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Still I Rise: The Relationship of Form and Content

In Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*, the speaker addresses the issues of racism, sexism, and discrimination of minorities, which unfortunately, still prevail in society today. Through its effective form and content, this poem offers a glimpse into one woman's struggle with debilitating emotions and feelings infused by constant oppression, and how she finds positivity and strength in herself to stand up to her accusers and rise up against injustice.

First and foremost, the speaker of this text is an African-American woman, presumably the author herself, who speaks in a first-person narrative. Referring to her as "I", she addresses another individual "you", whom may be interpreted either as a white man, perhaps of higher socio-economic status, or the white population as a whole. Throughout the text, the speaker's calm yet confident voice interrogates her accuser with rhetorical questions. This defensive argument against her persecutor's accusations indirectly reveals what "I" is persecuted for. Like the black race maltreated by white people during the civil rights movement, "you" despises "I" for being happy, proud, sassy, sexy, instead wanting her to feel down and destroyed. However, "I" is not afraid to stand up to injustice and acts as an inspiration for others in her position. The reader connects with the "I" in the poem, resonating with the afflicted person who evokes feelings of empowerment and confidence, making the accuser feel powerless, speechless.

Moreover, each time a threat or accusation is made, "I" will always rise. The repetition of the phrase "I'll rise" exudes confidence and encourages the reader also to rise. Although

ambiguous as to what “I” specifically rises to, from the context, it can be inferred that “I” uses these positive affirmations at the end of nearly every stanza to rise above discrimination. The speaker earns respect and recognition as a truly intelligent individual who seems to non-aggressively and effortlessly rise above those who shame her. By stating “I will rise”, the speaker indirectly informs the reader precisely what “I” will not do, for instance, “I” will not give up, feel hurt or insignificant. Near the end of the poem, the reader senses a shift, as the statements change from “I’ll rise” to “I rise”. This powerful transition affirms the speaker has moved beyond the stage of contemplation of rising in the future, to rising now. The repetition of “I rise” thrice upon conclusion brings a strong finish to the poem, with the speaker’s voice perhaps becoming louder and more certain each time.

Furthermore, this poem uses numerous metaphors and analogies to depict one’s struggle in equality. For instance in the last stanza the author writes, “Leaving behind nights of terror and fear / I rise / Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear” (35-37). She uses the contrast of night and day to symbolize leaving her dark, painful past behind and starting a new life with revived strength and determination. Although abuse and discrimination have prevailed through her life, the speaker has the will to become the light amidst the darkness, representing the truth and goodness of a bitter, segregated nation. Her persistence in fighting towards equality serves as an inspiration for people who do not yet have the courage or ability to stand up for themselves.

Maya Angelou’s *Still I Rise* is a poem deeply rooted in carefully chosen literary devices with the intent of expressing the struggle of oppression due to race, gender and life as a minority. At first glance, the language of the text may seem quite simple, however, the quality of the voice that galvanizes the written word effectively catches a reader’s attention and brings awareness to the issue of discrimination.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise". 1978. Print.