Still I Rise

SUMMARY

You have the ability to shape how history remembers me with your hurtful, warped lies. You have the power to walk all over me, crushing me into the dirt itself. But even so, I will rise up from the ground just as dust rises from the earth.

Does my bold and cheeky attitude offend you? Why are you so miserable? Maybe it's because of the confident way I walk, as if I had oil wells right in my living room.

I am like the moon and the sun, the rises of which are as inevitable as the rise of ocean tides. Just like high hopes, I will keep rising.

Were you hoping to see me looking sad and defeated? Did you want to see me in a submissive posture, with my head bent and eyes looking down rather than up at you? Did you want to see my shoulders slouching down in the same way that tears fall down, my body having been weakened by all my intense sobbing?

Is my pride making you mad? Are you so upset because I am so happy and joyful that it seems as though I must have gold mines in my own backyard?

You have the ability to shoot at me with your words, which are like bullets. You have the ability to cut me with your sharp glare. You may even kill me with your hatred. Nevertheless, just as the air keeps rising, I will keep rising.

Does my sex appeal make you upset? Are you taken aback by the fact that I dance as though I have precious gems between my legs?

I rise up out of history's shameful act of slavery. I rise up from this deeply painful past. I am as vast and full of power as a dark ocean that rises and swells and carries in the tide.

I rise up, and in doing so leave behind all the darkness of terror and fear. I rise up, and in doing so enter a bright morning that is full of joyful wonder. With the personal qualities and grace I inherited from my ancestors, I embody the dreams and hopes of past enslaved peoples. I will rise, and rise, and rise.

THEMES

DEFIANCE IN THE FACE OF OPPRESSION

"Still I Rise" presents the bold defiance of the speaker, implied to be a black woman, in the face of oppression. This oppressor, addressed throughout as "you," is full of "bitter, twisted lies" and "hatefulness" toward the speaker, and hopes to see the speaker "broken" in both body and spirit. However, despite all the methods of the oppressor to "shoot," "cut," or "kill" her, the speaker remains defiant by continuing to "rise" in triumph.

Angelou was a staunch civil rights activist, and "Still I Rise" can be taken as a powerful statement specifically against anti-black racism in America. At the same time, its celebration of dignity in the face of oppression feels universal, and can be applied to any circumstance in which a marginalized person refuses to be broken by—and, indeed, repeatedly rises above—prejudice and hatred.

Society relentlessly tries to humiliate and demean the speaker, who has little power to fight back. The speaker acknowledges that society "may" enact violence upon her. It also has the ability to write "lies" about the speaker and present them as facts. The speaker does not have the ability to prevent any of this, and, in fact, the attempts to harm the speaker only escalate as the poem continues. This "you" may crush the speaker into the dirt; it may "shoot," "cut," and eventually even "kill" the speaker with "hatefulness." An oppressive society, the poem is saying, presents a clear and pressing danger to the speaker's body and mind.

Yet the speaker responds to this treatment not only by surviving, but by *thriving*—something that provokes anger from her oppressor. The speaker wonders—her tone tongue-in-cheek—why the oppressor is so "upset," "offend[ed]," and "gloom[y]." Perhaps, she proposes, it is because of her confident "walk," generous "laugh[ter]," or dazzling "dance." In other words, the speaker presents her joy—her refusal to bend to the speaker's will—as its own act of defiance. Moreover, all of her acts are associated with traditional signs of wealth in the form of "oil," "gold," and "diamonds."

Regardless of the oppressor's negative and hateful responses, the speaker continues to prosper. The speaker even explicitly rejects the oppressor's desire to "see [her] broken." The oppressor wants to elicit "lowered eyes," "teardrops," and "soulful cries" from the speaker, to see her downtrodden. Thus simply living with joy, pride, and dignity is an act of resistance against and triumph over oppression.

Indeed, the speaker "rise[s]" repeatedly over the oppressor's violent hatred and prejudice. The speaker's rise is first compared to the rise of "dust," a reference to the earth. Later, her rise transforms from the rise of "dust" to "air," which is located physically *above* the earth. The progression of these comparisons over the course of the poem reinforces the speaker's rise over oppression. And just like the rise of "moons and … suns," the speaker's rise is inevitable and unstoppable. Her dignity and strength are qualities that society can't touch, no matter how hard it tries. The speaker is thus able to ascend

out of "history's shame" and "a past that's rooted in pain," both of which are particular references to slavery, by living with pride and joy. Indeed, her rise—a powerful form of resistance against oppression—*is* the ultimate "dream" and "hope" of oppressed peoples.

Given this context, the poem has clear and particular resonance for black Americans. More broadly, the poem is a ringing assertion of the dignity of marginalized people and an insistence on their ultimate, inevitable triumph over violence and hate.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Line 9
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 29-32
- Line 40

THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF BLACKNESS

Maya Angelou's work often focused on the experience of being a black woman in America. Read within that context, "Still I Rise" becomes more than a call for strength in the face of hardship: it's also a modern-day ode to the power and beauty of blackness. Although the speaker's racist society believes that black people's lives and bodies are less worthy than others', the speaker herself vehemently rejects that idea. The speaker asserts her full humanity and also associates her body with symbols of value, such as "oil wells," "gold mines," and "diamonds." These comparisons implicitly critique racist and sexist assumptions of beauty and power as being tied only to whiteness and masculinity, respectively. Instead, the poem becomes an ode to black womanhood.

In a racist world, the poem implies, society continuously denies the full humanity of black people. Society wishes to the speaker were "broken," "cut," or even "kill[ed]." Rather than valuing the lives and humanity of black people, society actively hopes to harm and destroy them. Society's "shame[ful]" history of slavery was of course the ultimate dehumanization; black people who were enslaved experienced unimaginable "pain" and "nights of terror and fear" as any agency over their own lives and bodies was taken away from them. The speaker references this history to illustrate how little society has historically valued black life.

Nevertheless, the speaker insists on the inherent humanity, value, power, and beauty of her black body. The speaker rises "like dust," a subtle biblical allusion: in the Bible, God created humans from "dust," and humans return to "dust" once they die. By stating that she is "like dust," the speaker asserts her full humanity; she is as much a creation of God as anyone else. The speaker also walks as though she possesses "oil wells," laughs as though she owns "gold mines," and dances as though she has "diamonds" suggestively placed between her thighs. These symbols are all objects of great value. Oil wells provide their owners with wealth and, consequently, power. Gold and diamonds are expensive and prized for their beauty. Thus, the speaker assigns value to her body and grants it power and beauty regardless of what society says. In particular, the placement of the diamonds "[a]t the meeting of … [her] thighs" speaks specifically to the speaker's womanhood. (The reference also feels distinctly autobiographical as Angelou once worked as a nightclub dancer.) Taken as a whole, the lines declare and reclaim the speaker's body and power in her femininity as a black woman. The speaker also insists that she is a "black ocean," a vast, powerful, and unstoppable figure.

The speaker thus doesn't assert her strength in spite of her blackness, but rather insists that her strength *comes from* her identity as a black person. And by subverting readers' expectations of an ode and who or what it should praise, Angelou challenges the assumed white gaze of her readership. Humanity, power, and beauty, Angelou declares, are abundant in blackness and black womanhood.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 17
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 22-23
- Line 25
- Lines 27-28
- Line 29
- Line 31
- Lines 33-34
- Line 35
- Lines 39-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

You may write ...
... dust, I'll rise.

The first two lines of "Still I Rise" establish the antagonistic relationship between the speaker, implied to be a black woman, and her oppressor, addressed throughout simply as "you." The

speaker accepts that her oppressor has the power to write "lies" about the speaker and present them as historical facts. This suggests that the "you" here represents society as a whole, and more specifically white society.

