

Interpretation of Black Culture by Maya Angelou Through Music Poetry

DU Juan^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign languages, Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 16 March 2016; accepted 10 May 2016
Published online 26 June 2016

Abstract

African American music covers wide ranges of music and musical genres largely developed by African Americans. Negro spirituals, ragtime, jazz, rhythm and blues, doo-wop, rock and roll, soul, funk, and disco constitute the principal modern genres of it. Maya Angelou successfully applies to different styles of music in her poetry. With work songs, spirituals, souls, funk, jazz and blues, her poetry reveals African Americans' withstanding hardships and expressing frustration as well as personal love and concerns. Through the analysis of the themes and the effect of the application of music merged with of her poems, the paper attempts to reveal the interpretation of black culture in Angelou's poetry.

Key words: Interpretation; African American; Music; Poetry

Du, J. (2016). Interpretation of Black Culture by Maya Angelou Through Music Poetry. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(6), 81-84. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8533>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8533>

INTRODUCTION

African American scholar Stephen Henderson claims that black speech/music is a source of black poetry (1973). In fact, black music has great impact on the style of Maya Angelou's poetry. She has been called the woman's poet laureate, and her poems are called the anthems of African Americans. As one of the most distinguished black women writers and poets in the contemporary American literary

world, Angelou has been at different periods of her life as a singer and a composer of musical pieces. Thus, she has a unique understanding of music. She is engaged in a kind of literary tropism by turning to explore the unique vernacular resources of setting out to reclaim the lost African heritage and she regards the merging of black music in poetry as the reinterpretation of black culture.

1. ORIGIN OF BLACK MUSIC IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Tracing back African American history, music serves a significant part in their lives. As early as in the slavery era, African Americans survived the alien culture by relying on music. When took to the coast of north America from their African home, they were deprived of their mother culture by the white dominators. Slaves were forbidden from speaking to each other in their mother tongue, keeping African traditions, and even participating in traditional religious activities. Fortunately, their white masters allowed them to sing in groups as they worked in the plantation fields or as they took part in religious activities. In many cases, during the early 17th century, some colonies granted slaves the right to establish churches, mixing elements of traditional African religions with traditional as well as new interpretations of Christianity (Levine, 1977).

Abemethy (2005) writes that in some places, enslaved Africans were permitted, or even encouraged, to hold their own prayer meetings. Slaves owners believed that when slaves work, and held prayer meetings, they sang for entertainment or relief of labor, so singing may facilitate the infusing of white's superiority. However, traditional black music not only serves as entertainment but as a close tie with economy, collectivity and spiritual pursuit. Therefore, to some extent, it governs cultural model of a certain community. The slave's religious meetings with their distinctive musical forms continued to be practiced

even after this. It is difficult to separate music from the cultural context. An important fact that ties music to black communities is that it has visible roots in Africa. It was a way of the early slaves could express themselves and communicate among each other when they were being relocated. In the time where their world was being turned upside down, music served as an escape and form of communication or expression. The function of music to act as a binding factor provides the black culture with a strong sense of collectivity. To the black slaves, retaining African music is keeping the contact with black historical culture. Hence, black music becomes the primary carrier of black collective consciousness.

2. MAYA ANGELOU'S MUSIC POETRY

African American music touches a wide range of music and musical genres largely developed by African Americans. Negro spirituals, ragtime, jazz, boogie woogie, rhythm and blues, doo-wop, rock and roll, soul, funk, disco, hiphop and techno constitute the principal modern genres of African American music. Floyd (1996) claims that work songs are seen as a means of withstanding hardships and expressing anger and frustration through creativity or convert verbal opposition; while as Braxton and MacLaughlin (1990) put that spiritual song boosts the morale and spirit of the slaves, giving them hope that there was a place waiting that was better than where they were. Both work songs and spirituals convey the common message; that is to encourage slaves to unite and to go out of adversity. With time progresses, more elements were mixed into native African music and a new music style--blues came into being and it soon spread among blacks. Blues express the black's gloom of the racial inequality after the abolishment of slavery. Obviously, music has become part of the black's life and becomes the major tool of expressing the collective consciousness of African Americans. Deep-rooting in national culture, Angelou realizes that African American music is a cultural continuous unity related with its historical culture. Thereafter, Angelou infuses black music in her poetry in an effort to inherit and develop its cultural heritage. By doing so she dissolves cultural submission and ensures African American national culture's presence. In a certain way, Angelou accomplishes cultural reconstruction.

