

Poetry
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Lecture 58
Maya Angelou

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Maya Angelou (1928-2008)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Maya Angelou
- Self-Esteem and Self-Expression
- “Phenomenal Woman”
- “Still I Rise”
- Analysis
- Self-Acceptance and Celebration



The first poet we have chosen to discuss for this topic Feminist Poetry is, Maya Angelou. You can understand the reason, one of the best poets, one of the most popular poets, one of the most remarkable women of twentieth century, born in 1928 and who died in 2008.

First, we will see the historical and Literary Context and then we will see her life briefly; focusing on the two aspects which really made the woman self-esteemed and self-expression. Discuss two poems “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise.” We will analyse them and then finally give importance to two concepts self-acceptance and celebration, which are very important for everybody, not only for woman.

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Historical and Literary Context



- The Great Depression of 1929
- Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s: *Crisis* (1910- ...)
- Harlem Writers Guild in New York in 1950
- The Black Arts Movement: *Freedomways* (1961-1985)
- The Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968)
- The Anti-War Movement (1964-1973)
- Frost's Inaugural poem in 1961 for President Kennedy
- **Mainstream and African American literature**
- Slave Narratives and African American Narratives
 - Booker T Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1901)
 - Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945)
 - Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy"
 - Georgia Douglas Johnson's poem "The Heart of a Woman"



Here we have the Historical and Literary Context. Maya Angelou was born in this time; The Great Depression of 1929 and she had this opportunity of watching this Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's. The magazine of this Harlem Renaissance is called 'Crisis,' which promoted African-American and their writings. Harlem Writers Guild was established in 1950 of which Maya Angelou became a member later on.

She witnessed this Black Arts Movement and the magazine called Freedomways, published in 1961 and continued upto 1985. Angelou had the chance of participating in this Civil Rights Movement held from 1954 to 1968. In fact, Maya Angelou organised several activities for Malcom X and also for Martin Luther King. At this time, we also witness this anti-war movement from 1964 to 1973. A culturally significant event took place when Robert Frost read this 'Inaugural poem' in 1961 for President Kennedy.

We have this distinction between mainstream and African-American literature. This African-American literature is represented by slave narratives and African-American narratives. We have two autobiographies and two poems here; Booker T Washington's autobiography, 'Up from Slavery' 1901, Richard Wright's autobiography 'Black Boy' in 1945. And two poems; one called Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" and another one Georgia Douglas Johnson's poem, "The Heart of a Woman." These two poems are important for Maya Angelou because these two poems gave two titles for her famous autobiographies; 'I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings,' from "Sympathy" and "The Heart of a Woman" from Johnson's poem.

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Maya Angelou (1928-2008)

- Born Marguerite Annie Johnson
- Lived Maya **Angelou** (from **Angelos**)
- Married twice but found her own ways in life
- Incredible journey from a muted woman to a vocal poet
- Joined forces with Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Poet, autobiographer, essayist
- Performer, producer, lecturer
- **MA: M – Motivation; A – Achievement**
- Mrs. Flowers turned Marguerite (Maya) into a poet
- Mr. Clinton transformed her into a national poet in 1993 when she recited “On the Pulse of Morning”



Let us see the life of Maya Angelou now. She was born Marguerite Annie Johnson but she lived Maya Angelou throughout her life and she got this name Angelou from her first husband's surname Angelos. She dropped 'S' and added 'U' on the advice of her well-wishers. She married twice but found her own ways in life. Her life was an incredible journey from a muted woman to a vocal poet.

She joined forces with Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr during The Civil Rights movement. She was a poet, auto biographer, essayist, performer, producer, and lecturer and many other forms she took in her life. Maya Angelou, this MA can be understood as motivation and achievement put together. She was motivated enough to achieve all that she got in her life. We have a very important woman in her life, Mrs. Flowers who read some passages from her library and turned this Marguerite into a poet.

Later one, when she was a popular woman, Mr. Clinton transformed her into a national poet in 1993 by asking her to recite this poem, this inaugural poem “On the Pulse of Morning.” Maya Angelou was a second poet after Robert Frost to have this privilege of reading an inaugural poem, that is why we refer to Robert Frost earlier in the historical and literary context.