Historical narratives are typically shaped by the perspective of the powerful—and, in the U.S., white people have long been those with the most power in society. The speaker is thus alluding to the idea that the experiences of oppressed and marginalized peoples have long been filtered through a distant and unsympathetic (if not outright racist) perspective. The speaker here is thus talking back to a world that has tried to suppress her voice, insisting that her truth and spirit will rise above whatever falsehoods a prejudiced society wants to spread.

Furthermore, by addressing the oppressor figure as "you" through the use of apostrophe, Angelou suggests the *reader* may also be implicated in racist social structures and attitudes. Angelou thus asks her poem's readers to question their *own* privilege and prejudices toward blackness.

The speaker also allows that her oppressor may step on her ("trod") and crush her into the dirt. This oppressor clearly has little care for the speaker. And, as highlighted through anaphora of the phrase "You may," the speaker has no power to literally stop this from happening.

Nevertheless, the speaker will rise above this humiliation. In the fourth and final line of the stanza, the speaker uses a simile to compare her rise to that of dust kicked up when stamping on the ground. There is also a subtle biblical allusion in the image of this rising dust: in the Bible, humans are said to be created by God from "dust" and to return to "dust" upon death. By stating that she is "like dust," the speaker asserts that she, too, is a creation of God and is equal to anyone else. In doing so, the speaker demands her oppressor and society as a whole recognize her full humanity.

The meter of the first stanza is also worth noting. The first three lines contain a series of trochees in its pattern of stressed-unstressed syllables:

> ... write me down in history
> ... bitter, twisted lies,
> ... trod me in the very dirt

The so-called "falling rhythm" of the trochees reflect the negativity of the first three lines, namely the speaker's acknowledgement of her oppressor's ability to humiliate her. However, the meter changes to iambic (unstressed-stressed) in the last line of the stanza:

> But still, like dust, I'll rise.

The shift to "rising meter" not only reflects the "rise" of the speaker, but also stands in direct contrast to the negative tone of the first three lines. The final spondee (stressed-stressed) of "I'll rise" also adds extra strength and emphasis to this phrase.

In terms of overall structure, this first and following six stanzas are all quatrains. Within each quatrain, the second and fourth lines rhyme with one another, while the first and third lines do not. In this first quatrain, the rhyme scheme is thus *ABCB*.

In rhyming "lies" with "rise," the poem emphasizes that the speaker is able to directly counter the "lies" of the oppressor with her "rise." This emphasis reiterates the power of the speaker's "rise."

In a larger sense, by establishing a formal structure at the beginning, the poem creates an opportunity to later *subvert* that structure in defiance of the reader's expectations. This subversion will be an interesting echo of the subversion in meter and tone within the first stanza itself.

LINES 5-8

> *Does my sassiness ...*
> *... my living room.*

In the next stanza, the speaker, using a cheeky and sarcastic tone, poses a series of rhetorical questions to her oppressor. Does her impertinence, she wonders, make her oppressor angry? Why is her oppressor so miserable and upset?

Perhaps, she suggests through the use of simile, it is because she walks with such confidence it is as if she personally owns oil wells in her living room. Oil wells provide their owners with wealth, and thus power, as they produce the highly valued commodity of oil. Moreover, the speaker's oil wells are far from dry; rather, they are busy "[p]umping" away. Line 7 is enjambed, echoing the smoothness of the speaker's walk (and perhaps the way that the oil readily pumps forth from this figurative well):

> 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
> Pumping ...

Thus, the speaker's walk has a confidence borne from the knowledge and certainty of her own power. It is the sight of this power, the speaker suggests, that provokes her oppressor's anger. Her boldness and confidence are therefore an act of defiance against oppression.

This stanza is again a quatrain with an ABCB rhyme scheme. There is also a great deal of assonance, adding to the stanza's sense of musicality. Note the repetition of /oo/, /eh/ and long /i/ sounds:

> 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 clear repetition of these vowel sounds adds a sense of rhythm to the language that reflects the speaker's confidence. The long /i/ sounds of the final two lines also suggest the repetitive pumping of the oil wells and of the speaker's walk. The sibilance in lines 1 and 2 further suggests a hissing, mocking tone ("sassiness upset ... beset"). These devices fill the speaker's cheeky questioning of the oppressor with a sense of relentless rhythm and power.

LINES 9-12

Just like moons ...
... Still I'll rise.

In the third stanza, the speaker continues to assert the inevitability of her rise above society's hatred and prejudice through the use of similes. First, she compares her rise to the rise of the moons and the suns. Their rises, she states, are as certain as those of the ocean's tides. Thus, her own rise is entirely certain as well; it is as assured as a force of nature.

Additionally, she compares her rise to the rise of "hopes" that leap into the air ("springing high"). In the word "springing," which has its stress on the syllable "spring," the image of the spring season comes to mind. The spring is associated with rebirth and with the sun's warm light after the cold darkness of the winter; this positive, hopeful image of increased light returns later in the final stanza (when the speaker talks about rising "Into a daybreak").

This stanza is also filled with consonance on the /s/ sound (more specifically known as sibilance): Just ... suns ... certainty ... Just ... hopes springing ... Still ..." This adds to the poem's general sense of musicality and rhythm, and also, given the hushed nature of the /s/ sound, perhaps lends this stanza an air of quiet assuredness. The regularity of the /t/ consonance in the phrase "certainty of tides" also mimics the repetitive action of the tides.

Line 12 is particularly notable because of how short it is:

> Still I'll rise.

The shortness of the line, markedly distinct from the three preceding lines, highlights the importance of the speaker's rise. Indeed, as a repetition of line 4, the phrase "I'll rise" becomes the poem's resounding refrain.

The rhyme scheme of the third stanza is again ABCB, though the assonance of the long /i/ sound in "tides," "high," and "rise" might make it feel like three slant rhymes in a row (ABBB). This long /i/ sound is extremely prevalent throughout the poem, and given that it's a major part of the refrain of "I rise," its use here is a subtle way of asserting the speaker's strength.

LINES 13-16

Did you want ...
... my soulful cries?

After asserting the power and inevitability of her rise, the speaker returns to addressing her oppressor with a series of rhetorical questions. The speaker asks if her oppressor wishes to see her "broken" in body and spirit; does the oppressor wish to see her in a submissive posture with a "bowed head and lowered eyes"? Perhaps, the speaker proposes, her oppressor wants to see her sobbing with slumped shoulders. Through the use of simile, the speaker compares the motion of her shoulders "falling down" to the motion of tears as they fall.

The speaker is mocking and teasing the oppressor here; she is not *seriously* asking these questions, but rather illustrating how society would prefer to see her—that is, weak, miserable, defeated. Simply to express joy, pleasure, and confidence, then, is a way of rebelling against society's oppression of the speaker.

The desolate mood of the oppressor's fantasy is reflected in the meter of the stanza as well:

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

Other than a variation in the beginning of line 14, trochaic meter dominates the stanza. The falling rhythm of the stanza emphasizes the speaker's imagined mournful "cries" and sorrowful "broken[ness]." The rhyme scheme, again ABCB, also highlights the sorrow and defeat that society's wants to see in the speaker's body. By rhyming "eyes" with "cries," the long /i/ sound in both words is once again emphasized through assonance. This sound again evokes the long /i/ sound in "rise," and is thus a reminder of the speaker's imminent rise.

LINES 17-20

Does my haughtiness ...
... my own backyard.