3. FORMS OF SONGS AS TECHNIQUE IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POETRY

Music nourishes Angelou and brings great impact on her writing. She mingles poetry with music and combines tradition with innovation.

3.1 Work Songs

Among the musical forms Angelou captures, work songs are the most frequent. Both work song and field holler

come from western African music with labor as the common theme. And most of them are improvisations. Like most western African music, work song characterizes itself by the flexibility of tones and call-and-response format. Usually a single leader makes a musical statement, and then the chorus responds together. During slavery, the Africans who were forced to leave their homeland comforted themselves by playing folk music. Work songs may have been sung to remind the Africans at home, dispel the boredom of field work, and to pour out depression and release dissatisfaction. Angelou's poetry can be traced to African American oral slave work songs, especially in her use of personal account on individual responses to hardship, oppression and loss. "One More Round" is heavily influenced by the work and protest songs of the past. The eight-stanza poem creates a refrain like those found in many work songs and is variations of many protest poems. Critic Robert B. Stepto (1979) states that the poem is the creation of a new art form out of work and protest forms. It talks about the difference between working hard and being overworked in life literally and figuratively. In this poem, Angelou depicts the slaves' desire to break away from being oppressed as a slave:

There ain't no pay beneath the sun
As sweet as rest when a job is well done.
I was born to work up to my grave
But I was not born to be a slave.
One more round
And let's heave it down
One more round
And let's heave it down (Angelou, 1994, p.155)

The four-line refrain "One more round/ And let's heave it down" is repeated four times throughout the poem creating verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener. In addition to examining individual experience, Angelou's poems often respond to racial matters on a larger social scale. Describing her work, Angelou once said that she was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass—the slave narrative—speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first-person plural. In "Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition", black pride is shown by the speaker talking about "I" meaning "we":

I'm the best that ever done it
(pow pow)
That's my title and I won it
(pow pow)
I ain't lying, I'm the best
(pow pow)
Come and put me to the test
(pow pow) (Angelou, 1994, p.34)
And in "Worker's Song":
Cars stretch to a
Super length

'cause of my strength
Planes fly high
Over seas and lands
'cause of my hands
Whoppa, Whoppa
Whoppa, Whoppa. (Angelou, 1994, p.223)

Both the “shoe shiner” and the “worker” are proud and confident in their work. The lines resonate with national pride, spiritual strength and hope for the future that everyone can relate to.

3.2 Gospel Songs

Besides work song, gospel song is another type in Angelou's poetry. Gospel music develops from the early spirituals and ring-shouts which were originally an oral tradition imparting Christian values while also describing the hardships of slavery. It adopts the call-and-response style of preaching led by a soloist for an interval and the congregation responds in unison. Meanwhile, it combines sound, movement, emotion, and communal interaction into one, focusing on faith of an individual or a people group. Gospel music can be traced to the early 17th century, with roots in the black oral tradition. For the African Americans, singing gospels is considered to be the most effective way to be close to God. Through gospels, they could get spiritually free from the boredom of poverty and loneliness. As religious music, gospel draws its materials from the *Bible*, personal religious experiences, and sometimes nature. It covers subjects like Jesus the Christ, resurrection, the magic salvation, the persistent pursuit of happiness and God will power. It features itself by lively rhythm, pun, repetition and improvisation. Most times, the singer leads the group one or two lines, and then the choir repeat the chorus. Singers rely on hand clapping and foot stomping as rhythmic accompaniment. Gospel songs display the composer's rich imagination and devout faith. “Just Like Job” shows the speaker's loyalty to God:

My Lord, My Lord,
Long have I cried to Thee
In the heat of the sun
The cool of the moon,
You said You'd be my protection
My only and glorious savior
My beautiful Rose of Sharon,
And I'm stepping out on Your word.
Joy, Joy
Your word.
Joy, Joy
The wonderful word of the Son of God...
(Angelou, 1994, p.172)

Job is one of the most frequently quoted Biblical figures. In African American culture, Job plays very essential role. In the Biblical story, he is a man who despite all the horrible things that happen to him during

his life remains completely loyal to God. In the poem, the image of Job always represents the unconquerable national spirit of African Americans by the repetition of “On your word, on your word”. Long and short lines are collocated together producing the effect of one sings and other chorus:

You said to lean on Your arm
And I'm leaning
You said to trust in Your love
And I'm trusting. (Angelou, 1994, p.172)

Meanwhile, the application of the shortened phrases also functions as chorus: “Into the alleys Into the byways Into the streets and the roads And the highways.” “Thank You, Lord” records personal religious experience in detail:

Thank You, Lord.
I want to thank You, Lord
For life and all that's in it.
Thank you for the day
And for the hour and for the minute.
I know many are gone,
I'm still living on,
I want to thank You. (Angelou, 1994, p.175)

The refrain “They've gone away. You've let me stay. I want to thank You” are passionate and rhythmic.

