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Celebrating Phenomenal Women

“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." (Maya Angelou 1) Being born into St. Louis, Montana in the era of the 1930’s- 40’s in America, Maya faced discrimination, bigotry and segregation everyday. Despite all of that, she lived a hard life as well. But through all of this, it made her a better person and made her poetry. Maya Angelou’s experience with racism is reflected in the theme of the struggle of a young black girl in segregated America and developed through her use of figurative language.

Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Montana as Marguerite Johnson through her adolescence she lived in a series of different homes. First, in St. Louis then after her parents divorce she moved in with her grandmother, in Stamps, Arkansas. Then, after a while she moved back and forth from her mother, her grandmother and for a time with her father as well. When she was eight, her mother’s boyfriend raped her. She then became mute for five years after. It didn’t end there, after moving to San Francisco her and her brother ran away, becoming homeless at a point. When she finally returned to her mother, she became pregnant at sixteen and gave birth to her son. Maya Angelou also worked a various amount of jobs while residing in San Francisco. She worked as a waitress, a cook, a prostitute, a madam and even a dancer. She took the name of Maya Angelou as a dancer in a cabaret. (“Maya Angelou …” 1)

Angelou’s theme is very powerful, and it is seen very well in especially in “four poems celebrating women” entitled Phenomenal Women, as in the title of the poem. Maya Angelou’s poems celebrate the black people, male and female. She doesn’t not go without mentioning the whites as well and holding them to account. But the way, she writes as quoted by Sandra Cookson,” her poems are generous in their directness, in the humor Angelou finds alongside her outrage and pain, in their robust embrace of life. They are truly "celebratory"” (1).

Maya’s style and rhyme is a mix of her life and all, she includes in several of her poems some figurative language, such as idioms. “She is at her best when working in the rhythms and highly inflected speech patterns of black Southern dialect, or being street-wise hip.” (“Sandra Cookson” 1). She uses a lot of straightforward rhyme, instead of free verse. In her poems, you can also sense a bit of jazz and the blues with the rhythm of rap songs and a hint of the language from the bible in a few of her poems. The majority of Angelou’s poems have the theme of the struggle and survival of black women, through everything and all. Especially seen in her poem “Still I Rise” as quoted by Sandra Cookson “… it celebrates black women while simultaneously challenging the stereotypes to which America has subjected them since the days of slavery. "Does my sassiness upset you?" "Does my haughtiness offend you?" "Does my sexiness upset you?"” (1)

In conclusion, it is clear to see Maya Angelou lived a very rough life that can be shown through her getting raped at the age of eight and becoming mute. But through all of it, she became stronger and it shows through her poetry. “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." (Maya Angelou 1)

Work Cited

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