

# The Power of Symbolism: Unveiling Maya Angelou's Poetic Themes



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## Abstract

This study employs a dual methodology of literature review and sentiment analysis to delve into a corpus of research focused on selected poems by Maya Angelou, encompassing “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” “Still I Rise,” “Phenomenal Woman,” “When I Think about Myself”, and “Alone”. Through a meticulous examination of existing scholarly works, the research unfolds the multifaceted impact of symbolism on the thematic underpinnings inherent in Angelou’s poetry. Themes such as resilience, racial discrimination, fear of the different, unity, and the broader spectrum of the human experience resonate throughout her work. Symbolism emerges as a pivotal element, adding layers of depth to these themes and imbuing her verses with profound meaning. By transforming ordinary objects and concepts into potent symbols, Angelou invites readers to explore nuanced perspectives and connect intimately with the profound messages embedded in her poetic tapestry. This study underscores the significance of symbolism as a powerful reflection of the intricate and profound themes woven into the fabric of Maya Angelou’s poetic expression.

## Key words

imagery, symbolism, poetry analysis, literary exploration, thematic comprehension

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## 1. Introduction

The interplay of imagery and symbolism in literature serves as a conduit for conveying emotions, themes, and messages. In the poetry of Maya Angelou, these literary devices play a pivotal role in articulating the profound impact of racial discrimination on the African-American community. This study aims to explore the various types of imagery and symbolic elements employed by Angelou, contributing to a deeper understanding of the themes she addresses.

In literary works, images are activated by language and with their help, a poet is able to recall and evoke cases of bodily, sensory perception. Hence, language might then be seen as a bridge which links the outside world (to which we have access through perception) and our mind. In its most direct meaning, the word “image” is

closely related to synesthesia, that is, an example of language that denotes the sensual experiences. Most poets will use images to make abstract ideas concrete and easier to communicate them to the readers. Mental imagery is also studied by psychologists, who have categorized images in seven different groups: those that represent the five senses which are the visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory images, two which involve biological processes like breathing or heartbeat known as organic images and those that indicate a moving subject known as kinesthetic images.

### **1.1. The Aim of the Study**

Existing literature provides a strong foundation for understanding symbolic language and imagery in Maya Angelou's poems, however, the present study provides an additional tool which is sentiment analysis of the context of words that are used heavily symbolically in Maya Angelou's poems which adds a layer of understanding of her literary work. By concentrating on this research aims to extend their findings by applying a more nuanced approach to the investigation of poetry providing a deeper insight into the emotional tone of the literary work.

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the imagery and symbolism employed by Maya Angelou in her poetry. By employing literature review and a thorough literature review, the study seeks to unveil the intricate layers of meaning embedded in Angelou's language, specifically focusing on the categories of visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and kinesthetic imagery. Additionally, the study aims to examine the symbolic significance of specific words which are used symbolically at a great extent in Maya Angelou's literary work, such as "child", "eyes", and "tears", drawing on insights from existing scholarly works.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employs a dual methodology of literature review and sentiment analysis to comprehensively examine the imagery and symbolism in Maya Angelou's poetry providing insights in the emotional tone of the concordances of the words examined. The literature review, informed by Arbi's (2018) categorization of imagery types, delves into specific words like "child", "eyes", and "tears", utilizing insights from Eleftheriou (2024). The sentiment analysis will employ R Programming Language for the Sentiment Analysis of the text. This systematic examination aims to reveal patterns and emotional nuances within Angelou's language. Simultaneously, the literature review draws on scholarly works by Ulfani (2017), Rachmawati (2014), Chandler (1999), Hardianti (2016), Radhi and Abed (2016), Del Hierro (2017), Khalifa and Essam (2022), Yustisiana (2021), and Eleftheriou (2024).

This synthesis of existing knowledge establishes a theoretical framework, highlighting gaps and informing the literature review to offer a nuanced under-

standing of the imagery and symbolism in Angelou's poetic works. Sentiment analysis provides insights into the emotional tone of the verses. This study provides a concrete sample for analysis to demonstrate the potential of sentiment analysis in the investigation of literature. By applying sentiment analysis techniques to a selected corpus, the research showcases how computational tools can be used to systematically quantify emotional and thematic trends in literary texts. This approach not only allows for a more objective and scalable way of examining literary works but also reveals new possibilities for uncovering patterns and insights that may be overlooked in traditional literary analysis. Through this sample, the study highlights the efficacy of sentiment analysis as a valuable method for enhancing literary scholarship, offering a novel perspective on how digital tools can contribute to deeper understanding and interpretation of texts.