The fifth stanza is a lot like the second stanza in form and content, although it only contains one rhetorical question rather than two. The speaker wonders if her "haughtiness"—essentially, her pride—"offend[s]" her oppressor. If it does, she advises flippantly, her oppressor should try not to be too negatively affected ("take it awful hard") by her joyful and proud laughter.

In an echo of the simile in the second stanza about oil wells, the speaker states that she laughs as if she has "gold mines" in her backyard. Just as the oil wells are busy pumping and producing oil, so too are these gold mines producing ("Diggin'") gold, a valuable and beautiful commodity. Thus, the speaker laughs as though she possesses a great amount of wealth and beauty. Her joyful laughter stands in direct contrast to the oppressor's fantasy of her "broken[ness]" in the previous stanza. Consequently, the very act of her laughter is an act of resistance and defiance against her oppressor's hatred.

The consonance and assonance here adds a sense of musicality and emphasis to the speaker's words. Note the repeated long and short /i/ sounds, plus the /d/, hard /g/, and /l/ sounds:

> 'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
> Diggin' in my own backyard.

Similar to the second stanza, the fifth stanza is composed mostly in trochaic meter (meaning most of the poetic feet follow a stressed-unstressed pattern) with an ABCB rhyme scheme:

> 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 backyard.

The regular rhythm of the meter evokes the rhythm of gold miners digging away. Because the speaker is mocking her oppressor here, the meter helps the speaker's laughter feel powerful and persistent.

LINES 21-24

> *You may shoot ...*
> *... air, I'll rise.*

Much like in the first stanza, here the speaker begins by conceding the ability of the oppressor to harm her. Through the use of anaphora, the first three lines all start with the phrase "You may," an acknowledgement of the oppressor's power. The oppressor may "shoot" her with his hurtful "words," "cut" her with his glaring "eyes," or even "kill" her with his hatred. The sense of danger escalates through the escalation of the oppressor's violence from "shoot" and "cut" to, ultimately, "kill."

The meter of the first three lines of the stanza also intensifies this sense of danger. Lines 21-23 are mostly in trochaic (stressed-unstressed) meter:

> You may shoot me with your words,
> You may cut me with your eyes,
> You may kill me with your hatefulness,

The meter functions in much the same way as it functions in the first stanza. The falling rhythm again emphasizes the cruel and ominous nature of the oppressor's abilities to harm the speaker. The oppressor's hatred and prejudice present a pressing danger to the speaker's mind and body.

However, line 24—the last line of the stanza—stands in direct contrast to the previous lines in its iambic (unstressed-stressed) meter (with a final emphatic spondee—stressed-stressed—on "I'll rise"):

> But still, like air, I'll rise.

A near copy of line 4 ("But still, like dust, I'll rise"), line 24 subverts the oppressor's abilities with a declarative statement of the speaker's certain rise. This time, however, the simile used compares the speaker's impending rise not to the rise of "dust," but rather "air." Dust is a material located on the ground, while "air" is spatially located above the ground. Therefore, this comparison is spatially *elevated* from the first stanza. The rising imagery, not only within the simile, but across the progression of the poem, intensifies the speaker's rise above the oppressor's hatred.

LINES 25-28

> *Does my sexiness ...*
> *... of my thighs?*

Returning to her rhetorical questions, the speaker asks if her sex appeal "upset[s]" her oppressor. Is he, she wonders, "surprise[d]" by her mesmerizing dancing, which makes it seem as though she has diamonds on her body? The diamonds are a clear escalation of value from the "oil wells" and "gold mines" of stanzas 2 and 5. The escalation marks an intensification of the speaker's value and worth as the poem progresses. The consonance and alliteration of "dance" and "diamonds" further links the two images together.

Furthermore, in the previous stanzas, the high-value commodities the speaker owned were located in her house ("living room") and on her land ("backyard"). Here, however, the diamonds are embedded on her own body. Her value and worth, the speaker implies, are inherent in *herself*.

Additionally, the sexually evocative placement of the diamonds "[a]t the meeting of [her] thighs" feels autobiographical in nature. The line may be a reference to Angelou's own past as a nightclub dancer. Considered in this context, the line is a reclamation of black femininity and womanhood.

This stanza continues to follow rhyme scheme patterns set by previous stanzas, where the first and third lines are unrhymed and the second and fourth lines are rhymed (ABCB). This is, however, the last stanza which follows this rhyme scheme, as the next two stanzas will subvert the form of the poem.

Like stanzas 2 and 5, stanza 6 is written in trochaic (stressed-unstressed) meter:

> 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?

The regularity of the meter here is evocative of the rhythm of the speaker's dance, which is dazzling and unbroken.

LINES 29-34

> *Out of the ...*
> *... in the tide.*

The eighth stanza departs from the form that characterized the rest of the poem so far. This stanza has six lines rather than four, and two of those lines are exactly the same: "I rise." This departure is an indication of a tonal shift. In this stanza, the speaker is no longer directly addressing or posing rhetorical questions to the "you" figure. Rather, this stanza is a statement of the speaker's power and can stand independently on its own.

In the first two lines, the speaker rises from "the huts of history's shame." "Huts," small crude shelters, is a reference to the poor housing conditions of enslaved peoples on plantations. "[H]istory's shame" is also a reference to slavery, as the practice of slavery is a shameful mark on human history. Thus, the first two lines are both an acknowledgement of the past, as well as an assertion of the speaker's rise above the attempt to dehumanize her and other black peoples.

The next two lines function in a similar manner. The "past that's rooted in pain" is another reference to slavery, which was an incomprehensible "pain" inflicted upon black people in the past. Yet, as declared in line 32, the speaker rises above whatever pain was inflicted upon her and her people.

In previous stanzas, the refrain of the poem was "I'll rise" (repeated in line 4, 12, and 24). Although the speaker's rise was an inevitable event, her rise would happen sometime in the future. In this stanza, however, the refrain of the poem is "I rise" (note that, given that the phrase appears at the end of two consecutive sentences, this can also be classified as an example epistrophe). Thus, the speaker no longer refers to a future event; rather, she is in the *midst* of rising.

The last two lines of the stanza are joyous and fantastical. Through a metaphor, the speaker declares that she is a "black ocean." The comma after "black ocean" marks a caesura that asks readers to pause and reflect on the blackness of the ocean. By describing the ocean, a powerful force of nature, as "black," the speaker contextualizes the stanza as specifically relevant to black people and their history in America. The speaker asserts her power is inherent in and inextricable from her blackness. Moreover, this ocean spans both great heights and vast distances. The act of "leaping" is evocative of a "rise," as a leap is a jump to a greater height. The ocean is a powerful force of nature that cannot be tamed by human beings.

Additionally, this ocean "[w]ell[s]" and "swell[s]" as it contains the turbulence of waves. The consonance and assonance here—the /w/, /eh/, /l/ and /ing/ sounds of "welling and swelling"—creates a moment of internal rhyme. This nicely complements the imagery, at hand adding a sense of fluidity to the speaker's words.

Finally, the speaker asserts that she carries in the "tide." A "tide" and other oceanic movements can be used to describe social movements (e.g. first-wave feminism). Thus, the tide that the speaker brings forth to the world is the empowerment of marginalized people, specifically black people.

LINES 35-40

Leaving behind nights ...
... of the slave.

The first six lines of the last stanza are an echo in structure, rhyme scheme, and meter of the previous stanza.

In lines 35-36, the speaker rises from "nights of terror and fear." The "nights of terror and fear" may be another reference to slavery, which, of course, caused "terror and fear" for many enslaved peoples. The description may also, more generally, refer to oppression which causes "terror and fear" for oppressed and marginalized people. These first two lines differ slightly from the previous stanza, however, as the speaker does not merely rise from but "[l]eav[es] behind" these terrible circumstances.

