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Solving Inequality and Discrimination Through Poetry

Maya Angelou was an African-American poet best known for her poems exploring the struggle to survive in a discriminatory society. Her structure, diction, and controversial themes have helped her to gain the fame and belovedness which she holds today; not just among blacks and women, but among communities and people of every race and gender. In her poetry, Angelou relies heavily on figurative language, imagery, repetition, various rhyming schemes, profanity, and short lines as well as short stanzas when writing about racism, sexism, and social survival.

Angelou uses many unique structural techniques in her poetry. Most notably, she often chooses to write shorter lines rather than longer lines, perhaps to increase the meaning of and emphasis on each individual word and idea in each line. She also tends to write in short stanzas, though there are many exceptions to this. In some of her poems such as “Artful Pose” (Angelou 84), the writer composes stanzas of varying lengths. In this particular poem, the first stanza is the longest, and the third and last stanza is the shortest, with the second stanza being shorter than the first but longer than the last. Occasionally, Angelou experiments with indentation and repetition of structure, such as in her poem “Lord, In My Heart” (Angelou 81). The poet’s structural techniques excellently complement her language choices and numerous linguistic techniques.

Angelou effectively works figurative language such as metaphors, similes, and personification into her poetry. She also uses imagery and repetition fairly abundantly, and makes an effort to work African-American cultural references into her poetry as well. One example of figurative language in Angelou's poetry is the usage of a simile in her poem "Where We Belong, A Duet" (Angelou 119): "Then you rose into my life / Like a promised sunrise" (Angelou ll 30-31). To add to her appeal to African-American readers, Angelou uses many metaphors that reference black slavery, such as the one in her poem "Junkie Monkey Reel" (Angelou 130): "Routes are gone beneath the tracks / Of desert caravans, pre-slavery / Years ago" (Angelou ll 13-15). In addition to her reliance on figurative language, Angelou often finds creative ways to incorporate imagery into her poems, intensifying the emotion in her linguistic schemes. She combines this imagery with sensuous language in her poem "A Georgia Song" (Angelou 175): "Tender evening poignancies of Magnolia and the great green / Smell of fresh sweat" (Angelou ll 3-5). In this quote, the reader can picture the magnolia in all of its beauty, while also being able to imagine the smell of sweat in the hot Georgia sun. Repetition is another technique commonly used by Angelou, such as her utilization of anaphora in her poem "Phenomenal Woman" (Angelou 121): "The span of my hips, / The stride of my step, / The curl of my lips" (Angelou ll 7-9). The repetition in her poems allows her to create a smooth rhythm, and also works to complement her rhyming schemes, such as her rhyming of "hips" with "lips" in "Phenomenal Woman" (Angelou 121). Angelou adds to her controversial messages by using profanity fairly frequently, specifically the 'n' word, which complements the contentious messages she sends to her readers through her choices of themes and ideas.

Angelou focuses her writing primarily on racism and sexism, and uses her own experience as a black woman to intensify the ethical appeal of her writing. She makes a clear effort to reference famous and influential African-American figures in many of her poems, such as “Thank You, Lord” (Angelou 166): “A Malcolm, / Martin, / Du Bois” (Angelou ll 6-8). She also makes many references to color, specifically skin color, such as in “I Almost Remember” (Angelou 92): “I see the black / brown hands and / white thin yellowed fingers” (Angelou ll 19-21). She most likely makes these references to skin color and other physical features belonging primarily to Afro-American individuals to emphasize how superficial the world is, and also to give African-Americans a kind and vulnerable image in the eyes of the reader. Angelou does not just speak for herself, but for her entire gender and race. There is a strong theme of survival in her poetry, probably relating to her own strain to survive as a black female in such a superficial, sexist, and racist society.

Throughout her poetry, Maya Angelou relies heavily on figurative language, imagery, repetition, profanity, various rhyming schemes, and short lines as well as short stanzas when writing about racism, sexism, and the struggle for social survival. She uses unique structural techniques, linguistic choices, and themes to enrich the experience of her readers, and to put emphasis on certain ideas that she believes are most important and relevant. Her prominence as a civil rights and women’s rights activist is clearly justified in her tendentious poetry, and she will forever be an important image and figure in the fight for social justice and legal equity for all.