### **3. Imagery in Angelou's Poetry**

#### **3.1. Imagery in selected Poems**

Maya Angelou's poetry, renowned for its profound emotional and thematic depth, frequently employs vivid imagery to convey complex social and personal messages. To fully appreciate the richness of Angelou's work, it is crucial to examine how different types of imagery are utilized to reflect and enhance the themes presented. This analysis explores various scholarly perspectives on Angelou's use of imagery, focusing on the contributions of Arbi (2018), Ulfani (2017), Chandler (1999). Moreover, by studying the imagery and symbolic language the reader is helped to comprehend the theme of the poems.

According to Arbi, (2018, 43) in "Analysis of Imagery in Five Selected Poems by Maya Angelou", there are five types of imagery which are employed in Maya Angelou poems selected. These poems are the following: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing, Still I Rise, Phenomenal Woman, When I Think about My Self and the last is Alone". These types are visual imagery which consists of 26 words, auditory imagery which involves 11 words, tactile imagery with 1-word, gustatory imagery with 1 word too and last kinesthetic imagery which involves 20 words as well.

Ulfani's (2017) article, *Imagery in Phenomenal Woman Poetry by Maya Angelou*, provides a focused analysis of the vivid imagery used in Angelou's iconic poem. The study emphasizes how Angelou employs various forms of imagery – visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic – to celebrate the beauty, strength, and confidence of the "phenomenal woman". Ulfani explores how the poet's descriptions of physical presence, natural elements, and sensory experiences help construct a powerful image of feminine self-assurance. The article highlights Angelou's use of these poetic devices to not only define beauty on her own terms but also to challenge societal norms. Six types of imagery were identified in Angelou's poem "Phenomenal

Woman". The poem involves mostly visual imagery while the poem displays a variety of imagery types like auditory imagery, organic imagery, gustatory imagery, kinesthetic imagery and tactile imagery. The function of imagery employed in this poem is to help the readers perceive and interpret the poet's feelings and help the poet pass her message in a vivid way where the readers would be able to use their senses to perceive the poet's literary work. For instance, in the following stanza, we find the auditory images in the words *shout, talk, click of my heels*, organic imagery in the word *jump* and visual imagery in the phrase *see me passing*. The verses that include the auditory images are the following: *I don't shout or jump about, Or have to talk real loud. When you see me passing, It ought to make you proud. I say, It's in the click of my heels.*

### 3.2. Funeral Imagery

One very characteristic type of visual imagery that she uses is Funeral Imagery. Angelou employs African funeral imagery to recognize the continuity of African experience in the Black community. This type of imagery especially in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing" highlights the effects of being an assimilated, segregated and socially alienated person in the American society. According to Chandler, (1999, 239) in Funeral Imagery in Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" Through the symbolic images of death and the rituals of African burial, Angelou tries to provide an identity to the African- American people especially women by shaping a strong Black identity .

Angelou's poem shows that the concept of racism is dominant using few indicators such as diction, imagery and symbolism. Diction consists of the selection of the words that are used in the poems and in becomes Angelou's poems is particularly significant as it reflects racism. Diction can be separated into four types such as borrowing diction which involves the use of different lexical items to reach the intended meaning. Dialect is a type of diction which helps the reader interpret a literary work based on the dialect. Imagery similarly contributes to the researcher's interpretation of Angelou's poem as well as understand that it reflects racism. Symbolism is one more language style the researcher uses to see that Angelou's poem mirrors racism. It likewise becomes one of the most significant indicators since symbol outline the literal meaning of many words. Some of them are the words *Black* and *white* (Hardianti 2016, 31).