Furthermore, the next line is a continuation of her act of rising, as the speaker enters "[i]nto a daybreak that's wondrously clear." The image of "daybreak" in line 37 is an obvious contrast to the image of "nights" in line 35. Additionally, this "daybreak" is "wondrously clear"; the speaker can clearly envision the light and hope of her present and future. Thus, in the first four lines of the stanza, the speaker metaphorically rises from dark "nights" to a "clear" and bright "daybreak." The progression of darkness to light, set up earlier in the idea of spring in "springing" (line 11), culminates in this last stanza.

Lines 39-40 are a final assertion of the speaker's value and power, which are linked to her ancestors and the oppressed people of the past. The speaker's personal strengths and her body are possible because of her ancestors who survived and eventually created her. Thus, in a sense, her ancestors "gift[ed]" her with who she is today. In line 39, "gifts" and "gave" are alliterative, adding emphasis to the words and highlighting the importance of both the "gifts" and the act of giving from her ancestors. The speaker has a clear sense of gratitude toward her ancestors who survived through the "pain," "terror," and "fear" of the past in order to give her life.

With the help of these "gifts," the speaker is defiant against and rises above oppression. Thus, the empowerment she embodies is truly "the dream and the hope" of enslaved peoples.

LINES 41-43

I rise ...
... I rise.

The last three lines repeat the poem's transformed refrain: "I rise." Through this use of epizeuxis, the speaker's assertion of her rise is forceful and vehement. The assonance between "I" and "rise" adds to the ringing and strident quality of the refrain. Each word of "I rise" is equally stressed in these lines as well. This leaves no doubt as to who will "rise" in the power struggle between oppressed and oppressor. Despite all the oppressor's efforts to crush her into the dirt or harm ("shoot," "cut," "kill") her, the speaker is the one who will triumph.

"I rise" is the central message and meaning of the poem, whose very title is "Still I Rise." By ending with a repetition of this message, the takeaway of the poem is clear: the speaker rises and will continue to rise above oppression and prejudice. "Still" has the meaning of "despite" in the title. Thus despite whatever "pain," "terror," or "fear" she experiences due to hatred and prejudice, the speaker remains defiant and empowered in the face of oppression. Ultimately, the phrase transforms from a personal mantra for the speaker to a rallying cry for black people and, more generally, all oppressed and marginalized peoples.

SYMBOLS

VALUABLE OBJECTS

"[O]il wells," "gold mines," and "diamonds" are all either sources of valuable material or precious objects themselves. All three are highly desired by human society and/or considered beautiful. In "Still I Rise," these objects and sources of value are symbolically associated with the oppressed and marginalized speaker, indicating the inherent beauty and value of her body.

In the first instance of this symbol, the speaker compares her "walk" to the walk of someone who owns "oil wells." In the second instance, the speaker "laugh[s]" as though she owns "gold mines." In the third and final instance of the symbol, the speaker "dance[s]" as though she has "diamonds" on her body. There is a clear escalation of value as the poem progresses from "oil" to "gold" to "diamonds." As the intimacy of the comparisons increases, from "walk" and "laugh" to "the meeting of my thighs," the value of the symbols increases. Thus, this escalation of objects and sources of value emphasizes the value of the *speaker's* actions and, most of all, her body itself. Therefore, however society may humiliate and look down upon the actions and bodies of oppressed people, they are just as beautiful and worthy as anyone else.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I walk like I've got oil wells / Pumping in my living room"
- **Lines 19-20:** "I laugh like I've got gold mines / Diggin' in my own backyard"
- **Lines 27-28:** "I dance like I've got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs"

THE OCEAN

The ocean is a powerful force of nature, with regular and inevitable tides. It contains a turbulence of waves without breaking apart. Furthermore, the waves may fall, but will always rise again. In "Still I Rise," the ocean symbolizes the speaker's power, which is a force of its own that cannot be inhibited by human efforts.

The speaker's rise above oppression and prejudice is as "certain[]" as the "tides." The tides, just like the speaker, may fall or, in the speaker's case, be crushed by the oppressor. However, this fall is only temporary. It is "certain" that the tides, and thus the speaker, will rise again.

Near the end of the poem, the speaker, presumed to be a black woman, declares she is a "black ocean" and highlights its scale and properties. This ocean rises to great heights ("leaping") and covers vast distances ("wide"). Moreover, it is not any ocean. Rather, this ocean, a metaphor for the speaker's power, is "black." Thus, the speaker's blackness is not a detriment to her power, but a part of it.

The ocean also becomes more immense and powerful ("welling and swelling") as it brings in the tide upon the shore. When the tide is brought in upon the shore, it is a rising tide. Thus, the speaker, like the ocean, only grows more powerful as she rises. The poem uses the ocean to represent the speaker's power inherent in her blackness and the inevitability of her rise above oppression.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "the certainty of tides"
- **Lines 33-34:** "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, / Welling and swelling I bear in the tide."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Metaphor occurs in the latter half of "Still I Rise." In lines 21-23, for instance, the speaker uses metaphorical language when listing off various things her oppressor may do to harm her:

> You may shoot me with your words,
> You may cut me with your eyes,
> You may kill me with your hatefulness,

Of course, you cannot literally "shoot" someone with words, because words are not bullets; similarly, "eyes" are not knives and cannot "cut" people, and "hatefulness" is not, in itself, deadly. The speaker is using figurative language to emphasize just how painful it is to be surrounded by racism in society—how much it hurts to be barraged with hateful language, stares, and a general feeling of being despised.

Later, in line 29, the speaker describes "the huts of history's shame." History cannot actually feel shame, and this metaphor (that edges on personification) is really an allusion to slavery. The institution of slavery is a scar on American history, a deeply shameful memory out of which the speaker declares she will

"rise."

More metaphors pop up in lines 33 and 40. In both cases, the metaphors build on the many previous instances of simile in the poem. Earlier in the poem, the speaker used simile to compare her rise to, for example, the rise of "dust," "moons," "suns," "hopes," and "air." She was "like" these natural forces, but she did not embody them.

However, the speaker switches from simile to metaphor in the last two stanzas. These final stanzas are also notably a departure from the quatrain form of the first seven stanzas. Thus, they can be considered the conclusion of the poem. In the first example of metaphor, the speaker states that she is "a black ocean" (line 33). She is no longer simply "like moons" or "like suns." By the end of the poem, she is a force of nature—"a black ocean"—in and of herself.

Similarly, in the second example of metaphor, the speaker states that she is "the dream and the hope of the slave" (line 40). She is not just "like" "the dream and the hope"; she *is* it. These more definite assertions are an escalation of the previous similes and contribute to a satisfying conclusion to the poem. The speaker's confidence in herself and her ability to overcome hatred and prejudice are clear.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "You may shoot me with your words"
- **Line 22:** "You may cut me with your eyes,"
- **Line 23:** "You may kill me with your hatefulness"
- **Line 29:** "the huts of history's shame"
- **Line 33:** "I'm a black ocean"
- **Line 40:** "I am the dream and the hope of the slave"

SIMILE

Simile occurs frequently in the first seven stanzas of the poem (apart from the fourth stanza). In each instance, simile is used to enhance and bring attention to the speaker's power, worth, and beauty.

The speaker's rise is not physically limited to the human scale. Her rise is compared to the rise of "dust," "moons," "suns," "hopes springing high," and "air." These various rises go beyond the limits of human capability. In many cases, they cannot even be measured. In the example of "hopes springing high," their rise is limitless. Thus, the speaker's rise too is immeasurable and limitless. It is a force of power.

