the strength to carry on against the hate-filled society in which she has lived and not allow others to determine her success. On top of having this declaration of perseverance herself, the poem also calls for other African-Americans to rise above the society they live in as well. In the poem, Angelou makes statements about herself including her strength as a black woman, and declares to those in society who want to knock her down that she will continue to rise above their hatred and racism (Corfman). In her conversation with Claudia Tate from 1989, Angelou speaks on the subject of the poem, saying “The title poem of “And Still I Rise” refers to the indomitable spirit of black people (Angelou & Tate).

Angelou is a very skilled writer takes her time in crafting her art, she has used various figures of speech throughout her writing career to help her gain control of her writing. In her conversation with Claudia Tate, she discusses this process when asked by Tate what her responsibility is as a writer, Angelou replies “My responsibility as a writer is to be as good as I can be at my craft. So I study my craft. I don't simply write what I feel, let it all hang out. That's baloney. That's no craft at all. Learning the craft, understanding what language can do, gaining control of the language, enables one to make people weep, make them laugh, even make them go to war. You can do this by learning how to harness the power of the word. So studying my craft is one of my responsibilities” (Angelou & Tate). Angelou exhibits this control with the use of repetition in the poem “And Still I Rise”. Angelou repeats variations of the phrase “Still I Rise” at the end of multiple stanzas in the poem after stating actions racists and discriminators take against her. For example, in the first stanza Angelou writes *“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.”* and later in the sixth stanza she writes, *“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.”* In both of these instances, Angelou takes control of her writing with repetition to emphasizes her unshakable spirit that pushes on against the hatred she has endured as a black woman in America. She also uses repetition here as she repeats the word “you” as she is directly speaking to her oppressors, showing her fearless and unwavering determination to keep pushing forward in spite of their attempts to beat her down. Angelou literally skills are abundant here as she is also weaving in similes in these lines as well as other lines in the poem, for example in the third stanza of the poem, *“Just like moons and like suns, With the certainty of tides, Just like hopes springing high, Still I'll rise,”* in the fifth stanza *“Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines, Diggin’ in my own backyard,”* and in the seventh stanza, *“That I dance like I've got diamonds, At the meeting of my thighs?”* These similes allow the reader to visualize her spirit to rise against those trying to devalue her life, like how one can envision “dust” rising from the ground. The two latter similes quoted, which are also the last 2 similes in the poem, demonstrate Angelou’s pride in her heritage and race as a black woman. She highlights her great laughter and dancing that is unique to her identity as an African-American and she chooses to show off these attributes despite the judgement of those who get upset or offended to hear or see these traits in a black woman.

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