Your Name

Instructor Name

Course Number

Date

Title: Maya Angelou

Normally poetry is always about beautiful analogies and breath-taking rhythms. The best poems are those which make the reader feel like the poet is talking privately and solely to them. Nevertheless, Angelou's poems are not about intense conversations, they are about intense feelings. Since, one would always forget what they have been said, but never how they felt. Maya Angelou's poems had an edge, for they were not a palette of literature, but a garden of sentiments, an instrument reflecting African-American sentiments. Maya Angelou was more of a second-wave feminist. Her focus was on equalizing the status of men and women in society, just as she focused on equalizing the status of the races and social classes. As time went on, she evolved similarly too many in the civil rights movement. She expanded her goals from equal legal rights to social justice, the idea that equality of outcome should be guaranteed by government action (Corrêa, Cláudia). She used the power of words to promote her ideas of social equality and to enlighten people of the situation in which African-Americans found themselves.

Some of the notable poems by the poetess are “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”, “Phenomenal Woman”, “The pusher”, “Still I Rise”, “Alone”, “Caged Bird” and many others. Her perspectives can be uncovered from the popular poems by her. In " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”, she says, "It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense." She was an African American, who never entered college but had acquaintance with standard American and African American English reflected in her work. A Bird in a Cage and it sings that is an added quality of sound and emotion. The caged bird, on the other hand, sings constantly because there is nothing else to do. The poem is a metaphor for living under extreme institutionalized racism and in the shadow of slavery (as an African-American growing up in pre-civil rights era America) (Saunders). Someone who has never experience slavery takes their freedom for granted. They are too busy living their lives to spend much time celebrating and creating art (singing) about their freedom. For someone living under slavery, however, "singing" is the only way to escape, for a moment, their chains. While a slave, freedom is all you can think about.

Angelou takes her writing and uses it as an instrument to demand liberation, and urges readers, regardless of race, to challenge the thinking and core beliefs of those they believe to be controlling them. Furthermore, she employs the "Call and response" style, which builds verbal and non-verbal interaction between the narrator and hearer by punctuating statements or 'calls' from the speaker with replies from the hearer. For instance in the poem, “Still I Rise, “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 poems’ overall tone is that of triumph over obstacles, presumably, the many Maya Angelou faced and documented in her works. For instance, in “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, she speaks largely to the white oppressors of African-Americans and the centuries of mistreatment and abuse they have endured. “Still I Rise" is simultaneously highly personal and highly political. When she says "But still, like dust, I'll rise," she takes something with a largely negative connotation (dust) and implies that it can instead be seen as a positive thing - encouraging readers to make the best of whatever they have. "Still I Rise" is a piece full of faith, hope, and a fierce sense of determination (Febiyanto, GATOT).

It means in spite of her hardships in life she still has the strength to move forward. That nothing she faces is strong enough to keep her down, and although she names the harsh realities and knows what she faces them for what they are, but puts her head up and pushes through it with a contributed affirmation “still I rise” with confidence with the boldness of speech. Punching back at her grueling doses of life with her own venom and power, growling, Still I rise, she almost uses the power in the pain as the strength to keep moving or rising. With every hard punch and with every hard blow that knocks her down she gets back to her feet and says is that all you, is that as hard as you hit, and come on hit me with your best shot fire away. That is the true meaning of “still I rise”. She is like Rocky talking smack to Apollo. She means to encourage herself to continue the fight continue to live and to succeed no matter what.

Maya Angelou's poem "The Pusher" is a poem stylized as rap talking about the difference between black ethnic pride and real pride. She paints the picture of a young black man who has read a few sentences about Malcolm X, enough to want to call fear into the hearts of white men and calling for pride in their heritage via the wearing of African style clothing and joining in the call for solidarity. But she implies that this young man's pride is based on ignorance via the reference to breathing slaughter to the Malcolm X Institute. She implies his sole use of that Institute and the MLK library is to stash his drugs. Her last stanza refers to the terrible death to people of any race due to drugs and the drug culture which destroys individuals, families, and society. She basically says the pusher undermines everything that could be gained in terms of black solidarity and pride in heritage.

Just as she was focused on reducing the social equalities, her poem “Phenomenal Woman” reflects on how strong and powerful a woman can be (Angelou). The tone of the poem is that of a confident woman who is not bothered by what others think of her. It asserts that the beauty of a woman is more than what others think of her physical features. She also refutes the idea of distorted beauty and emphasizes the significance of inner beauty. The true beauty lies within, is the central idea of the poem that rejects the standards of beauty set by society and only considers a woman beautiful who possess that so-called traits. She utilizes the self-assurance mantra, “Cause I'm a woman, Phenomenally, Phenomenal woman, That's me”, to give confidence to other women (Carpenter, Tracy, and Victor). She also wants others to consider her a phenomenal woman.

The idea of human beings, how equal are they despite having many differences are reflected in her poem, “Human Family”. This poem also centers on the themes of racism, family and social equality. It makes a strong statement that there are differences throughout the family yet the similarities are more than differences. Every human belongs to one race, the human race. Throughout the poem, she focuses on the differences but in the end, deliberates that similarities are more than the dissimilarities. Being a civil rights activist, she acknowledges the difference among the people yet emphasizing the importance of similarities based on hat everyone deserves to be treated fair and equal (Agins, Donna). She wants others to forget about people's races while they treat them, and must not discriminate since everyone has the rights that God grants him or her being human. The ultimate goal of her in this poem is to promote a message of equality.

'On the Pulse of Morning' was written for President Bill Clinton's inauguration on January 20, 1993, and since Clinton's inaugural had a recurring subject of equality. Angelou symbolized this by saying in her poem, "the notion of an inclusive America in which all people, regardless of their race, creed, or ethnic origin, would be valued members of the society. The poem emphasizes the significance of diversity, change over time, and equality and as human beings, we humans have more similarities than dissimilarities. we are more alike than unalike. This poem also talks about survival and it calls people to have the creative energy progress rather than rip down. The themes of diversity, equality ("we are more alike than unalike"), and social change in Clinton's address neatly dovetailed with similar themes in Angelou's inauguration poem.

To sum up, like many other civil rights activists Maya Angelou used the power of words and poetry to explore the issues faced by the black community at that time. In addition, through her poems, she promoted social, racial and gender equality in the ways discussed above. It told people they are not the only ones. Besides, her work is a manifestation of the fact that nothing is better than poetry, which imbibes away the pain stuck to the darkest corners of peoples’ hearts, and rinses those corners with the soft realization of existence. She quoted her mission as, "My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style."

**Works Cited**

Agins, Donna Brown. *Maya Angelou: A Biography of an Award-winning Poet and Civil Rights Activist*. Enslow Publishing, LLC, 2013.

Angelou, Maya. "Phenomenal woman." And still I rise (1978): 8-10.

Carpenter-Aeby, Tracy, and Victor Aeby. "Rewriting family stories during successful transition from an alternative school: one Student's story of “violent female” to “phenomenal woman”." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 19.3 (2009): 281-297.

Corrêa, Cláudia Maria Fernandes. "Through their voices she found her voice: women in Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." *ariel: a review of international english literature* 41.1 (2010).

Febiyanto, GATOT HENDY. "The idea of black feminism in Maya Angelou's Still I Rise and Phenomenal Woman." (2010).

Saunders, J. R. (1991). Breaking Out of the Cage: The Autobiographical Writings of Maya Angelou. *Hollins Critic*, 28(4), 1.