

The Poetry of a Movement: An Analysis of 20th Century African-American Poetry

How is the subject of African-American civil rights portrayed in a selection of poems by Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes?

English A: Category 1

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This essay explores KRZ WHKXEMFWRI \$ I UFDQ \$P HUFHQFLYLQJ KW LV SRUWD HG LQ WKH SRHWU\ RI ~~BRDGG / \$QVMG~~+ XJKH. The scope of this essay includes the various contexts for the two poets and their poems as well as the language usage within their writing to versify a complex subject rooted in the earliest history of African-American integrati

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Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes are icons in the development of literature and their work thoroughly expresses the subject of African-American civil rights, despite their different contexts. The Civil Rights Movement is often bookended with

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Throughout the civil rights era, the African-American voice in literature slowly emerged, becoming an expressive channel with which to expand the educational opportunities for the African-American population formerly known as slaves. Even before the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans were expressing themselves and their collective struggles. As early as the 19th century, a slave narrative began to surface, characterizing the discrimination they faced. This was strengthened by the era of segregation that followed the Civil War (Andrews). In the 20th century, several platforms for African-American writers were created such as the Colored American Magazine and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, with the sponsorship of poetry readings, community theatres and literary magazines (Andrews). In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance catalyzed the advancement of the literature of what was called the New Negro Movement (Andrews). "New negroes" were characterized as having a new "self-confidence" and "assertiveness" and were encouraged to question white supremacy and promote racial pride in their writing (Andrews).

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One influential writer and poet that grew out of the Harlem Renaissance was James Mercer Langston Hughes. Born in 1902 to Carrie and James Hughes as an only child, Hughes grew up in Missouri and Kansas after his parents separated (Bloom). He later ended up in New York, guided by a keen desire to experience Harlem and his writing received ot

describes her symbolic legacy over generations. It epitomizes the arising confident narrative that sprung from this time period (Myers and Wojahn 159) and exemplifies Hughes' "presentation of the matriarchal archetype" seen in several of his poems (Miller). By giving voice to a mother as a muted yet relatable figure, he highlights the unity of African-Americans over generations. "Let America Be America Again" was written by Hughes in 1935 (Hughes 10). The poem explores the political perspective of discrimination faced by African-Americans and questions the American dream. Angelou also explores the subject of African-American civil rights in her poems: "Caged Bird" and "Million Man March Poem" "Caged Bird" was published in 1983 as part of Angelou's collection

this concept to further express the perpetual struggle for freedom. She writes in the third stanza, "You have been paid for in a distant place, / The old ones remind us that slavery's chains / Have paid for our freedom again and again" (22-24). A payment is considered a final, non-negotiable action and by integrating "again and again," Angelou is suggesting that the sacrifices made during slavery have never sufficed to fully pay for freedom. Literary critic Jacqueline Thursby affirms this in saying, "The caged bird in the narration will never know freedom, and perhaps it senses that, but its spirit is still unbroken." Hughes analogously uses this motif in his poem "The Negro Mother" writing, "I am the dark girl who crossed the red sea / Carrying in my body the seed of the free" (7-8). Later in the poem, the mother refers to her children saying, "I had to keep on! No stopping for me - / I was the seed of the coming Free" (27-28). Through the mother's voice, Hughes is showing the reader that from slavery to civil rights, the historical sacrifices made targeted a common goal of freedom. In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes mocks the American dream in saying, "(There's never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free')" (15-16). Hughes' frequently references "the homeland of the free" and always in quotations. This subtle allusion to the American national anthem, scorns the freedom that is promised and cherished in the American dream. He says later, "And torn from Black Africa's strand I came / To build a 'homeland of the free'" (49-50). Hughes is stressing the dissonance between what was promised and the reality when it comes to African-American integration into society. In particular, poetry aids Hughes in voicing the frustrations of African-Americans by reaching them on a personal level while cogently questioning the flaws of their unequal treatment and ultimately illustrating the theme that true freedom is difficult to attain.