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What motivated Maya Angelou to become the woman she became? Self Esteem and Self Expression: these are the two keys to understand the personality of Maya Angelou. She had some good mentors like James Baldwin and Robert Loomis, who challenged her to write her own autobiography. Initially she started with *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*, in 1969. Later on, she came out with many volumes about her own life. These were well received by the public and the critics. She also wrote five volumes of poetry, “*And Still I Rise*” is the third volume published in 1978, which has number of famous poems including the “*Phenomenal Woman*” and “*Still I Rise*.” These poems became much more popular when she performed these poems on stage in front of audience. These are available on YouTube. Please search for Maya Angelou and her poems. You will see the videos and you must watch Maya Angelou’s performance to understand the spirit of the woman.

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Background

"Phenomenal Woman"

- Dramatic - I and You
- Free verse; Four verse paragraphs and 60 lines
- Recitative/ mnemonic power
- Feminist self-assertion

"Still I Rise"

- Lyrical, celebratory, assertive
- 10 quatrains plus, 43 lines
- Celebration of the rise of women
- Racial and gender (marginal) identity



We have some background information for these poems "Phenomenal Woman" and "Still I Rise." "Phenomenal Woman" is a dramatic poem; there is an address between a man and a woman. It is written in the form of a free verse. We have four verse paragraphs and sixty lines. This has a power which can be called recitative or mnemonic power and the whole poem is all about feminist self-assertion.

The second poem, "Still I Rise" is lyrical. It is celebratory and self-assertive. It has 10 quatrains and also 3 other lines; that is why we call it 10 quatrains plus; we have the celebration of the rise of women in this poem. The poem deals with the racial and gender identity, how a woman could rise and rise in spite of all the odds against her.

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Phenomenal Woman - I

- Beautiful women may wonder about the secret of power and success in the speaker and so she explains:

"I say," (*declaration and assertion in all four stanzas*)
[my arms,... my hips,... my step,... my lips.]

"I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me." (*refrain in all four stanzas*)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48985/phenomenal-woman>



First, we will deal with 'Phenomenal Woman,' we are not able to read the whole poem because of copyright reasons. We have given the source to Poetry foundation. We can find this poem in the text, Norton Anthology of poetry as well. This poem deals with the concept of beauty. So, she describes the difference between beautiful woman and not so beautiful woman. And how do these not so beautiful women get their power, that is the whole poem.

So, initially, we have this discussion on how beautiful woman may wonder about the secret of power and success in the speaker and so she explains. She says, "I say, I say, I say" in this poem. It is a kind of declaration. We find this declaration and assertion in all the four stanzas. She says about her arms, hips, step, lips and all that. These are all her physical features which have contributed to her strength. And so, she says,

"I am a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman
That's me."

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48985/phenomenal-woman>

These four lines are a kind of refrain we find in all the four stanzas. 'I say' is repeated, similarly 'I am a woman phenomenally, phenomenal woman, that's me;' she repeats in all the four stanzas.

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Phenomenal Woman, II and III

Lines 14-20

- When she moves into a room, she is surrounded by men "like a bee of hives"

Lines: 30 -36

- She explains her "inner mystery" (34) but men cannot see it nor touch it.



We have summarised one stanza here from lines 14 to 20. She talks about moving into a room. When she moves into a room, she is surrounded by men “like a bee of hives.” That means there is some attraction in her that is why men gather around her. And in the second section that is from lines 30 to 36, she tries to explain some inner mystery in her but men cannot understand it. Men cannot see it nor touch it; that is why she celebrates her difference, her unique feature or her unique intelligence or whatever she has inside.

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Phenomenal Woman -IV

Lines 52-56

- She explains her mysterious source of her power, which is in her walk, in her hair, in her palm, and in her care.
- She has showcased the power of being a woman, a tall, skinny, and gap-toothed black woman.

“Cause I’m a **woman**
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal **woman**,
That’s me.”

