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**Maya Angelou** Poetry Study

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**Introduction**

The poet I chose is Maya Angelou. The reason why I chose Maya Angelou as my poet is because in her poems, she includes many descriptive metaphors in her poems. The metaphors that Maya Angelou uses are very unique and it has a nice sound to it. When I first read her poems, I question myself, “What does this metaphor mean?” and “What is she trying to state through this metaphor?” After I have finally understood what Maya Angelou is trying to say, I leave myself with a feeling of awe. I learned from Angelou that when you are describing things, it doesn’t always have to be so literal. Also, when you are stating a metaphor to describe the object or to tell the reader what you’re trying to say (through a metaphor), it doesn’t always have to make sense to the reader or anyone. As long there is logic that makes sense to you, the poem is a masterpiece. That’s what I learned from reading Maya Angelou’s amazing poems. And that’s also why other readers would enjoy these poems and her poems would be worth reading.

1

**Biography**

Marguerite Johnson also known as Maya Angelou was born on April 4, 1982 in St. Louis, Missouri. The name "Maya" was nicknamed by her brother, Bailey Johnson Jr. who got this idea from "My" or "Mya Sister" because Bailey was not able to correctly pronounce her name due to a stutter. When Maya Angelou was just three years old, and her brother was four, their parents Bailey Johnson (father) and Vivian Baxter Johnson (mother) were divorced and their father sent the two children to live in Stamps, Arkansas to live with their paternal grandmother. The two kids travelled to Stamps all by themselves by a train. At age 13, Maya and Bailey reunited with their mother in San Francisco. She then attended Mission High School and won a scholarship to study dance and drama in San Francisco’s Labor School. However, Maya dropped out of school. Although this may be bad news, Maya became San Francisco’s first African American female cable car conductor. Afterwards, Maya wrote down many songs and poems for many years and by the 1950s, Maya developed great skills in poetry and writing. Then, Maya went to New York and joined the Harlem Writers Guild. In 1970, Maya Angelou published the poem: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* Like all of her other amazing poems, this poem talks about life. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* talks about life and wanting for freedom which was really important at the time of Civil Rights Movement, where the black race was treated unfairly and when Feminism started to develop and grow. As Maya Angelou continued her poetry, she received many awards such as Presidential Medal of Freedom, Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album, NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, Women in Film Crystal Award, Marian Anderson Award, and many more awards. This is how successful Maya Angelou came to be. Unfortunately, Maya Angelou passed away on May 28th, 2014 due to heart problems.

2

**I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind   
and floats downstream till the current ends   
and dips his wing in the orange suns rays   
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage   
can seldom see through his bars of rage   
his wings are clipped and his feet are   
tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill   
of things unknown but longed for still   
and his tune is heard on the distant hill   
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze   
and the trade winds soft through the   
sighing trees and the fat worms   
waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and   
he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the   
grave of dreams his shadow shouts   
on a nightmare scream   
his wings are clipped and his feet are   
tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill   
of things unknown but longed for still   
and his tune is heard on the distant hill   
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

**Maya Angelou**

3

**Alone**

Lying, thinking   
Last night   
How to find my soul a home   
Where water is not thirsty   
And bread loaf is not stone   
I came up with one thing   
And I don't believe I'm wrong   
That nobody,   
But nobody   
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone   
Nobody, but nobody   
Can make it out here alone.

There are some millionaires   
With money they can't use   
Their wives run round like banshees   
Their children sing the blues   
They've got expensive doctors   
To cure their hearts of stone.   
But nobody   
No, nobody   
f make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone   
Nobody, but nobody   
Can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen closely   
I'll tell you what I know   
Storm clouds are gathering   
The wind is gonna blow   
The race of man is suffering   
And I can hear the moan,   
'Cause nobody,   
But nobody   
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone   
Nobody, but nobody   
Can make it out here alone.

**Maya Angelou**

4

**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.

Does my sassiness upset you?   
Why are you beset with gloom?   
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells   
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,   
With the certainty of tides,   
Just like hopes springing high,   
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?   
Bowed head and lowered eyes?   
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.   
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?   
Don't you take it awful hard   
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines   
Diggin' in my own back yard.

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.

Does my sexiness upset you?   
Does it come as a surprise   
That I dance like I've got diamonds   
At the meeting of my thighs?   
Out of the huts of history's shame - I rise   
Up from a past that's rooted in pain - I rise   
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,   
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise   
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear I rise   
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,   
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.   
I rise   
I rise   
I rise.

**Maya Angelou**

5

**Touched by an Angel**

We, unaccustomed to courage   
exiles from delight   
live coiled in shells of loneliness   
until love leaves its high holy temple   
and comes into our sight   
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives   
and in its train come ecstasies   
old memories of pleasure   
ancient histories of pain.   
Yet if we are bold,   
love strikes away the chains of fear   
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity   
In the flush of love's light   
we dare be brave

And suddenly we see   
that love costs all we are   
and will ever be.   
Yet it is only love   
which sets us free.

**Maya Angelou**

6

**Analysis of “I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings”**

In “I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings” by Maya Angelou, the narrator talks about a caged bird that “sings of freedom”

I think the narrator is talking about how the African Americans want to have their freedom. Due to the darkness of their skin, it is like a barrier or a “cage” from freedom because at that time, the black race was mistreated and had no freedom.

Using the metaphor “for the caged bird sings of freedom”, the narrator is trying to say that the African Americans are trying to get their freedom or “sings for freedom”. Also, “caged bird” metaphor is indicating that the color of the African Americans is in a cage that locks away their freedom.

**Analysis of “Alone”**

In “Alone” by Maya Angelou, the narrator talks about how “nobody can make it out here alone”.