The speaker also uses similes to associate her physical actions and body with symbols of worth and beauty. Her walk is compared to the walk of an oil baron, her laughter compared to the laughter of a gold mine owner, and her body is like a body embedded with diamonds. By associating her acts and body to "oil," "gold," and "diamonds," the speaker associates her physical gestures and body with high worth and beauty. At the same time, by using similes, the speaker suggests that her actions and body are not any of her comparisons. They are simply "like" these comparisons. Thus, her power, worth, and beauty cannot be pinpointed down exactly in these beginning stanzas. They may even, the speaker seems to suggest, go beyond the capabilities of these comparisons.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "like dust, I'll rise"
- **Lines 7-8:** "I walk like I've got oil wells / Pumping in my living room"
- **Line 9:** "Just like moons and like suns"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Just like hopes springing high, / Still I'll rise"
- **Lines 19-20:** "I laugh like I've got gold mines / Diggin' in my own backyard"
- **Line 24:** "like air, I'll rise"
- **Lines 27-28:** "I dance like I've got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

In "Still I Rise," the speaker directly addresses her oppressor through apostrophe and a series of rhetorical questions. The speaker poses eight rhetorical questions in a tongue-in-cheek and defiant tone. In each instance, the rhetorical questions illustrate the oppressor's resentment and hatred toward the speaker.

Rhetorical questions allow the reader to glimpse into the mindset of the oppressor. The speaker wonders why her "sassiness," "haughtiness," and "sexiness" "upset[s]" and "offend[s]" the oppressor. The oppressor is someone who would react angrily toward the speaker's defiant attitude, pride, and attractiveness. The oppressor's pettiness is laid out clearly for the reader, who immediately sympathizes with the speaker. At the same time, the speaker's cheeky tone in asking these questions makes it clear that she already *knows* why her oppressor would react so negatively to her. It is, she implies, because of his prejudice and hatred.

The speaker, in fact, teases her oppressor with her rhetorical questions in the fourth stanza. She asks if her oppressor "want[s] to see [her] broken." In the following lines 14-16, the speaker lays out ways in which she can present and express her emotional and physical brokenness for the oppressor's gratification. However, these rhetorical questions are not *genuine* offers. Rather, they mock the oppressor by laying out these fantasies, but never fulfilling them. For instead of being "broken," the speaker defiantly lives in joy and hope and, ultimately, rises above societal hatred. Throughout the poem, rhetorical questions are thus an example of the speaker's defiance as they mock and interrogate her oppressor's hateful mindset and motivations.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?"
- **Lines 13-16:** "Did you want to see me broken? / Bowed head and lowered eyes? / Shoulders falling down like teardrops, / Weakened by my soulful cries?"
- **Line 17:** "Does my haughtiness offend you?"
- **Lines 25-28:** "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?"

REPETITION

Repetition is abundant in "Still I Rise" and takes on many different forms, including anaphora, epizeuxis, and epistrophe. This repetition is used to emphasize and reassert major ideas and themes of the poem. It also highlights the confidence in the speaker's tone.

Anaphora in particular is a major presence throughout the poem. For example, stanza 1 uses anaphora to highlight all the abilities of the oppressor to harm the speaker with the phrase "[y]ou may." The oppressor's abilities are not to be taken lightly; they present a clear and pressing danger. Stanza 6 echoes the first stanza in its structure and reminds the reader again of the oppressor's abilities:

> You may shoot me ...
> You may cut me ...
> You may kill me ...

The response, however, to the oppressor's abilities are also highlighted through repetition of the title itself. The poem's title is a statement of defiance against this oppressor, and the phrase "Still I rise" gains power with each subsequent repetition. In the first example in line 4, the title appears again, albeit slightly altered. Namely, the title of "Still I Rise" is interrupted by a simile ("But still, like dust, I'll rise"). Additionally, "I rise" transforms to the future tense of "I'll rise."

The title is repeated again, almost word for word, in line 12. The present tense, however, has still been switched for the future tense of "I'll rise":

> Just like hopes springing high,
> Still I'll rise.

In the third instance in line 24, the structure is quite similar to line 4, other than replacing the word "dust" with "air": "But still, like air, I'll rise." Each of these examples are not *exact* copies of either each other or the title. Rather, they are slightly altered in each subsequent appearance. They do, however, create a refrain out of the poem's title, and their repetitive reflects the speaker's assuredness in her ability to overcome hatred and oppression.

In the last two stanzas, this pattern of altered repetition changes and contributes to the poem's overall sense of completion. "I rise" is now in the present tense, and is repeated word-for-word seven times throughout stanzas eight and nine. The use of epistrophe in lines 30, 32, 36, and 38 add further emphasis to the importance of the phrase. Here are lines 29-32, for example:

> Out of the huts of history's shame
> I rise
> Up from a past that's rooted in pain
> I rise

Although "I rise" excludes the "still" from the title, the return to the present tense, as first shown in the title, provides a satisfying conclusion to the poem. Moreover, the use of epizeuxis in the last three lines transforms the refrain of "I rise" into a rallying cry, not only for the speaker, but for all oppressed peoples. Through various forms of repetition, the transformed refrain emphasizes the importance of the phrase "I rise," a mantra that asserts the speaker's power and triumph over oppression.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You may"
- **Line 3:** "You may"
- **Line 4:** "But still, like dust, I'll rise."
- **Line 5:** "Does my"
- **Line 7:** "'Cause I"
- **Line 9:** "Just like"
- **Line 11:** "Just like"
- **Line 12:** "Still I'll rise"
- **Line 17:** "Does my"
- **Line 19:** "'Cause I"
- **Line 21:** "You may"
- **Line 22:** "You may"
- **Line 23:** "You may"
- **Line 24:** "But still, like air, I'll rise."
- **Line 25:** "Does my"
- **Line 30:** "I rise"
- **Line 32:** "I rise"
- **Line 36:** "I rise"
- **Line 38:** "I rise"
- **Lines 41-43:** "I rise / I rise / I rise."

CAESURA

Caesura occurs in four places in "Still I Rise"—in the middle of lines 2, 4, 24, and 33. In each instance, the caesura emphasizes key phrases by slowing down the pace of the line or contributing to the imagery of a simile or metaphor.

In lines 2, 4, and 24, caesura forces the reader to pause and

reflect on important phrases and ideas. For instance, in line 2, the "bitter[ness]" *and* "twisted[ness]" of the oppressor's lies is emphasized through the pause between each adjective:

> With your bitter, twisted lies,

In lines 4 and 24, the two pauses in each line break the lines into three sections:

> But still, like dust, I'll rise.

And:

> But still, like air, I'll rise.

Each of these three sections have their own distinct ideas and emotions. The first section of the line ("But still") is an expression of defiance against the oppressor's expectations that the speaker will remain oppressed. The second section of the line is a simile. In line 4, the speaker compares her rise to "dust." In line 24, the speaker compares her rise to "air." These comparisons are a clear indication that the "rise" of the speaker is not a physical or literal rise, but an emotional and spiritual one. In the third section, "I'll rise" stands alone, highlighting its importance as the poem's refrain. The progression of the lines' tone thus shifts from one of defiance to outright triumph.

