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### Confidence and Strength in Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

Whether it is based on race, gender or sexuality, an important part of systemic oppression is teaching people to hate themselves. To this day African Americans are taught to be ashamed of the colour of their skin and women to be insecure about their bodies, and by debasing these aspects of their identities, they become more easily exploited by others. In her powerful 1978 poem "Still I Rise", Maya Angelou challenges the idea that as a black woman she must be fearful, apologetic and ashamed of who she is. Using various literary devices, she shows that with pride and self-confidence, she not only endures hardship, but thrives against it.

Angelou's first device is the poem's informal and defiant tone. The poem uses everyday language filled with colloquialisms and relaxed grammar, such as in the abbreviation "'cause" and in the teasing line "Don't you take it awful hard" (7, 18-19). This makes the poem disarmingly familiar, and shows Angelou's comfort in being her unfiltered, unadorned self. The poem frequently asks rhetorical questions that call out and mock society for being offended by her haughtiness and upset by her sassiness and sexiness (17, 5, 25); in other words, for being bothered by her unexpected confidence and strength. Through this relaxed yet bold use of tone, Angelou shows she is not the broken and weakened woman she is supposed to be (13, 16).

The second device is the poem's structure. The first seven stanzas are quatrains, each with an ABCB rhyme scheme, and are quite repetitive, such as in the repetition of "You may" throughout stanzas one and six and in the similar format of stanzas two, five and seven. This plain, symmetrical structuring contrasts and highlights the poem's vivid language while also making it even more deliberate and direct. The poem's last two stanzas break free of the quatrain with alternating long and short lines that quickly increase the pace. Thus where the first stanzas show Angelou's buildup of strength, the last two mirror her final rise above adversity.

Finally, there is the use of metaphorical language. Throughout the poem Angelou describes the society that oppresses her using human actions, saying society can "shoot", "cut", "kill", "trod" and "write [her] down" (21-24, 1-3). However, Angelou describes herself using nature metaphors, comparing herself to "moons", "suns" and "a black ocean, leaping and wide" (9, 33), and so characterizes herself as indomitable, eternal and beautifully grand. Most notably, in lines 7, 19 and 27 she describes herself as rich in oil, gold and diamonds – all pieces of nature highly coveted by man. Yet these treasures are hidden in her living room and backyard and the meeting of her thighs, kept for Angelou alone and nobody else. Thus, Angelou symbolizes taking ownership of parts of her identity that have long been exploited by others.

With these three devices of tone, structure and metaphorical language, "Still I Rise" delivers a compelling message of resilience and self-love. Although from the perspective of a black woman, this message resonates with anyone struggling to accept and celebrate all aspects of who they are.

Word Count: 514

Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." *poets.org*. Academy of American Poets, n.d. Web. 30 January

2016. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/still-i-rise>