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# Stylistic Analysis of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

Luijim S. Jose \*, Girlie P. Barnachea, Kathleen Kate A. Landeza, Christine R. Santiago, Patrick M. Soligam, Andrixe Jaira G. Tolentino

Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Gen. Tinio Street, Quezon District, Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines 3100.

\* For correspondence: [luijimjose@gmail.com](mailto:luijimjose@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper provides a comprehensive stylistic analysis of Maya Angelou's iconic poem "Still I Rise," focusing on phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexical levels. Through the examination of rhyme scheme, rhythm and meter, assonance, consonance, punctuation, affixation, and syntactic features, the analysis uncovers the intricate ways in which Angelou employs linguistic elements to convey themes of resilience, empowerment, and defiance. The phonological analysis reveals the poem's use of irregular rhyme and varied meter to create a dynamic and engaging rhythm. The graphological analysis highlights the strategic use of punctuation to enhance the poem's rhetorical impact. The morphological analysis examines the use of affixation to emphasize key ideas, while the lexical-syntactic analysis explores the metaphorical and simile-rich language that deepens the reader's understanding of the poet's message. This study underscores the significance of stylistic devices in enhancing the emotional and thematic depth of Angelou's work, ultimately showcasing the poem's enduring power and relevance.

*Keywords: Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" stylistic analysis, phonological level, graphological level, morphological level, lexical-syntactic features, resilience, empowerment, defiance*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou is widely recognized as one of the most significant writers in twentieth-century American history. Born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, Angelou's early life was marked by hardship and emotional turmoil. Her father,

Bailey Johnson, worked as a doorman and navy dietician, while her mother, Vivian Johnson, was a nurse and card dealer. Despite a challenging childhood, Angelou emerged as a multifaceted talent, excelling as an author, poet, memoirist, actress, screenwriter, dancer, and civil rights activist. Notably, she became the first female inaugural poet in American presidential

history, delivering a powerful poem during President Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration.

Angelou's literature profoundly explores African American realities, delving into themes such as love, loss, music, prejudice, family, identity, racism, struggle, and enslavement. Her work addresses the persistent gap between blacks and whites in America, aiming to raise awareness and uplift both black individuals and society as a whole. According to Thompson (2020), literature has the power to shape societal values and perspectives, which parallels Angelou's efforts to instill resilience and moral strength through her writings.

Angelou's third collection of poems, "And Still I Rise," was first published in 1978, with the title poem "Still I Rise" becoming one of her most celebrated and widely read works. This poem, along with others in the collection, captures the essence of Angelou's literary voice, characterized by its defiant optimism and unwavering strength. As Smith and Jones (2019) discuss, addressing the needs of marginalized communities is crucial for societal development, mirroring Angelou's aim to elevate and empower African Americans through her art.

Scholars have extensively analyzed "Still I Rise" for its thematic richness and stylistic prowess. Hagen (1997) emphasizes the poem's role in challenging societal norms and empowering marginalized voices, noting how Angelou's use of repetition and rhetorical questions serves to reinforce the poem's affirmations of self-worth and dignity. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2021) highlight the importance of impactful communication, such as community-based workshops, in fostering resilience during challenging times, similar to Angelou's literary approach in galvanizing her readers.

Further, Jose (2022) explores the semantic depth in religious texts, which can be paralleled with Angelou's ability to infuse her poetry with profound meanings that transcend the literal. This depth of interpretation is also evident in the study by Jose and Jose (2024), which provides a comprehensive stylistic analysis of modernist literature, showcasing the intricate interplay of language and meaning. This meticulous approach to literary analysis can be applied to "Still I Rise," where Angelou's masterful use of linguistic elements conveys a powerful message of resilience and hope.

In summary, Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" stands as a testament to her literary genius and her unwavering commitment to social justice. Through her evocative language and powerful themes, Angelou not only chronicles the African American experience but also inspires resilience and hope in the face of adversity. As her work continues to resonate with readers worldwide, it remains a cornerstone of contemporary American literature and a beacon of empowerment for future generations.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Stylistic analysis can be conducted through various levels, each focusing on different aspects of language. These levels of analysis are essential for a comprehensive understanding of literary works, as they explore the expressive and creative elements of a text and produce specific linguistic effects. The primary levels of stylistic analysis are:

### 2.1. Phonological Level

This level involves the study of sound patterns in a language, including word rhyming and pronunciation. It encompasses phonological processes, phonological devices, and phonotactics, which are the rules and patterns governing the distribution and organization of

phonemes within a language. Phonological devices such as consonance, assonance, and alliteration play a significant role in enhancing the auditory appeal of a text and contributing to its overall meaning and mood.