60



Then we come to the fourth stanza where in lines 52 to 56, she explains her mysterious source of her power which is in her walk, in her hair, in her palm and in her care. She has thus showcased the power of being a woman- a tall, skinny and gap-toothed black woman. Actually, initially she was a bit upset about her own personality but later on, she overcame all these difficulties of being a tall, skinny and gap-toothed woman, finally became a phenomenal woman. And this could happen to any woman for that matter, that is why she sings,

“Cause I am a woman,

phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That’s me.”

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Thematic Contrast

- Unpretty women and Pretty Women
 - Lie and Truth
 - Woman and Man
 - Phenomenal and Ordinary
 - Outer appearance and Inner Mystery
 - Body and Soul
 - Self-respect and Self-suspect
 - Success and Failure
 - I and You
- Assertion against discrimination and oppression



Now, let us see the Thematic Contrast between unpretty women and pretty women. Pretty woman feels happy about themselves and they wonder when unpretty women become successful and the whole poem is a kind of explanation of a unpretty women to all pretty women. There is a lie and also truth, a woman and man, ordinary and phenomenal, and outer appearance and inner mystery. And this whole poem deals with that kind of inner mystery, of course, through this outer appearance. This outer appearance is in the body and the inner mystery is in the soul.

And this soul and this inner self has to exemplify that kind of self-respect. Omitting or disregarding the self-suspect that maybe imposed on her and then only she can achieve success and ward off failure in her life. This woman, 'I' is successful against 'You,' not only men here she includes women also, beautiful women, who maybe a kind of hindrance for unpretty women or ugly women. The whole poem is an assertion against discrimination and oppression both by men and also by beautiful women. That is a beautiful aspect of this poem.

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Poetic Devices

- **Repetition:** words, phrases, lines
- **Diction:** Common words
- **Refrain:** last four lines in each stanza
- **Assonance:** But when I start to tell them (3)
It's in the click of my heels (53)
- **Alliteration:** The stride of my steps (8)
- **Metaphor:** Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees (19-20)
- **Metaphor:** fire in my eyes (21) Honeybee and sun
- **Personification:** the joy in my feet (25)
- **Anaphora:** I say (the beginning of four declarations)
- **Pun/ Metaphor:** The sun of my smile (39)



We have a number of poetic devices in this poem, many words are repeated. Words, phrases, lines, we refer to I say, and the refrain phenomenal woman. We have common words in the whole poem; nothing is strange in this poem. The last four lines in each stanza are considered to be refrain. And we have Assonance in these two lines:

“But when I start to tell them,
It’s in the click of my heels.”

We have highlighted those sounds which form this assonance. When that is ‘a’ and ‘in’ or ‘e,’ in the second line. We have alliteration in, “The stride of my steps.” Metaphor in, “Then they swarm around me,” ‘a hive of honey bees.” Again, we have another metaphor in; “Fire in my eyes, Honeybee and sun.” We also have personification in “the joy in my feet.” She concretises her joy which is found in her own feet. We have Anaphora “I say,” it begins the declarations. Then we have Pun plus Metaphor in “The sun of my smile.” Maya Angelou had a son even before she was married and this son was very precious for her. The Sun of my smile could be this son and also the actual sun which gives light for all of us.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Form:** Four stanzas, unequal number of lines; 60 lines
- **Line Length:** Mostly short lines: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 syllables
- **Rhyme:** occasional rhymes; hips, lips; please, knees, bees, teeth, feet; much, touch; smile, style
- **Rhythm:** **iamb** and anapest in the extract.
- **Meter:** Polymetrical
- **Enjambment and End-stopped lines:**

I say,
It's | in the click | of my heels
The bend | of my hair,
the palm | of my hand,
The need | for my care.



We have four stanzas in this poem, they are unequal in lines lengths but totally we have 60 lines. Some of them are short lines and some of them are as long as 6 syllables nothing more. We have occasional rhymes in his poem. We have listed those words hips, lips, please, knees, bees, teeth, feet, much, touch, smile, style. The rhythm we find in this extract we have here is, I am an anapaest.