In line 33, caesura asks the reader to pause and reflect on the phrase "black ocean":

> I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

The ocean is not simply any ocean; rather, its quality of "blackness" is part of what makes it powerful. Therefore, the speaker's "blackness" is integral to her own power, too. Moreover, caesura mimics the rolling imagery of the ocean waves, thereby immersing the reader in the experience of the line.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bitter, twisted"
- **Line 4:** "still, like dust, I'll"
- **Line 24:** "still, like air, I'll"
- **Line 33:** "ocean, leaping"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs throughout "Still I Rise." Angelou uses enjambment to subvert or build on the ideas of previous lines. Enjambment is also used to emphasize and build on complex similes.

Lines 1, 26, and 27 use enjambment to subvert readers' expectations in a surprising way. The first line opens with a seemingly positive tone. The speaker acknowledges that the "you" figure may "write [her] down in history." To be written down in history is typically a great honor. However, the next line subverts readers' expectations, for "bitter, twisted lies" rather than the truth will be written down. Enjambment also creates an element of surprise in lines 26-28:

> Does it come as a surprise
> That I dance like I've got diamonds
> At the meeting of my thighs?

The division of the speaker's question into three lines through enjambment enhances the unexpectedness of each subsequent image. Upon reading line 26-27, the reader assumes the speaker is dancing while wearing diamond jewelry. In the next line, however, readers are surprised to discover that these diamonds are not embedded in a necklace or earrings, but rather on the speaker's own body.

Lines 7 and 19 use enjambment to clarify and build up complex similes and imagery. In line 7, the speaker compares her walk to the walk of someone who owns "oil wells." That would be enough of a simile to stand on its own. However, the simile becomes more complex in the next line. These oil wells are not only actively producing oil, they are also located in the speaker's living room:

> 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
> Pumping in my living room.

Lines 18-20 function in a similar manner. The simile in line 19—"'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines"—can again stand on its own. However, line 20 builds on the simile, by adding further descriptors to the activity and placement of the gold mine.

It's worth noting that there are a couple lines in the poem that are only ambiguously enjambed. Take lines 29-31:

> Out of the huts of history's shame
> I rise
> Up from a past that's rooted in pain

"I rise" is a complete sentence, and despite not having any punctuation, the long white space on the page after this sentence implies a pause. As such, it's possible to read line 30 as being end-stopped. At the same time, however, the *lack* of punctuation allows "I rise" to apply to the sentences before *and* after it; "Out of the huts of history's shame I rise up ..." This adds a sense of continuity and forward momentum to the poem. The same thing happens in lines 35-38:

> 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,

Each "I rise" bridges the gap between these lines, allowing them to flow into one another with unstoppable, building force. This underscores the inevitability of the speaker's triumph over oppression.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "history / With"
- **Lines 7-8:** "wells / Pumping"
- **Lines 18-19:** "hard / 'Cause"
- **Lines 19-20:** "mines / Diggin'"
- **Lines 26-27:** "surprise / That"
- **Lines 27-28:** "diamonds / At"
- **Lines 29-30:** "shame / I"
- **Lines 30-31:** "rise / Up"
- **Lines 31-32:** "pain / I"
- **Lines 35-36:** "fear / I"
- **Lines 36-37:** "rise / Into"
- **Lines 37-38:** "clear / I"
- **Lines 38-39:** "rise / Bringing"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs frequently throughout "Still I Rise." Angelou uses alliteration to enhance the musicality of the poem and emphasize certain phrases and images. Take the alliterative /d/ sound in lines 3 and 4, which connects "dirt" to "dust." This sonic connection underscores the speaker's ability to overcome being stepped all over by society; society pushes her into the dirt, but she simply rises like the dust that has been kicked up from the ground in the process.

Later, the speaker asks if her "sassiness" or "sexiness upset[s]" her oppressor. The stressed /s/ sounds here enhance the speaker's cheeky and sassy tone. (Recall that in its broadest definition, alliteration refers to sounds at the start of stressed syllables, not simply the start of words; as such, we've marked "upset" and "beset" as alliterative in this guide. Depending on the definition readers are working with, these might better be described as general consonance; more important than the term used to describe this, however, is the *effect* of this repeated sound—which, again, adds a sort of teasing quality to the speaker's rhetorical questions.)

When the speaker describes her physical acts of "walk[ing] like [she's] got oil wells" or "danc[ing] like [she's] got diamonds," the alliteration enhances the musicality and rhythm of her physical actions.

Alliteration is also used to stress important phrases. For example, lines 29 and 31 are both references to slavery. The alliteration in "huts of history's shame" and "past that's rooted in pain" draw readers' attention to each specific phrase and highlight their importance. Line 39 functions similarly, emphasizing the gratitude and debt the speaker owes to her ancestors for the "gifts" that they "gave" her.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "may," "me"
- **Line 3:** "may," "me," "dirt"
- **Line 4:** "dust"
- **Line 5:** "sassiness upset"
- **Line 6:** "beset," "gloom"
- **Line 7:** "walk," "got," "wells"
- **Line 9:** "suns"
- **Line 10:** "certainty"
- **Line 11:** "hopes," "springing," "high"
- **Line 12:** "Still"
- **Line 13:** "broken"
- **Line 14:** "Bowed"
- **Line 17:** "Does"
- **Line 18:** "Don't"
- **Line 19:** "laugh like," "got gold"
- **Line 20:** "Diggin'"
- **Line 21:** "You," "may," "me," "with," "your," "words"
- **Line 22:** "You," "may," "cut," "me," "your"
- **Line 23:** "You," "may," "kill," "me," "your"
- **Line 25:** "Does," "sexiness"
- **Line 26:** "Does," "surprise"
- **Line 27:** "dance," "diamonds"
- **Line 29:** "huts," "history's"
- **Line 31:** "past," "pain"
- **Line 33:** "wide"
- **Line 34:** "Welling"
- **Line 39:** "gifts," "gave"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears widely through "Still I Rise." This is often the result of repetition—the repetition of words like "me," "you," "may," etc. naturally creates the repetition of consonant sounds. Other times, Angelou uses consonance more deliberately to intensify particular lines. Overall, this is an extremely musical poem, and the intensity of the repeated consonant sounds throughout adds to this effect.

In line 2, the consonant repetition of the spitting /t/ sound in "bitter, twisted" halts the reading pace of the line and adds a sense of biting anger to the tone. The consonance of the /t/, /r/, and /d/ sounds in the next line function similarly ("trod me in the very dirt"). The heavy, halting consonant repetition echo the feet of the oppressor crushing the speaker into the dirt.

The /s/ consonant repetition of the last line, however, serves as a response to both the consonance and content of the previous lines. The sibilant /s/ sound combines with that biting /t/ sound in "still, like dust" to suggest how the speaker rises above her oppression. There's consonance of the soft /l/ sound here too,

as well as clear assonance of the long /i/ sound: "still, like dust, I'll rise." Altogether, this makes the speaker's rise above her oppression feel fluid and smooth; she is fully in control of her language here.

The musicality of consonance can enhance the joy and importance of certain lines. In particular, Angelou uses consonance to highlight assertions by the speaker of her own worth, beauty, and history. In lines 7, 19, and 27, the speaker describes the value and beauty of her physical acts and body. The speaker "walk[s] like [she's] got oil wells," "laugh[s] like [she's] got gold mines / Diggin'," and "dance[s] like [she's] got diamonds." The playful and musical quality of the consonance intensifies the cheeky and joyful tone of her assertions.

Consonance also appears in lines 29 and 31. These lines both address slavery, which is relevant to the speaker's ancestry as she is a black woman. Consonance in these lines emphasizes the importance of remembering and acknowledging the "huts of history's shame" and how the speaker rises "up from a past that's rooted in pain."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Line 29
- Line 31
- Line 32
- Lines 33-34
- Line 34
- Line 35
- Line 36
- Line 37
- Line 38
- Line 39
- Line 40
- Line 41
- Line 42
- Line 43

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears frequently in "Still I Rise." It functions similarly to consonance by enhancing the musicality of the poem and stressing the underlying rhythm across lines. Assonance can also draw attention to particular phrases and images.