I think that the narrator is trying to say that people cannot live without each other or other people in this world. Each and every one of us needs companionship. Even if they are rich, it cannot replace having someone in our lives.

Using the repeated phrase, “Nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone”, the poet makes the reader think that even though you try to be independent or alone, you are always going to need the help of others. Also, the narrator uses the descriptive imagery, “There are some millionaires with money they can't use, they've got expensive doctors to cure their hearts of stone. But nobody No, nobody can make it out here alone.”. That tells the reader that even with money, your heart cannot be healed if you don’t have any companionship.

7

**Analysis of “Still I Rise”**

In “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou the narrator talks about how she “like dust will rise”. I think the narrator is trying to say that despite the dark color of her skin, the narrator knows that she and the African American race will “rise”. Basically, the narrator is saying that African Americans still got pride.

With the descriptive imagery, “Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom? ‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells pumping in my living room”, the poet makes the reader have an impression of African Americans to have lots of pride and proudness. She also gives this image to the reader by speaking in a prideful tone in her poem.

**Analysis of “Touched By an Angel”**

In “Touched by an Angel”, the narrator talks about when “we accustomed to courage” and when “love arrives”.

I think the narrator is trying to say since we get hurt from falling in love, we try to avoid falling in love again. But when love does enter into our lives again, we remember how we got hurt so we are scared to love again. But then again, we still remember the good times which make us feel excited to love again.

8

Using the metaphors “Love arrives in a train come ecstasies old memories and of pleasure ancient histories of pain” and “exiled from delight”, the poet makes the reader feel that love can be scary but exciting at the same time.

9

**“*You Do You*”** (inspired by Maya Angelou)

Your messy desk

Shall not be

Organized

By a friendly pest

And when your desk is not

Organized by you

Your utensils

Will park in a different lot

That’s why

You Do You

That’s why

Do not let anyone

Organize you

You Do You

I chose to include this poem because in this poem, I am trying to tell the reader to do not let anyone boss you around and make decisions in your life. Like the metaphor I mentioned, if a friend is organizing your desk, you wouldn’t be sure of where your belongings have went to. Just like if you let anyone make decisions for you, you wouldn’t know yourself or where you’re headed to. Maya Angelou inspired me on this poem because in her poem, “*Still I Rise”* the poem talks about life and shows pride of the black race. Just like in this poem, I’m trying to tell the reader to have pride. And in this poem, she also included the repeated phrase “still I rise”.

10

**“Don’t”** (inspired by Maya Angelou)

Pretty flower with   
their bewitching   
Pulchritudinous fashion  
their effortlessly

Polished leaves   
asking for a

Hand-kiss

Friends that accompany you with

Their gentle arm

To wrap around you when

Your heart is filled with

Melancholy

But do not be

Deceived by

Their traits

Because

The flower can pierce

You with her

Sharp thorns

Just like friends

They will also stab you

With their thorns

I chose to include this poem because in this poem, I am trying to tell the reader that there’s always bad sides to everything even the good things. That’s why whenever a miracle comes along one’s life; he/she must not feel as if everything is perfect because that one miracle might just be that one big troublemaker. Maya Angelou inspired me on this poem because in “*Touched by An Angel”* she uses descriptive language like “love leaves its high holy temple” and “in its train come ecstasies old memories of pleasure ancient histories of pain.”

11

**“Bow & Arrow”** (inspired by Maya Angelou)

With full power

With full strength

He drags you back

Back into the lower

Deep and dark darkness

Where you can’t see anything

And can’t do anything

But don’t fear

Because when He drags

You back,

He launches you back into the air

To a Fully greater

Fully Better

Future

I chose to include this poem because in this poem I am trying to tell the reader that like a bow and arrow, life or “He” will pull you back into darkness, your worst moments. However, this trip leads to you to be launched into a greater future. Like a bow and arrow, you have to pull the string to a certain point so that the arrow can launch into the air and hit their target. Maya Angelou inspired me to write this poem because in “*Still I Rise”*, she refers “I” as the black race and “You” as the white race. And in my poem, I referred life as “He”.

12

**“Success”** (original)

It is better to not listen to Her

If she says

That you can win because of

Your shrewdness

It is better to not listen to her

It is better to not be fooled by her

If she uses her slick and sly words

That convinces you

Into thinking you are going to win

Because of your intuition

You better slide past her intentions

After all, one does not win

With just ingenuity

I chose to include this poem because in this poem, I am trying to tell the reader that ingenuity is not the only key to success and sometimes ingenuity tricks people to think that they can win anything. But of course that is never the case to success.

13

**“Will he soar?”** (Original)

Will He soar?

Well first he must

Walk out of his nest

And fall to the floor

Multiple times

The he must flap his wings

Like an angry hurricane.

But still he kept on falling

Will He soar?

Well, for minutes

For hours

For days,

He kept on fluttering his wings

But those little wings

Were not able to make him rise

But as he kept on waving,

His little wings became

Strong wings that carried his dream

I chose to include this poem because in this poem, I am trying to tell the reader that if you want to reach or soar to your dreams, it will not be easy. In the poem, the bird or “He” wants to reach his dream which is to be able to fly. But he failed multiple times. However, he kept on trying until his wings were strong enough to help him fly. I am also trying to tell the reader that when people try to succeed, they must firstly fail. Then they have to fail again. Thirdly, they fail better.

14

# Resources

* “Global Renaissance Woman” *mayaangelou.com*

< http://mayaangelou.com/bio/>

* “America’s Renaissance Woman” *achievement.org*

< http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/ang0bio-1>

* “Maya Angelou” *en.wikipedia.org*

< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya\_Angelou>

* “Maya Angelou” *afropoets.net*

<http://www.afropoets.net/mayaangelou.html>

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