In the whole of the poem, we have many other kinds of rhythm as well like Trochee and Spondee, therefore, we call this meter of this poem polymetrical. We have some enjambment and end-stopped lines in this passage;

“I say,
It's | in the click of my heels
The bend | of my hair,
the palm | of my hand,
the need | for my care.”

If you watch Maya Angelou performing, you will see her jumping and moving and still rising as a phenomenal woman.

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Overall Impression

- Maya Angelou realized that she was a phenomenal woman and proved it in her life and her writings, specially in this poem on “Phenomenal Woman.”
- She understood what she could achieve with her physical features, arms, hips, lips, eyes, teeth, waist, feet, back, breasts, smile, style, heels, hair, hand and care. [Lupita Nyong'o's “Essence of Beauty”]
- She became a singer, dancer, actor, writer, reporter, editor, manager, secretary, organizer, and many more.
- Being a woman or a black woman, or a poor woman is not a limitation; it is an opportunity to transform oneself into a great human being, a phenomenal woman.
- As a phenomenal poet, she has mastered the art of poetry by using language poetically through devices and rhythm.



To give an overall impression of this poem, Maya Angelou realised that she was a phenomenal woman and proved it in her life and her writings, specially in this poem on “Phenomenal Woman.” She understood what she could achieve with her physical features; arms, hips, lips, eyes, teeth, waist, feet, back, breasts, smile, style, heels, hair, hand, and care.

In this context we may refer to Lupita Nyong'o's speech “Essence of Beauty.” This is also available on YouTube please watch it and compare the twos. That is, one is a poem; another is an actual speech. The Essence of Beauty is inside not outside. Maya Angelou became a singer, a dancer, an actor, a writer, a reporter, an editor, a manager, a secretary, an organiser and many more roles she played in her life, although she was unpretty, skinny, tall, gap-toothed.

Being a woman or a black woman or a poor woman is not a limitation. It is an opportunity to transform oneself into a great human being, a phenomenal woman. As a phenomenal poet, she has mastered the art of poetry by using language poetically through the poetic devices and the rhythmic devices we have in this poem.

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Still I Rise

"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."

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>




Let us see the second poem now, 'Still I Rise.' Again, we are not able to read the whole poem for copyright reasons. We have given the link here. You can again see the same poem in our textbook.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>

"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."

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Still I Rise


- Fears and terrors are there to be overcome.
- The daybreak is an inspiration for the poet to rise again every day.
- She transmutes herself into a symbol of hope for her whole race, all kinds of marginalized people.

"I am the dream and the hope of the slave. 40

I rise

I rise

I rise."



We have some summary of this poem here; fears and terrors are there to be overcome not to be afraid of really. The daybreak is an inspiration for the poet to rise again and again every day. She transmutes herself into a symbol of hope for her whole race, even for all kinds of marginalised people. And that is why she says,

"I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise,

I rise,

I rise."

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Thematic Contrast

- Rise and Fall
- Truth and Lie
- Courage and Cowardice
- Riches and Poverty
- Black and White
- Glory and Shame
- Love and Hate
- Fear and Hope
- Slavery and Freedom
- Dream and Reality



We have the Thematic contrast between rise and fall, truth and lie, courage and cowardice, riches and poverty, black and white, glory and shame, love and hate, fear and hope, slavery and freedom, dream and reality. These are gaps, it is for the individual to bridge the gap. The moment you fall, if you accept your fall, you cannot do anything. With every fall, one has to rise; that is what Maya Angelou has done in her life and that is why she has written this poem. Whatever may happen to me, still I will rise.

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Poetic Devices

Catechism: Question and answer

Voice: Male and female voices

Q: Did you want me to be broken?

A: But, still like air, I'll rise.

Simile: Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise. (9-11)

Metaphor: You may shoot me with your words (21)

Memorable image: Phoenix at the background

Tricolon: Repetition of "I rise" (41-43)



We can see some poetic devices in this poem, Catechism is the most dominant one in this poem, that means a list of questions and answers. Maya Angelou asks questions and then gives answers. These questions are addressed to men, people in power and then she responds

to these questions as a woman with some sense of power. That is why we refer to these voices, male and female voices. The question is like this, did you want me to be broken? Answer is, but still like air, I will rise. This is only one question and answer we have many like this in the poem. Then we have a Simile;

“Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides.