### 4. Symbolism in Maya Angelou's literary work

In terms of the symbolism that is employed consistently in Angelou's literary work, the term "symbol" is used to reflect a word or phrase that indicates an object or event which means something. A symbol consists of a word that describes a reality beyond

itself. The word “symbol” originates from the Greek term “symbolon” which means ‘identification sign’ and initially it symbolizes a piece of skeleton or another object that has worked for a personal identification. It is common that the same symbol is perceived in a different way in different cultures, places, and time periods. Symbols can be used to create a penumbra of meaning. However, the meaning of the symbol cannot consequently be specifically defined (Gill 1996).

One poem of Angelou that was investigated for its symbolism by Radhi and Abed, (2016, 77) is the poem: “Million Man March”. The poem reveals how the Afro-Americans lived in the United States and how Angelou as an African American woman responds against this life. Angelou’s consciousness and perception of rejection related to the white’s racist policies can obviously be detected. After outlining the meaning of the symbols in “Million Man March”, Angelou displays that the times of sycophancy that the Afro Americans had lived, had been long and gloomy.

The poem reveals the negative experiences of Afro-Americans in the United States. For instance, the word “night” is used as a symbol persistently to depict the negative experiences of the members of the “Black Community”.

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

Nonetheless, she likewise depicts that she is hopeful. She identifies a light of hope of experiencing freedom in the verse “This morning I look through your anguish”. Angelou uses symbolism to challenge the white’ racial policies. She writes with a mission which is the unity of the Black. She states recurrently “clap hands” as a call for the African-American to unite against all characteristics of the racial discrimination which have been made against them. She encourages her people to develop their strength from their families who have forwent themselves for freedom, and to be encouraged by their teachings to protect the rights of their race. In the last two verses of the poem, she says: “We are a going on people who will rise again” and “And still we rise”. In these verses, Angelou makes known to the world that the African-American people are determined, persevering and their pains and sufferings will not reduce their enthusiasm for redemption from sycophancy they experience. Angelou approves that they are determined and they possess the will to breakdown the manacles of slavery and to continuerising and be strong (Eleftheriou 2024).

#### **4.1. Fashion & Body Symbolism**

One more element that Maya Angelou uses symbolically is fashion. Fashion marks many significant instants in her literary works. Usually, clothing indicates significant emotions that the narrator cannot quite put into words. When she slips into prostitution, she cannot remember her first experience, only the “scratching of the man’s zipper on my upper thighs” (348). His apparel marks the narrator’s body and memory. Similarly, the narrator uses makeup to correlate her physical appearance with her inability to succeed throughout the narrative. The way Angelou places symbolism in clothing represents a more complex view of herself. Her voice refuses to reject the moments of failure, so she shows the embodiment of them instead (Del Hierro 2017, 43).

One more imagery that has been investigated by Khalifa and Essam (2022) is the African body. The study investigated Maya Angelou’s employment of imagery and conceptual metaphors of body collocates in her poetry to associate the ways she presents the African female body to the way other African poets present the same concept. According to the results of the study, Angelou uses mainly personal pronouns and less impersonal pronouns. The most frequent conceptual metaphors are: “Nation is a body”, “Nation is a family”, “Nation is a person”, “Social group is a fabric” and “Body is a container for emotions” (203).

#### **4.2. Nature & Escapism as Symbols**

The element of nature and escapism in the poem “Woman Work” was investigated by Yustisiana (2021). The study examined the symbol, imagery and figures of speech of the poem. According to the results of the study, in terms of the figurative language there are personification and apostrophe which help the narrator of the poem to endow the elements of nature giving them human qualities with the aim to feel less loneliness. Therefore, when the woman could no enjoy the human company, “the sun, the rain, the snow, dewdrops, the wind, the sky, mountains, oceans, leaves, stones, “star shine and moon glow” became her companions. The poem “Woman Work” depicts the everyday routine of a woman who had to perform the chores and then craved a break in nature. The elements of nature are described as having the potential to provide strength and comfort to the lonely woman.

#### **4.3. The symbolic use of the words “child”, “eyes” and “tears”**

Maya Angelou’s adept use of visual imagery, particularly in her portrayal of the word “child”, serves as a poignant reflection of the struggles faced by Black children within her community. While the term is predominantly employed with its literal meaning, denoting the innocence and vulnerability of the young, Angelou introduces metaphorical elements, as evident in her vivid depiction of “bony children” experiencing starvation. This metaphorical usage delves into the harsh realities of



the Black children’s plight, emphasizing the visual impact of their physical deprivation resulting from rights disparities within the community.