## 2.2. Graphological Level

This level focuses on the study of a language's writing system, including the formal rules of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and sentence structure. It examines how authors use graphic resources to express their ideas and achieve their communicative goals. The graphological level also considers the visual aspects of a text, such as font choices, layout, and the use of typographical elements to convey emphasis or stylistic nuances.

## 2.3. Morphological Level

This level analyzes the structure of words and their constituent parts, such as stems, root words, prefixes, and suffixes. It also examines elements of speech, intonation, and stress, as well as how context can alter a word's pronunciation and meaning. Morphological analysis helps in understanding how words are formed and how they function within a text to convey specific meanings and stylistic effects.

## 2.4. Lexical Level

This level involves the study of words and idioms in different linguistic contexts. It focuses on word formation, morphology, and semantics, examining the lexicon and word choices within a text. Lexical analysis is crucial for understanding an author's vocabulary usage, the connotations of specific words, and the overall thematic development of a literary work.

Together, these levels of stylistic analysis provide clarity and emphasize the importance of understanding literary works. They allow for a detailed exploration of how

authors use language creatively and expressively, thereby enhancing our appreciation and interpretation of their texts. By examining the phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexical levels, we gain a deeper insight into the intricate linguistic craftsmanship that underpins effective and impactful literature.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Phonological Level

#### 3.1.1. Rhyme Scheme:

- 1st Stanza:  
End rhyme: lies/rise
- 2nd Stanza:  
End rhyme: gloom/room  
Internal rhyme: like/like
- 3rd Stanza:  
End rhyme: tides/rise  
Internal rhyme: just/like
- 4th Stanza:  
End rhyme: eyes/cries
- 5th Stanza:  
End rhyme: hard/yard
- 6th Stanza:  
End rhyme: rise/eyes
- 7th Stanza:  
End rhyme: surprise/thighs
- 8th Stanza:  
End rhyme: pain/rise
- 9th Stanza:  
End rhyme: clear/rise  
Internal rhyme: terror/error
- 10th Stanza:  
End rhyme: slave/rise  
Internal rhyme: gifts/gave

Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" features an irregular rhyme structure that departs from a regular beat. Nonetheless, the poem includes internal and ending

rhymes at several points. The poem uses rhyme intentionally to enhance its rhythm, musicality, and to emphasize certain words and phrases. For instance, the words "lies" and "rise" sound alike, and this phonological choice helps convey the poem's rhythm and thematic emphasis on resilience.

### 3.1.2. Rhythm and Meter

#### 3.1.2.1. Anapestic Meter

"You may write me down in history" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Does my sassiness upset you?" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Just like moons and like suns" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Did you want to see me broken?" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Does my haughtiness offend you?" (anapestic tetrameter)

"You may shoot me with your words" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Does my sexiness upset you?" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Out of the huts of history's shame" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Leaving behind nights of terror and fear" (anapestic tetrameter)

"Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave" (anapestic tetrameter)

#### 3.1.2.2. Trochaic Meter

"But still, like dust, I'll rise." (trochaic tetrameter)

"Cause I walk like I've got oil wells" (trochaic tetrameter)

"Pumping in my living room." (trochaic tetrameter)

"Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines" (trochaic tetrameter)

"Diggin' in my own backyard." (trochaic tetrameter)

#### 3.1.2.3. Iambic Meter

"I rise" (iambic dimeter, also anapestic monometer)

"Still I'll rise" (iambic dimeter)

The poem's meter is diverse, with lines that alternate between trochaic, iambic, and anapestic rhythms. This rhythmic variation enhances the poem's dynamic and engaging nature, highlighting its themes of empowerment, defiance, and perseverance. Additionally, the repetition and parallel construction contribute to the poem's rhythmic pattern, enhancing its overall impact and memorability.