For example, take lines 5-6, where the speaker directly addresses her oppressor using an interrogative and cheeky tone:

> Does my sassiness upset you?
> Why are you beset with gloom?

The long /oo/ sound that reoccurs across the two lines emphasizes the speaker's direct address of "you." This lends an air of confidence and relentlessness to the speaker's questions. Clearly, she is unafraid to confront her oppressor.

One of the most prominent examples of assonance is the repetition of the long /i/ sound. Not only is this present in the repeated refrain of the poem, "I rise," but it also appears with regularity throughout the poem. Words like "lies," "I've," "like," "tides," "high," "eyes," "cries," "surprise," "thighs," and "wide" all maintain this assonant rhythm across the stanzas. This assonance in a constant sonic reminder for the reader of the refrain "I rise" and emphasizes its importance for the poem.

Moreover, all the end rhymes in the poem are assonant. This pattern also contributes to the overall musical and pleasing quality of the poem. There is a rolling rhythm to each stanza, as well as across stanzas. This rhythm pulls the reader through the poem and encourages further reflection on certain phrases and images.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "me," "history"
- **Line 2:** "With," "bitter," "twisted," "lies"
- **Lines 4-4:** "But still, / dust, I'll "
- **Line 4:** "like," "rise"
- **Line 5:** "upset," "you"
- **Line 6:** "Why," "you," "beset," "gloom"
- **Line 7:** "I," "walk," "like," "I've," "got"

- **Line 8:** “Pumping,” “in,” “my,” “living,” “room”
- **Line 9:** “like,” “like”
- **Line 10:** “tides”
- **Line 11:** “like,” “high”
- **Lines 11-12:** “springing / , / Still I'll ”
- **Line 12:** “rise”
- **Line 13:** “see,” “me”
- **Line 14:** “Bowed,” “lowered ,” “eyes”
- **Line 15:** “Shoulders,” “down”
- **Lines 15-16:** “teardrops, / Weakened by my ”
- **Line 16:** “soulful,” “cries”
- **Line 18:** “hard”
- **Line 19:** “I,” “like,” “I've,” “mines”
- **Line 20:** “my,” “backyard”
- **Line 21:** “You,” “shoot”
- **Line 22:** “You,” “eyes”
- **Line 23:** “You”
- **Line 24:** “like,” “I'll ,” “rise”
- **Line 25:** “sexiness upset”
- **Line 26:** “surprise”
- **Line 27:** “I,” “like ,” “I've,” “diamonds”
- **Line 28:** “thighs”
- **Line 29:** “huts,” “shame”
- **Line 30:** “I rise”
- **Line 31:** “Up,” “past that's,” “pain”
- **Line 32:** “I rise”
- **Line 33:** “I'm,” “wide”
- **Line 34:** “Welling,” “swelling,” “I ,” “tide”
- **Line 35:** “behind,” “nights,” “fear”
- **Line 36:** “I rise”
- **Line 37:** “wondrously,” “clear”
- **Line 38:** “I rise”
- **Line 39:** “Bringing,” “gifts,” “my,” “gave”
- **Line 40:** “I,” “slave”
- **Lines 41-43:** “I rise / I rise / I rise”

VOCABULARY

Trod (Line 3) - The past tense of "tread," which means to step or walk. Here, Angelou uses "trod" to describe the oppressor trampling the speaker and crushing her into the dirt.

Beset (Line 6) - To be set upon or attacked by. Within the poem, the speaker wonders why gloom has set upon the oppressor's state of mind.

Gloom (Line 6) - Sadness, a low mood. The speaker here wonders why her oppressor seems so depressed.

Oil wells (Line 7) - A well drilled into the earth to bring oil to the surface. As oil is an expensive and limited natural resource, oil wells are a source of wealth for their owners.

Springing (Line 11) - To "spring" is to leap into the air. Here, hopes are metaphorically leaping joyfully high into the air. The word "springing" also contains the word "spring," which is a hopeful season associated with rebirth.

Soulful (Line 16) - Expressing profound and heartfelt feeling. The speaker's "soulful cries" express her deep sorrow and pain.

Huts (Line 29) - A small and crude shelter. Here, "huts" is a reference to the crude housing for enslaved peoples on plantations.

Rooted (Line 31) - Having roots in; grounded in.

Welling (Line 34) - A rising forth of, usually in reference to a liquid. Here, the waves of the ocean rise forth.

Bear (Line 34) - Carry, bring. The speaker, as an ocean, is bringing in the tide upon the shore.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Still I Rise" is composed of three different types of stanzas:

1. 7 rhymed quatrains
2. 1 sestet
3. 1 nine-line stanza

The poem begins with seven rhymed quatrains (four-line stanzas) that introduce the antagonistic relationship between the speaker and the "you" figure. These quatrains make is clear that the "you" hopes to oppress the speaker. The speaker, however, remains defiant by living with joy and rising above hatred and prejudice.

As the poem progresses, the form shifts from quatrains to a sestet, or six-line stanza. Thus, just as the speaker subverts her oppressor's expectations by rising despite his oppression and hatred, so too does the poem subverts *readers'* expectations of the form. The shift in form also indicates a tonal shift. The speaker no longer addresses her oppressor in a tongue-in-cheek dialogue. Instead, the sestet is comprised of assertions of her own power that stand alone. These assertions are filled with solemnity and confidence.

The last stanza shifts again from a sestet to a nine-line stanza. The first six lines of this last stanza are a structural echo of the previous stanza in form and rhyme scheme. However, this last stanza has an additional three lines, all of which consist solely of the phrase "I rise." The use of repetition and epizeuxis in these last three lines highlight the importance of the phrase and affirm it as the poem's refrain. There is a resounding triumph in the speaker's declaration of her rise.

The clear progression of shifts in form and tone provide contributes to readers' satisfaction in their experience of the poem. The ending tone of triumph, toward which the form of the poem builds, is a message of hope for oppressed and

marginalized people.

METER

Angelou uses meter in "Still I Rise" to emphasize and highlight certain moods; shifts in meter, therefore, often indicate a shift in mood. There is no single, overarching meter guiding the poem, which can be read with various inflections; Angelou's poetry is often best appreciated when read aloud, and different readers may stress different words.

That said, Angelou often uses a clear trochaic rhythm, also known as "falling rhythm." The first three lines, for example, are dominated by trochees (a poetic foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable):

> You may write me down in history
> With your bitter, twisted lies,
> You may trod me in the very dirt

The first feet here—"You may," "With your," and again "You may"—could arguably be scanned as spondees (a foot consisting of two stressed syllables in a row) or even pyrrhics (two unstressed syllables in a row); it all depends on the reader. More important than getting bogged down in terminology is appreciating the lines' general sensation of falling rhythm, the sound of the poem moving from an emphasized beat to an unstressed beat again and again—DUM da DUM da. However, in the last line of the stanza, the meter changes to almost the exact opposite of what has come thus far in the poem—da DUM da DUM:

> But still, like dust, I'll rise.

The shift to roughly iambic, or "rising meter," highlights the positive response of the speaker to her oppressor. Despite his hatred and prejudice, she will rise above him. The content and tone of the line is a direct contrast to the content and tone of the first three lines. The shift in the meter reflects and emphasizes that change. The meter of the sixth stanza ("You may shoot ... But still, like air, I'll rise.") is an echo of the form and function of the first.

