

Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou - all of these people have one very important characteristic: resilience. These people were able to break free of the oppression set on them by years of racism and stereotypes. Maya Angelou, a woman who was revered for her writing and success, is an important member of this nation's history. In her story Graduation, she offers a glance into her life as a young girl in the oppressive 1940's. By manipulating diction and tone throughout the story, Maya Angelou emphasizes the effect of racism during the time period and gives hope to those discriminated against.

“I was going to be lovely. A walking model of all the various styles of fine hand sewing and it didn't worry me that I was only twelve years old and merely graduating from the eighth grade.”

Maya Angelou describes a time in her life that was busy with preparation; her graduation ceremony, one of the most anticipated events of the school year, has finally arrived. She and her schoolmates rehearse the motions, parents buy and make special clothing for their children, and gifts are prepared. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that this is an important day. The diction in these earlier paragraphs is very lighthearted and jubilant. Maya Angelou uses this to describe the importance of the event, the preparation put into the event, the event itself, and the clothes. She describes, in detail, the care and consideration put into the dress that she will wear for her eighth grade graduation ceremony. An example of this is, “..and Momma launched out on mine. She smocked the yoke into tiny-crisscrossing puckers, then shirred the rest of the bodice. Her dark fingers ducked in and out of the lemony

cloth as she embroidered raised daisies around the hem.” By using words like “tiny-crisscrossing”, “lemony cloth”, and “embroidered raised daisies”, she thoroughly describes the amount of work put in her dress. Similar to that of the diction, the tone of the earlier paragraphs is very lyrical and sincere as Maya Angelou describes the event unfolding. The morning when which her mother makes ‘Sunday breakfast despite it being only Friday’, is described in great detail. The book she is given containing a collection of Edgar Allan Poe’s poems is significant to the plot as it can be linked for her passion for literature. The amount of preparation and concern put into the graduation ceremony signifies its importance.

“Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called.”

Similar to that of a tsunami, the joy and excitement from the earlier paragraphs rapidly changes into an altogether more morbid and depressing one. Her rage, disgust, and shame casts a veil over her diction, making it dark and hate-filled. Her descriptions of her thoughts and emotions become much darker and morbid. The words of Mr. Edward Donleavy crushes the audience and their accomplishments, and Maya realizes it. That, despite their effort and consideration, this ceremony is nothing in the eyes of a successful white man. He limits them. He belittles their accomplishments, their heroes, their school. Sentences like, “We should all be dead.”, “The ugliness they left was palpable. An uninvited guest that wouldn’t leave.”, and “The accomplishment was nothing.” Hold key words like “dead”, “ugliness”, and “nothing” that reveals her malice and bitterness. Along with the diction, the tone goes through a significant development. As she describes her emotions in great detail, the passage turns into a more of a morose and malicious one. The effect of Mr. Edward Donleavy’s words has a major impact

on the tone. After he finishes speaking, the pride that Maya once felt immediately vanishes, turning into shame. The effect of Edward Donleavy's racism is lasting, staining the much-anticipated event with disgust. Phrases such as, "He told us of the wonderful changes we children in Stamps had in store. The Central School (naturally, the white school was Central) had already been granted improvements that be in use in the fall." and "Nor were we to be ignored in the general betterment scheme he had in mind." reveals his true reason for being there. He doesn't care about their accomplishments, their school, or even them as human beings. He cares about being reelected. He does not address their accomplishments, just their school. It is as if he is amazed that African Americans can excel, despite being segregated into a run-down school. It is as if Maya Angelou cannot bear to be proud of her accomplishments, cannot bare to be proud of her graduation, cannot bear to be herself in the face of racism.

"We were on top again. As always, again. We survived."

As the anger fades away from the previous paragraphs, Maya Angelou begins rebuilding the spirits of the audience. The diction in the last few paragraphs goes through yet another transformation. Emerging from the dark and depressing middle section of the passage, the words morph into a more inspiration variety. Maya Angelou realizes that, despite the limitations put on her by Mr. Edward Donleavy and his associates, that she is still proud of her ethnicity and the work that they can accomplish. The 'Negro National Anthem' is the turning point. Where the shame that the audience feels is exchanged for hope and pride. An example of this is, "The tears that had slipped down many faces were not wiped away in shame." The phrase "were not wiped away in shame." is extremely powerful. It represents the

resilience of these people, how they can still take pride in their accomplishments despite being repeatedly belittled. The tone, once again linked to the diction, is altered as the passage ends, turning into more of a hopeful one. Accompanied by the diction, the tone successfully changes once again. It inspires hope in the reader, a breath of fresh air compared to the previous paragraphs. Maya breaks free of the 'shackles' set on her and immediately feels pride once again. While not necessarily upbeat, it is content.

Maya Angelou was a victim to the oppression and racism of the 1940's. She grew from it, processed it, and turned it into something beautiful. Despite the limitations put on her as a young girl, she broke through the hate and fear and made a life for herself. This passage is a brief glance into her life as a girl, what made her who she grew up to be. Her writing in an unique first-person account of the horrors of racism and how someone can flourish from it. She is an inspiration to those who have been discriminated against, a beacon of light during one of the darkest periods in American history.