### 3.1.3. Assonance and Consonance:

#### 3.1.3.1. Assonance

- 1st Stanza: "write me down in history"

Repetition of the long "i" sound in "write," "me," and "history" creates a melodic and harmonic effect, emphasizing the speaker's assertion of being remembered despite hardship.

- 2nd Stanza: "beset with gloom"

The repetition of the long "oo" sound in "beset," "gloom," and "room" emphasizes the negative emotions felt by the speaker's critics, heightening the sense of sadness and despair.

- 3rd Stanza: "hopes springing high"

Repetition of the long "i" sound in "springing" and "high" adds to the line's uplifting and hopeful tone, highlighting the speaker's resilience and determination.

#### 3.1.3.2. Consonance

○ 1st Stanza: "your bitter, twisted lies"

The repetition of the "t" and "s" sounds in "bitter," "twisted," and "lies" emphasizes the deceitfulness of the lies while conveying a sense of bitterness and sharpness.

○ 2nd Stanza: "I walk like I've got oil wells"

Repetition of the "k" and "l" sounds in "walk," "like," "oil," and "wells" creates a flowing, rhythmic effect, emphasizing the speaker's confident stride.

○ 4th Stanza: "my soulful cries"

The repetition of the "s" and "l" sounds in "soulful" and "cries" enhances the line's mournful tone, emphasizing the speaker's deep emotional pain.

Assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds, and consonance, the repetition of consonant sounds, are used throughout the poem to create internal rhyme and enhance its aural texture. These occurrences contribute to the poem's melody, rhythm, and emotional resonance, reinforcing the themes of resistance, defiance, and empowerment.

### 3.2. Graphological Level

#### 3.2.1. Question Marks (?)

- "Does my sassiness upset you?" (Line 5)
- "Why are you beset with gloom?" (Line 6)
- "Did you want to see me broken?" (Line 13)
- "Bowed head and lowered eyes?" (Line 14)
- "Does my haughtiness offend you?" (Line 17)
- "Does my sexiness upset you?" (Line 25)
- "At the meeting of my thighs?" (Line 28)
- The use of question marks in these lines shows that the speaker challenges the reader, questioning their prejudices. This questioning tone adds power to the poem's message of resilience in the face of adversity.

#### 3.2.2. Commas (,)

- "With your bitter, twisted lies," (Line 2)
- "But still, like dust, I'll rise." (Line 4)
- "But still, like air, I'll rise." (Line 24)
- "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide," (Line 33)
- "Just like moons and like suns," (Line 9)
- "With the certainty of tides," (Line 10)
- "Just like hopes springing high," (Line 11)
- "You may shoot me with your words," (Line 21)
- "You may cut me with your eyes," (Line 22)
- "You may kill me with your hatefulness," (Line 23)
- "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave," (Line 39)

Commas are used to create pauses, emphasizing certain phrases. In lines 2, 4, 24, and 33, commas emphasize specific comparisons or create vivid imagery. In lines 9-11, commas separate parallel phrases, reinforcing imagery of resilience and natural cycles. In lines 21-23, commas separate actions, creating a rhythmic effect.

#### 3.2.3. Apostrophes (')

- 'Cause (Lines 7, 19)
- I've (Lines 7, 27)
- I'll (Lines 4, 12, 24)
- Don't (Line 18)
- Diggin' (Line 20)
- history's (Line 29)
- that's (Lines 30, 34)
- I'm (Line 31)

Apostrophes throughout these lines indicate contractions, giving the poem a more casual or conversational tone, making it more inviting and relatable.

### 3.3. Morphological Level

#### 3.3.1. Affixation (Prefix)

- "Does my sassiness upset you?" (Line 5)
- 3.3.2. Affixation (Suffix)
- "With your bitter, twisted lies," (Line 2)
  - "Does my sassiness upset you?" (Line 5)
  - "Pumping in my living room." (Line 8)
  - "With the certainty of tides," (Line 10)
  - "Just like hopes springing high," (Line 11)
  - "Did you want to see me broken?" (Line 13)
  - "Bowed head and lowered eyes?" (Line 14)
  - "Shoulders falling down like teardrops." (Line 15)
  - "Weakened by my soulful cries." (Line 16)
  - "Does my haughtiness offend you?" (Line 17)
  - "Don't you take it awful hard" (Line 18)
  - "You may kill me with your hatefulness," (Line 23)
  - "Does my sexiness upset you?" (Line 25)
  - "At the meeting of my thighs?" (Line 28)
  - "Up from a past that's rooted in pain" (Line 31)
  - "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide" (Line 33)
  - "Welling and swelling I bear in the tide." (Line 34)
  - "Leaving behind nights of terror and fear" (Line 35)
  - "Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear" (Line 36)
  - "I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (Line 38)

Prefixes and suffixes in these lines show how the poem uses affixation to alter word meanings and grammatical functions, enhancing the poem's rhythm and meaning.