Hughes and Angelou use the motif of dreams to convey a similar message about the attainability of freedom and equality. In "Caged Bird," Angelou writes, "But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams," suggesting that the aspirations of those who wished to escape oppression have died repeatedly in the past, negatively connoting dreams (26). Conversely, in "The Negro Mother," Hughes takes a more optimistic approach to dreams by highlighting their indestructibility. He writes, "I nourished the dream that nothing could smother / Deep in my breast – the Negro Mother" (29-30). The rhyme and cadence highlights the pride in this proclamation and supportm y

rebellion for the bird. This parallels the context of the piece as non-violent protests, like those led by Martin Luther King Jr., were used when other forms of rebellion were restricted by African-American circumstances, promoting a peaceful approach to seeking equality. Song is also a symbol in Hughes' poem, "The Negro Mother." In the second stanza he writes, "Three hundred years in the deepest South: / But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth" (15-16). Here, song symbolizes hope and faith as the mother characterizes herself as a vehicle of the divine intentions of God. In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes also uses song as a symbol of hope in saying:

For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung (56-59).

In "The Negro Mother," Hughes uses a seed as a symbol of hope and new beginnings as it is twice presented as the seed of imminent "freedom". Hughes also uses a torch as a symbol of hope to move from darkness to light, paralleling a transition from hopeless to promising circumstances. Both poets' use of these symbols highlights hope in the face of adversity. This optimistic message is one that reflects a

Hughes and Angelou use the structure of their poems to portray the subject of African-American civil rights. Angelou structures “Caged Bird” and “Million Man March Poem” in similar form and progression. They both have clear rhyme schemes but variable line length and syllable count. The six stanzas of “Caged Bird” alternate between the caged bird and free bird descriptions and the third stanza is repeated in the last one. She starts with three septets, then two quatrains, and an octet. “Million Man March Poem” is longer with seven stanzas and the first stanza repeated three times. In the second half of the poem, the stanzas get longer until the last three lines, composed of a rhyming couplet and a stand alone line. Hughes, however, writes “The Negro Mother” with less uniform organization to versify the way a mother would address her children. While Hughes does employ an AABB rhyme scheme and all lines have similar lengths, the poem is less religiously divided and speaks to Hughes’ confidence and experience as a poet. “Let America Be America Again,” the longest of the four poems, is noticeably more structured. It has 13 main stanzas, with several stand-alone line interjections and similar line length. The construction of the four poems are closely related to their function. “Let America Be America Again” addresses the more political aspects of African-American civil rights so the metrical structure and cadence delivers this message as a speaker might deliver their speech to an audience. Literary critic Jacqueline Thursby wrote about “Million Man March Poem”: “The poem has a strong cadence, and in 1995, when Angelou read it to the crowd...the massive gathering was quiet and listened to her respectfully.” “Million Man March Poem” and “Let America Be America Again” were written for political purposes and their functions are perhaps best understood when spoken aloud. One does not need to see the poems on paper to appreciate their cadence or construction and for this reason, they are accessible to the wide audience Thursby describes.

Hughes and Angelou utilize several poetic devices to convey the subject of African-American civil rights. In "Caged Bird," personification creates bold visuals that aid in her characterization of the birds like, "The free bird leaps / on the back of the wind" (1-2). Then describing the caged bird: "his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream" (27). The personification of the tranquil wind contrasts the dark personification of a shadow. This juxtaposition emphasizes the sheer disparity between the lifestyles of the two birds and as Thursby observes, it "contrasts the beauty of freedom and the tragedy of confinement." In "Million Man March Poem," Angelou uses ana

leeches drawing blood. Angelou's "Caged Bird" also uses the extended metaphor of birds to represent the human condition under oppression. Hughes uses alliteration in "The Negro Mother" saying, "strong in struggle and strife," effectively drawing attention to those words and highlighting the strength in African-American resilience (43). In general, Hughes use of poetic devices bring a more immediate effect whereas Angelou's subtle metaphors require critical reflection to appreciate. However, the effect remains the same. The conventions of poetry allow both poets to convey their perspective on civil rights in a way that highlights the beauty and strength of what other mediums might focus on as a primarily political movement.

