

An Analysis Of The Lexical and Contextual Meaning Of The Poem "Still I Rise" By Maya Angelou

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Abstract. *This study looks at the meanings of words and their context in Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." This poem is well-known for its message of strength and empowerment, especially for African American women during the civil rights movement. Using a qualitative approach, this research combines examining the text and interpreting its context. The lexical analysis looks at dictionary definitions of important words in the poem and their deeper meanings within the poem's context. The contextual interpretation places the poem within the larger historical and cultural background of Angelou's life and the civil rights era. The findings show that Angelou's use of language not only strengthens the poem's themes of defiance and self-worth but also deeply connects with the socio-political climate of its time. The study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the lexical and contextual meanings of some of the lines in Angelou's literary work "Still I Rise" as well as in discussions of race, identity and empowerment.*

Keywords: Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise", Lexical Meaning, Contextual Meaning .

Abstrak. Studi ini melihat arti kata-kata dan konteksnya dalam puisi Maya Angelou "Still I Rise." Puisi ini terkenal dengan pesan kekuatan dan pemberdayaannya, terutama bagi wanita Afrika-Amerika selama gerakan hak-hak sipil. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menggabungkan memeriksa teks dan menafsirkan konteksnya. Analisis leksikal melihat definisi kamus dari kata-kata penting dalam puisi dan maknanya yang lebih dalam dalam konteks puisi. Interpretasi kontekstual menempatkan puisi dalam latar belakang sejarah dan budaya yang lebih besar dari kehidupan Angelou dan era hak-hak sipil. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan bahasa Angelou tidak hanya memperkuat tema pembangkangan dan harga diri puisi tetapi juga sangat terhubung dengan iklim sosial-politik pada masanya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk memberikan pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang makna leksikal dan kontekstual dari beberapa baris dalam karya sastra Angelou "Still I Rise" serta dalam diskusi tentang ras, identitas, dan pemberdayaan.

Kata kunci: Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise", Makna Leksikal, Makna Kontekstual.

1. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" is one of the most esteemed works in American literature. The poem has become an icon for its portrayal of resilience and empowerment, particularly within the context of African American women's experiences during the civil rights movement. The background of this poem is influenced by Angelou's personal experiences and the collective struggles of African Americans against racial discrimination and injustice. In this context, "Still I Rise" not only stands as a beautiful literary piece but also as a declaration of courage and steadfastness in the face of oppression.

Related studies have extensively discussed the lexical and contextual meanings in Angelou's poetry. However, most research tends to focus on thematic and rhetorical analysis

without deeply connecting it to the historical and cultural context. Previous studies, such as those by Brennan (2020) and Dobbs (2019), examine the rhetorical strategies in this poem but do not specifically highlight how the lexical meanings of certain words can change within the poem's context. Additionally, research by Taylor (2021) and Johnson (2019) emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context in literary interpretation, yet lexical analysis often remains overlooked in these analyses.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach that simultaneously combines lexical and contextual analysis. This study not only explores the lexical meanings of the words in the poem "Still I Rise" but also how these meanings shift and are enriched by the historical and cultural context. Thus, this research fills a gap in the literature by offering a new comprehensive perspective on the interaction between lexical and contextual meanings in literary works.

The aim of this research is to analyze the lexical and contextual meanings in Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." This study aims to reveal how Angelou's word choices not only strengthen themes of resilience and empowerment but also reflect the socio-political conditions of the time. By understanding the interaction between lexical and contextual meanings, this research hopes to make a significant contribution to the study of African American literature and enrich discussions about identity, race, and empowerment.

2. THEORITICAL REVIEW

Lexical Meaning

Lexical meaning refers to the direct dictionary definitions of words. According to Dobbs (2019), in poetry, words often gain richer meanings beyond their literal definitions. In "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou uses vivid and powerful language to convey her message. For example, the word "rise" not only means to move upward but also symbolizes metaphorical elevation, strength, and defiance. The dictionary definitions of specific terms in the poem can be very different from their meanings within the poem itself (Dobbs, 2019).

Contextual Meaning

Contextual meaning involves understanding words and phrases within the larger framework of the text, historical background, and cultural significance. According to Taylor (2021), this analysis looks at how Angelou's personal history, the civil rights movement, and the broader African American experience shape the poem's themes and language choices.

Understanding the context in which "Still I Rise" was written provides deeper insight into its lexical elements and overall impact (Taylor, 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the lexical and contextual meaning of Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." Qualitative research focuses on understanding the meaning and interpretation of texts rather than quantifying data. The methodological framework combines textual analysis and contextual interpretation to explore the poem's linguistic intricacies and socio-cultural significance.

Textual analysis involves close reading and identifying key lexical elements such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs within the poem. According to Smith (2018), each word's dictionary definition is noted to understand its literal meaning and potential connotations. This analysis focuses on how Angelou's word choices contribute to the poem's themes of resilience, defiance, and self-worth (Smith, 2018). The process of textual analysis involves:

1. **Identifying Key Words:** Finding important words in the poem that have significant meanings.
2. **Examining Definitions:** Looking up dictionary definitions to understand their basic meanings.
3. **Analyzing Connotations:** Considering additional meanings and emotions the words might evoke within the poem's context.
4. **Connecting to Themes:** Linking the lexical analysis to the poem's main themes.

This study places the textual analysis within the broader historical and cultural context of African American literature and the Civil Rights Movement. As explained by Green (2020), by examining Angelou's biography, the time period in which she wrote, and the poem's thematic concerns, this approach shows how historical and cultural factors shape the poem's meaning. Contextual interpretation enriches the understanding of Angelou's literary techniques and their significance (Green, 2020). The steps involved in contextual interpretation include:

1. **Researching Historical Context:** Investigating the historical period during which the poem was written.
2. **Exploring Cultural Background:** Understanding the cultural and societal norms that influenced the poem.
3. **Analyzing Biographical Elements:** Looking at Angelou's personal life and experiences that may have influenced her writing.