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I ‘ll rise.”

Then metaphor; ‘you may shoot me with your words.’ Words are like bullets and this communication of speech is like shooting between a man and a woman. That is why kind words can save people, harsh words can kill people, particularly people in difficult situations. We have this memorable image of the Phoenix at the background always rising. We have one specific rhetorical figure called Tricolon that is repetition of “I rise, I rise, I rise” at the end, three times.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Rhyme: occasional rhymes in 43 lines

Rhyming words: lies, rise; gloom, room; eyes, cries; hard, backyard; wide, tide; fear, clear; gave, slave

Repetition: “rise” 10 times,

Rhythm: Trochaic/ Iambic (ebb and flow)

Meter: Tri/ tetra meter

Caesura, Enjambment and End-Stopped Lines:

You may | write me | down in | history ➡ (4 feet)

With your | bitter, | twisted | lies, (3+ extra syllable)

You may | trod me | in the | very dirt ➡ (4 feet)

But still, | like dust, | I'll rise. (3)



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. We have some occasional rhymes in these 43 lines. Some of the words are lies, rise; gloom, room; eyes, cries; hard, backyard; wide, tide; fear, clear; gave, slave. The word rise is repeated 10 times in this poem adding power to this rising feeling of the poet and the speaker. On the whole we can say, the poem

has Iambic tetra meter or Trochaic tri meter. But this is a combination. We have Caesura, enjambment and end-stopped lines in,

“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.”

We are shown this enjambment with that arrow mark and indicated the number of syllables feet in brackets. In the second line you have here, we have some extra syllable, that is why we have put it 3 plus.

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Overall Impression

- Rising against odds is the key to achievement, for all the oppressed and marginalized people.
- No historical lies and oppressed situations will prevent the speaker from rising.
- She will rise like the sun, the moon and the tides whatever the days and seasons may be.
- **No insult, no shame, and no hate can put her down.**
- She has plenty of pride, courage, confidence, and wealth, to rise out of her slavery.
- The speaker actively engages with the oppressor in a catechistic style of question and answer.
- The poem adds power with the tri and tetra meter in various measures like iamb, trochee, and anapest.



To give an overall impression, rising against odds is the key to achievement for all the oppressed and marginalised people. No historical lies and oppressed situations will prevent the speaker from rising. She will rise like the sun, the moon, the tides; whatever the days and seasons may be. No insult, no shame, and no hate can put her down. She has plenty of pride, courage, confidence and wealth to rise out of her slavery. The speaker actively engages with the oppressor in a catechistic style of question and answer. The poem adds power with the tri and tetra meter in various measures like iamb and trochee and anapest.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Maya Angelou
- Self-Esteem and Self-Expression
- “Phenomenal Woman”
- “Still I Rise”
- Analysis
- Self-Acceptance and Celebration



Now, let us have the summary of this discussion. We discussed the historical and literary context in which Maya Angelou lived and wrote her poems. She was able to imbibe all kinds of self-esteem and self-expression in her poetry, in her autobiography and write famous poems like “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise.” We were not able to read the two poems fully because of copyright reasons and we have given the links for you and you can collect the poems and read them yourself. We emphasised self-acceptance and celebration in the discussion of these two poems.

First of all, we have to accept what we are, who we are, where we are, why we are here like this and then we can find causes for celebration. There is no life without limitations but every life has enough opportunities for overcoming these limitations. Let us rise and become phenomenal people.

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References

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- Lupton, Mary Jane. 2014. " 'When Great Trees Fall': The Poetry of Maya Angelou, *CLA Journal*, 58 (1-2): 77-90.
- Saunders, James Robert. 1991. "Breaking Out of the Cage: The Autobiographical Writings of Maya Angelou," *The Hollins Critic*, 28 (4): 1-11.



Here are some references. Hope you will further see many such references and help yourself.
Thank you.