With a distinctive mood, Hughes and Angelou are able to eloquently portray the campaign for African-American civil rights. These moods echo the emotions of African-Americans and emphasize the solidarity in rallying behind the cause for equal rights. In "Caged Bird," Angelou incorporates several mood shifts corresponding to the juxtaposition of the caged and free bird descriptions. The first stanza has somewhat of a tranquil mood that shifts to a sympathetic mood in the second and third stanzas as she describes the caged bird. In the fourth stanza, it is more peaceful and in the fifth and sixth stanzas, the mood changes to somber and grim. By paralleling the mood shifts with the caged bird and free bird sections, the reader becomes immersed in the dynamic progression of the characters of both birds and is able to see a reflection of human emotions in the them. In "Million Man March Poem," the mood commences as helpless. Angelou directly addresses the reader by saying, "Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound, / You couldn't even call out my name" (7-8). However, following the fourth stanza, the mood becomes significantly more triumphant and hopeful. Perhaps what most exemplifies this mood are the last three lines of the poem: "The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain / We are a going-on people who will rise again. / And still we rise" (50-52).

The triumphant tone aids Angelou in emphasizing the theme that solidarity is necessary in overcoming adversity using a first-person narrative. The progression of the mood in Hughes' poem, "The Negro Mother," is similar. In the first stanza, the mood is pitiful and sympathetic as the mother describes life as a slave. However, like "Million Man March Poem," this shifts in the second and third stanzas to hopeful and optimistic as she describes her desires for the future generations. Hughes

for still," presenting a contrast

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Hughes and Angelou published their poems in varying contexts, the earliest and latest of the four being 64 years apart. However, the parallels in their portrayal of the subject of the African-American struggle for civil rights demonstrate both the endurance of the topic, and the literature of the two writers. While maintaining a distinctive style, both writers successfully employ the motifs of freedom and dreams, symbolism and various poetic devices. Their poems, written with several tone and mood shifts and a structure suited to their function, passionately describe different themes related to African-American civil rights. The conventions of poetry like rhyme and rhythm allow Hughes and Angelou to impact the reader in a way that any other medium could hardly achieve. Hughes and Angelou's works display similitude in the devices used and themes uncovered, but are scarcely the same. Hughes wrote his poems during a period of development for the African-American narrative and his belief in the promotion of African-American self-esteem is reflected in the optimism of "The Negro Mother" and "Let America Be America Again." Angelou's "Caged Bird" foreshadows a gloomy future for the oppressed whereas her "Million Man March Poem" suggests that there is strength in unity. Context aside, each poem points to a continuous struggle for freedom and equality that is yet to be achieved. Their anthemic works mark the historical significance of the use of literature to illustrate the subject and remind us of the timeless nature of this continual struggle for civil rights.

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Appendix A

Let America Be America Again
By Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers
dreamed-
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants
scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

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I am the young man, full of strength and
hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of
satisfying ne÷j e

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek-
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sungrelrel

Appendix B

The Negro Mother
By Langston Hughes

Children, I come back today
To tell you a story of the long dark way
had to

Appendix C

Million Man March Poem
By Maya Angelou

The night has been long,
The wound has been deep,
The pit has been dark,
And the walls have been steep.

Under a dead blue sky on a distant beach,
I was dragged by my braids just beyond your
reach.
Your hands were tied, your mouth was
bound,
You couldn't even call out my name.
You ~~M~~

Appendix D

Caged Bird By Maya Angelou

The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the orange sun 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 fearful trill
of the 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