### 3.4. Lexico-Syntactic Level

#### 3.4.1. Lexical Categories

- Nouns: history, chains, wells, gold mines, suns, tides, nights, terror, daybreak, gifts

- Verbs: write, rise, laugh, dance, walk, shoot, cut, kill, leave, bear
  - Adjectives: bitter, twisted, sassy, broken, haughty, sexy, black, wide
  - Adverbs: like, still, just, behind, clear
- 3.4.2. Sentence Structures
- Simple Sentences: "I rise." (Line 3, Line 38)
  - Compound Sentences: "I rise" (Line 3)
  - Complex Sentences: "Did you want to see me broken?" (Line 13)
  - Parallelism: "You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness," (Lines 21-23)
  - Repetition: "Still I'll rise." (Lines 4, 12, 24, 40)

The poem's lexico-syntactic structure shows how Maya Angelou uses a diverse range of sentence structures, including simple, compound, and complex sentences, to create a rhythm and flow that enhance the poem's meaning and impact. The use of parallelism and repetition reinforces key themes and makes the poem more memorable.

Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" employs a rich array of linguistic features that work together to create a powerful and memorable poem. The poem's phonological elements, such as rhyme and meter, give it a rhythmic and musical quality. Graphological elements, including punctuation, contribute to the poem's tone and structure. Morphological features, like affixation, enhance the meaning and impact of words. Finally, the poem's lexico-syntactic structure, including sentence variety and repetition, reinforces its themes of resilience, defiance, and empowerment. Overall, the stylistic analysis reveals how Angelou's linguistic choices work together to convey a message of strength and determination in the face of adversity.

## 4. CONCLUSION



Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" stands as a monumental work in the landscape of American literature, showcasing her profound ability to weave linguistic elements into a powerful narrative of resilience and empowerment. Through a detailed stylistic analysis, we have explored how the poem's phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic features contribute to its overall impact and meaning.

At the phonological level, Angelou's use of rhyme, rhythm, and meter creates a musical quality that enhances the poem's emotional resonance. The strategic use of internal and end rhymes, along with varying metrical patterns, underscores the poem's themes of defiance and perseverance. Assonance and consonance further enrich the poem's aural texture, adding layers of meaning and emphasizing key emotions and ideas.

Graphologically, the poem employs punctuation marks such as question marks, commas, and apostrophes to shape its tone and rhythm. These elements not only guide the reader through the text but also amplify the speaker's challenge to societal prejudices and injustices. The visual arrangement of the poem supports its oral performance, making it both a written and spoken work of art.

Morphologically, the poem's use of prefixes, suffixes, and contractions illustrates how Angelou manipulates word forms to enhance meaning and maintain the poem's rhythmic flow. These morphological choices reflect the speaker's assertiveness and the transformative power of language in articulating resistance and hope.

At the lexico-syntactic level, Angelou's careful selection of words and sentence structures creates a dynamic and engaging narrative. The poem's varied sentence types, parallel constructions, and repetitive phrases reinforce

its central message of rising above oppression and adversity. The use of unusual collocations and metaphors adds depth to the poem's imagery, inviting readers to engage with its complex layers of meaning.

In conclusion, "Still I Rise" exemplifies Maya Angelou's mastery of linguistic artistry. Her deliberate use of stylistic devices not only enhances the poem's aesthetic appeal but also powerfully conveys its themes of resilience, dignity, and empowerment. Through this poem, Angelou asserts the enduring spirit of African Americans and offers a timeless message of hope and defiance. This stylistic analysis reaffirms the importance of examining literary works through multiple linguistic lenses to fully appreciate their expressive and creative potential. Angelou's "Still I Rise" continues to inspire and uplift, cementing its place as a cornerstone of contemporary American poetry..

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