According to the sentiment analysis of the context of the word “children”, the concordances of the word “children” in the poems consist of 312 words and 19551 tokens. The average sentiment is negative -0.03369243 (SD=0.3392804) (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Average Sentiment for the word “children” in the Poems

element_id	word_count	sd	ave_sentiment
1	312	0.3392804	-0.03369243

As we can see, the average emotion of each emotion type is slightly above neutral. However, the words that express sadness (14) are more than the ones that express other emotions. Anticipation (14) is the next most frequent emotion and joy (12) and trust (12) follow. The least frequent emotions in the concordances are surprise (5) and disgust (6) (See Table 2).

**Table 2.** Emotion Classification for the word “children” in the Poems

element_id	emotion_type	word_count	emotion_count	sd	ave_emotion
1	anger	340	4	0.014416852	0.011764706
1	anticipation	340	14	0.072235573	0.041176471
1	anticipation_negated	340	2	0.007119352	0.005882353
1	disgust	340	6	0.023870880	0.017647059
1	fear	340	10	0.023270110	0.029411765
1	joy	340	12	0.049913476	0.035294118
1	joy_negated	340	2	0.007119352	0.005882353
1	sadness	340	17	0.068861188	0.050000000
1	sadness_negated	340	1	0.005356870	0.002941176
1	surprise	340	5	0.047861524	0.014705882
1	trust	340	12	0.055054709	0.035294118
1	trust_negated	340	2	0.007119352	0.005882353
1	anger_negated	340	0	0.000000000	0.000000000
1	disgust_negated	340	0	0.000000000	0.000000000
1	fear_negated	340	0	0.000000000	0.000000000
1	surprise_negated	340	0	0.000000000	0.000000000

In a distinctive shift, Angelou employs the word “eyes” in both a metaphorical and literal sense across her poetic and autobiographical works. In her poems, “eyes” assume a metaphorical or symbolic role, evoking positive sentiments such as wonder, admiration, or beauty. Through vivid imagery, Angelou describes eyes as “sparkling” or “shining,” creating a positive and uplifting atmosphere within the verses. Conversely, in her autobiographies, the literal usage of “eyes” takes center stage, with Angelou describing the physical appearance and expressions of individuals encountered in her life’s journey. Here, the emotional associations with “eyes” transcend the positive spectrum, encompassing emotions like sadness, fear, or anticipation, offering a nuanced exploration of the human experience.

The concordances of the word “eyes” in the poems consist of 482 words and 19267 tokens. The average sentiment is negative -0.37796447 (SD=0.3686452) (See Table 3).

**Table 3.** Average Sentiment for the word “eyes” in the Poems

element_id	word_count	sd	ave_sentiment
1	649	0.3686452	-0.37796447

The words that express sadness (14) are more than the words that express other emotion. Fear (13) and anger (9) are the next most frequent emotions. The least frequent emotions in the concordances are disgust (2) and surprise (1) (See Table 4). The use of the word “tears” in Angelou’s poetry is used metaphorically in all cases examined. In “My Guilt,” the phrase “guilt made music with the tears” creates an auditory image, symbolizing the writer’s profound feelings of guilt. Across various poems, “tears” are metaphorically compared to “crystal rags,” signifying the delicate nature of emotional expression. In “Mothering Blackness,” the use of “white tears” portrays a forgiving nature, showcasing a unique perspective on forgiveness within the context of racial struggles. Furthermore, “tears” in “On Reaching Forty” are described as “toughened,” offering a tactile dimension to the emotional experience.

**Table 4.** Emotion Classification

	emotion_type	word_count	emotion_count	sd	ave_emotion
1	anger	482	9	0.02751588	0.018672199
2	anticipation	482	3	0.02492605	0.006224066
3	anticipation_negated	482	1	0.01496711	0.002074689
4	disgust	482	2	0.01841903	0.004149378
5	fear	482	13	0.03940522	0.026970954