Angelou also uses the rhythm of the meter to enhance the imagery of her lines. Take stanza 7, for example, which is again written in generally trochaic meter:

> 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?

Again, it's possible to read this a bit differently—some readers might not stress "That I," for example. The overall regularity of the meter's rhythm, however, evokes the rhythm of the speaker's "dance." The image of diamonds embedded on the speaker's body is a hypnotizing one. The relatively steady rhythm, too, of the lines, matches that hypnotic imagery.

Another way Angelou uses meter is to increase emphasis on a phrase or idea. For example, the phrase "I rise" itself is another spondee—two stresses in a row, creating additional emphasis on the phrase and highlighting its importance as the poem's central image and message of rising above oppression.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Still I Rise" works a lot like the poem's form; shifts in the rhyme scheme indicate shifts in tone and content. The rhyme scheme within the first seven quatrains establishes an initial pattern. The first and third lines are unrhymed, while the second and fourth lines rhyme. The overall rhyme scheme of the quatrains is thus:

> ABCB

The most common rhyme (the B rhyme) is based on the long /i/ sound. This rhyme includes, significantly, the word "rise." As the idea of rising above oppression is the overarching message of the poem, each B rhyme is an evocation of this central idea and is carried throughout the poem.

The final two stanzas, however, subvert previously established patterns of both form and rhyme scheme. This shift in pattern indicates shifts in content and tone. In these last two stanzas, the speaker no longer directly addresses or engages in dialogue with her oppressor. Instead, these last two stanzas are stand-alone assertions of the speaker's power and transformative rise. Furthermore, this subversion of the established rhyme scheme, in defiance of *readers'* expectations, is an interesting echo of the *speaker's* subversion of her *oppressor's* expectations.

Taking a closer look, the rhyme schemes of the eighth stanza is as follows:

> ABABCC

And here's how that pattern actually plays out:

> ... shame (A)
> I rise (B)
> ... pain (A)
> I rise (B)
> ... wide, (C)
> ... tide. (C)

Note that the B rhyme here is in fact just a direct repetition of the word "rise." "[W]ide" and "tide"—which form a perfect rhyming couplet with each other—*also* chime with "rise" because of their assonant long /i/ sound.

The final stanza is then:

> ABABCCBBB

Once again, the B rhyme here is actually just repetition of the

word "rise." The long /i/ sound has echoed throughout the poem, and it thus culminates in this final image of the speaker in the midst of her "rise." Therefore, the rhyme scheme helps build toward the climax of the poem and relate its central message of rising defiantly above oppression.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Still I Rise" is someone who faces unjust hatred and prejudice from society. She is also clearly a person who is unafraid to confront her oppressors and mock them with a series of cheeky rhetorical questions. Finally, she is also confident enough to assert her inevitable rise above such antipathy.

More specifically, the speaker of "Still I Rise" is strongly implied to be Angelou herself (which is why we've chosen to use female pronouns in reference to the speaker throughout this guide). The reference to the speaker "danc[ing] like [she's] got diamonds/ At the meeting of [her] thighs" is, perhaps, a nod to Angelou's past as a nightclub dancer. The allusions to slavery and the metaphor comparing the speaker to a "black ocean" also imply that the speaker is a black person living in the western world.

That said, the speaker can also be considered more broadly as representative of any person facing the indignity of racism and oppression. The speaker, who successfully rises above such oppression at the end of the poem, can then be viewed as a symbol of hope for marginalized peoples around the world.

SETTING

"Still I Rise" does not have a setting beyond that of modern society in general. Within this society, there are oppressors ("you") who are filled with hatred and prejudice, and there are those (the speaker) who are marginalized. As the poem progresses, the speaker reveals that this society is one that has had a shameful history of slavery. While the poem is implied to specifically refer to the historical oppression of black people, the lack of specific setting helps the poem's message of triumph in the face of prejudice and hate feel universal.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Still I Rise" was published in 1978 in Maya Angelou's third volume of poetry, *And Still I Rise*. At this point in her career, Angelou was already an established writer, having previously produced six plays, three autobiographies (including the famous *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*), two poetry books, and one spoken-word album. After publication, "Still I Rise" became not only one of the most famous poems from its collection, but also one of the most famous and well-known poems of Angelou's career.

Much of Angelous's poetry is often autobiographical and as such tackles issues related to black identity and womanhood. Angelou herself once said she felt she "was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass—the slave narrative" in her use of personal narrative in her work. A singer, songwriter, dancer, playwright, and actress, Angelou also often blended recitation, theater, music, and dance in her performances onstage. Perhaps it's no wonder then that Angelou's poetry has often been described by as even better heard than read. Indeed, "Still I Rise" can perhaps best be appreciated through performance.

The performative quality of Angelou's poetry has roots in African American oral traditions as well as in the Harlem Renaissance, a movement centered on black arts and expression in the 1920s. The poetry at the time was heavily influenced by jazz rhythms. Additionally, poetry and the literature produced by Harlem Renaissance writers focused on and celebrated blackness. Oftentimes poets, such as Langston Hughes (whom Angelou counted as an influence on her work), were writers as well as social activists. Angelou herself joined the Harlem Writers Guild in the 1950s, alongside other prominent black authors (such as James Baldwin).

Angelou's influence on American literature is immeasurable. Her performances onstage have had a large impact on modern slam poetry, a popular contemporary genre of poetry meant to be read aloud. "Still I Rise" has also influenced and inspired responses from artists and writers and been recited by well-known figures from Nicki Minaj to Serena Williams. The poem's message of rising above oppression and triumphing over hatred has long resonated, and in all likelihood will continue to resonate, with readers across the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Angelou wrote "Still I Rise" in the decade following the American Civil Rights movement. This movement was focused on achieving equality for black people and other people of color in the United States. During this time, activists were able to successfully achieve landmark legislation and judicial rulings, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Angelou herself was a passionate Civil Rights activist and in fact worked for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The assassination of Dr. King, one of the most prominent and inspirational leaders of the movement, in 1968 was a terrible loss to the black community and the movement as a whole. Of course, the fight for equality did not end there.

Angelou wrote this poem in the late 1970s, during the Post-Civil Rights Movement Era—though, of course, racism continued to persist long past the movement's end. The black

feminist movement had also found strength by this time, fueled by disappointment within the broader Civil Rights and feminist movements.

Racism, hatred, and prejudice continue to persist in America. Thus, it is no wonder that "Still I Rise," a poem about overcoming oppression, continues to resonate and remain relevant for so many people today.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Still I Rise" and Today's America — Read about the relevance and meaning of "Still I Rise" to America today. (https://www.mic.com/articles/90129/maya-angelou-s-still-i-rise-holds-a-powerful-lesson-for-today-s-america)
- The Political Power of "Still I Rise" — Learn how the poem has remained relevant for contemporary political figures and celebrities. (https://qz.com/1668570/history-of-maya-angelous-still-i-rise/)
- "Still I Rise" Art Exhibit — Learn how other artists have been inspired by and responded to Angelou's poem. (https://massmoca.org/event/still-i-rise/)
- Maya Angelou Recites "Still I Rise" — Listen to the poet read "Still I Rise" aloud. (https://youtu.be/JqOqo50LSZ0)
- "Still I Rise" Music Video — Watch a video that creatively integrates Angelou's recitation of the poem with relevant images. (https://youtu.be/fthuqMaPe0Y)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- Caged Bird

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Chen, Wendy. "*Still I Rise.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Chen, Wendy. "*Still I Rise.*" LitCharts LLC, October 28, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/maya-angelou/still-i-rise.