4. Connecting Context to Text: Relating the historical and cultural context to the themes and language of the poem.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, researcher delve into the lexical and contextual meanings in Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." By examining key words and phrases and placing them within the historical and cultural context of the civil rights movement, we gain a deeper understanding of the powerful messages conveyed through Angelou's poetic language.

Lexical and Contextual Meaning Analysis

Here, researcher analyze several key words and phrases from "Still I Rise," exploring how their meanings contribute to the poem's overall themes.

1. *"You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies"*

- Lexical Meaning:

- Write (verb) : To record or document information.
- Bitter (adjective) : Having a sharp, pungent taste or showing anger, hurt, or resentment.
- Twisted (adjective) : Bent or distorted in shape or meaning.
- Lies (noun) : False statements made with deliberate intent to deceive.

- Contextual Meaning: In these lines, Angelou addresses the falsified narratives imposed on African Americans throughout history. The use of "write" signifies the act of recording these false accounts, while "bitter, twisted lies" highlights the emotional and moral corruption behind these distortions. This acknowledgment of historical manipulation sets the stage for the speaker's declaration of resilience and defiance.

2. *"But still, like dust, I'll rise"*

- Lexical Meaning:

- Dust (noun) : Fine, dry particles of matter.
- Rise (verb) : To move upward or to get up from a lying, sitting, or kneeling posture.
- Contextual Meaning: Dust, often overlooked and seen as insignificant, symbolizes something that people try to sweep away or ignore. By comparing herself to dust that rises, Angelou emphasizes the unstoppable nature of her resilience. Despite attempts to suppress and ignore her, she will continue to rise and assert her presence, portraying the idea of emerging from oppression and claiming one's worth.

3. "You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise"

• Lexical Meaning:

- Trod (verb, past tense of tread): To step on or walk over.
- Dirt (noun) : Soil or earth, often used to signify something unclean or base.

- Contextual Meaning: These lines reinforce the metaphor of being treated as insignificant or unworthy ("trod in the very dirt"). Despite being metaphorically stepped on and demeaned, the speaker declares that she will rise, like dust, from the ground. This repetition of "rise" emphasizes the resilience and determination to overcome oppression and degradation.

4. "You may shoot me with your words, / You may cut me with your eyes, / You may kill me with your hatefulness, / But still, like air, I'll rise"

• Lexical Meaning:

- Shoot (verb) : To fire a weapon or to hit with a missile.
- Cut (verb) : To penetrate or divide with a sharp-edged instrument.
- Kill (verb) : To cause the death of a living being.
- Hatefulness (noun): The quality of being full of hate.
- Air (noun) : The invisible gaseous substance surrounding the earth.

- Contextual Meaning: Angelou uses violent imagery to describe the ways in which she is attacked—through words, looks, and hatred. Despite these attacks, she compares herself to air, which cannot be captured or destroyed. This metaphor of air symbolizes her untouchable spirit and her ability to rise above negativity and violence.

5. "I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, / Welling and swelling I bear in the tide"

• Lexical Meaning:

- Ocean (noun) : A large body of saltwater that covers most of the Earth's surface.
- Leaping (verb) : To jump or spring a long way.
- Wide (adjective) : Having a great extent from side to side.
- Welling (verb) : To rise to the surface and flow out.
- Swelling (verb) : To become larger or rounder in size.

- Contextual Meaning: By describing herself as a "black ocean," Angelou invokes the image of immense power, depth, and expanse. The ocean's ability to leap and swell represents her strength and unstoppable force. The tide bearing in the swell signifies the

natural and inevitable rise of her spirit and presence, mirroring the unstoppable movements of the ocean.

Contextual Interpretation

Contextual interpretation involves placing the poem within its historical, cultural, and biographical context to uncover deeper layers of meaning. "Still I Rise" is deeply rooted in the socio-political climate of the civil rights movement and Angelou's personal experiences.

Historical Context

The poem reflects the broader socio-political climate of the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for racial equality. During this time, African Americans were battling systemic racism, segregation, and discrimination. Angelou's poem captures the spirit of defiance and resilience that characterized this era. By repeatedly asserting "I rise," she echoes the collective determination of African Americans to overcome oppression and assert their dignity. According to Green (2020), understanding the historical backdrop of Angelou's work enhances the interpretation of her themes of resilience and empowerment.

Cultural Significance

Angelou's repetition of "I rise" serves as a cultural anthem for marginalized communities, celebrating their heritage and unbreakable spirit. This phrase has since been adopted in various movements advocating for equality and justice. The poem's cultural impact extends beyond its immediate context, resonating with anyone who has faced and overcome adversity (Taylor, 2021).

Biographical Influences

Angelou's own life, marked by overcoming personal and systemic adversities, profoundly shapes the thematic content of the poem. Her autobiographies provide insight into her resilience and determination, mirrored in the poem's assertive tone. Angelou's experiences of racism, trauma, and empowerment are intricately woven into her poetic expression, making "Still I Rise" a deeply personal and universal declaration of strength (Brennan, 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of "Still I Rise" through lexical and contextual lenses reveals the intricate ways in which Maya Angelou crafts her message of defiance and empowerment. The lexical meanings of key words are enriched by their contextual implications, highlighting themes of resilience, self-worth, and triumph over oppression. By situating the poem within its historical and cultural context, we gain a deeper appreciation of its significance as both a literary work and a socio-political statement.

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