6	fear_negated	482	2	0.03301822	0.004149378
7	joy	482	4	0.02583322	0.008298755
8	joy_negated	482	1	0.01496711	0.002074689
9	sadness	482	14	0.05498620	0.029045643
10	sadness_negated	482	6	0.05393294	0.012448133
11	surprise	482	1	0.01122533	0.002074689
12	surprise_negated	482	1	0.01496711	0.002074689
13	trust	482	3	0.01167804	0.006224066
14	trust_negated	482	1	0.01496711	0.002074689
15	anger_negated	482	0	0.00000000	0.000000000
16	disgust_negated	482	0	0.00000000	0.000000000

In “On a Bright Day, Next Week,” the metaphorical use of tears describes the consequences of a bomb fall, highlighting the societal impact of violence. Finally, in “Equality,” tears are employed to describe the emotional release that accompanies the achievement of equality. Despite the diversity of contexts, the overarching sentiment is negative, and the most frequent emotion associated with “tears” is sadness, underscoring the pervasive emotional weight carried within Angelou’s verses. This exploration of the symbolic use of “tears” adds depth to the emotional landscape of Angelou’s poetry, revealing a nuanced portrayal of human experiences and societal challenges (Eleftheriou 2024).

The concordances of the word “tears” in the poems consist of 485 words and 19267 tokens. The average sentiment is negative  $-0.3079463$  ( $SD=0.2817488$ ) (See Table 5).

**Table 5.** Average Sentiment for the word “tears” in the Poems

element_id	word_count	sd	ave_sentiment
1	198	0.2817488	-0.3079463

As we can see, the average emotion of each emotion type is slightly above neutral. However, the words that express sadness (11) are more than the words that express other emotion. Disgust (7) and fear (7) are the next most frequent emotions. The least frequent emotions in the concordances are surprise (4) and trust (3) (See Table 6).

**Table 6.** Emotion Classification for the word “tears” in the Poems

element_id	emotion_type	word_count	emotion_count	sd	ave_emotion
1	anger	216	5	0.04299246	0.02314815
1	anticipation	216	5	0.04069624	0.02314815
1	disgust	216	7	0.04250415	0.03240741
1	fear	216	7	0.05297977	0.03240741
1	joy	216	5	0.04425298	0.02314815
1	sadness	216	11	0.08552852	0.05092593
1	surprise	216	4	0.02861695	0.01851852
1	trust	216	3	0.02295203	0.01388889
1	anger_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	anticipation_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	disgust_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	fear_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	joy_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	sadness_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	surprise_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000
1	trust_negated	216	0	0.00000000	0.00000000

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores Maya Angelou’s profound ability to intertwine personal memory with collective historical experiences through her poetry, revealing the depth of emotion and resilience in the African-American narrative. By applying sentiment analysis and literary examination to her work, this research highlights how Angelou uses powerful imagery, metaphors, and symbolism to address themes of memory, loss, and the enduring impact of historical trauma, such as slavery and displacement. The findings demonstrate that Angelou’s poetry not only reflects individual emotions but also serves as a vehicle for exploring broader social issues, inviting readers to engage with both personal and collective histories. Through a blend of traditional literary analysis and computational tools like sentiment analysis, this study bridges the gap between literary scholarship and digital methodologies, showing the potential for new insights into complex literary texts. Angelou’s poetic legacy thus emerges not only as an artistic achievement but as a vital reflection of cultural and historical consciousness, offering a nuanced perspective on the African-American experience.

Sentiment analysis, as applied to literature, offers a powerful tool for quantifying and interpreting emotional tones and trends within a text. In the context of literary analysis, it allows for an objective assessment of emotional arcs, patterns of sentiment, and shifts in mood across a work or corpus. By providing data-driven insights into the emotional undercurrents of a narrative, sentiment analysis can uncover layers of meaning that may not be immediately apparent through traditional close reading methods. For instance, in the analysis of Maya Angelou's poetry, sentiment analysis can reveal the ebb and flow of emotions such as hope, sorrow, resilience, and triumph, offering a broader understanding of her work's emotional resonance. This method provides a fresh lens through which readers and scholars can analyze the emotional structure of literary works, helping to highlight thematic emphases and contrasts in ways that might be less accessible through purely qualitative approaches.

However, sentiment analysis in literature also comes with notable limitations. Literature often deals with complex, nuanced emotions that may be difficult to categorize into simplistic positive or negative sentiments. Irony, sarcasm, and ambiguous expressions can challenge sentiment analysis algorithms, leading to potential misinterpretations.

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