3.3 Blues

Except for the work song and gospel, Angelou composes song poetry with blues character. The blues style is a combination of field hollers, church music and work songs. African Americans sing about topics such as being away from home, unfairness of their situations, losing one's love, and other troubles they all share and want to express. Like other African traditional music styles, blues also emphasizes on improvising, rhythm and call-and-response form. As one of the typical characteristics of blues, the need for sharing information and emotions is shown in “Poor Girl”. It expresses the remorse for the lost love:

You're going to leave her too
And I know it
She'll never know
 What made you go
She'll cry and wonder
 What went wrong
Then she'll begin
 To sing this song
Poor Girl
 Just like me. (Angelou, 1994, p.70)

Topics of blues are always about hardships of life and the unfairness African Americans meet with, thereafter, it reminds people of the dark side of life. However, its charm also lies in releasing African Americans' spirit of perseverance and determination to overcome difficulties.

“In My Missouri” shows the persistent national spirit by the strong rhythm and repeated short lines:

In my Missouri
I had known a mean man
A hard man
A cold man
Gutting me and killing me
Was an Ice man
A tough man
A man
.....
But Jackson, Mississippi, has some fine man
Some strong man
Some black man
Walking like an army were the sweet man
The brown man
The man
The man. (Angelou, 1994, p.263)

The national will power is also expressed in “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me”. It sets to a harrowing march, necessarily deals with a young African American’s journey through youth facing crises yet with confidence.

I go boo
Make them shoo
I make fun
Way they run
I won’t cry
So they fly
I just smile
They go wild
Life doesn’t frighten me at all. (Angelou, 1994, p.167)

In “Still I Rise”, she combines call-and-response with the blues technique of understating one’s overall prowess:

Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom? ‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells Pumping in my living room.

She continues:

Does my haughtiness offend you? Don’t you take it awful hard ‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines Diggin’ in my own backyard.

And finishes with:

Out of the huts of history’s shame... I rise I rise I rise.
(Angelou, 1994, p.163)

3.4 Other Genres

Besides the frequent forms of music Angelou applies in her poetry, she masterfully writes her poem with hip hop, jazz and funk. “Harlem Hopscotch” is an Afrocentric hip-hop on the sense of tribal motion and dance. With a stiff two step dances beat hip-hop style, “The Thirteens”

describes the different types of characters that might inhabit a stereotypical group of black generation, as well as the life dilemma they’ve faced. “Pickin ‘Em Up” has Angelou speaking rhythmically on a down home style bluesy gospel/funk stomp. “Ain’t That Bad” has a past paced jazzy funk attitude about it as the poet talks about the black pride. To a percussive drum machine style Minneapolis funk ballad “Come To Me Baby” discusses the uniqueness of the male gender they may not even see among themselves. “Human Family” deals with cherishing the differences in culture in the world while respecting our similarities with modern funk beat/guitar driven.

CONCLUSION

Throughout her collected poems, Maya provides us with the updated musical autobiography of her life. Not from a first person point of view, but rather what has happened before and around her has brought influence on her creation. While many of these poems are endowed with past and contemporary black music touches, it is absolutely not only about her personal life. Her artistic legacy to present her voice in such a musical context produces the cross generational effect that Maya Angelou is speaking and singing the collective experiences of African Americans. With the right choice of imaginative words and phrases and musical styles, she interprets black culture and promotes the thinking of a race’s past, present and future.

REFERENCES

- Abernethy, B. (2005, August 26). *African-American spirituals*. Religion & Ethics Newsweekly. PBS.
- Angelou, M. (1994). *The complete collected poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Braxton, J. M., & MacLaughlin, A. N. (Eds.). (1990). *Wild women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American culture and the contemporary literature renaissance*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Floyd, S. A. (1996). *The power of black music: Interpreting its history from Africa to the United States*. Oxford, US: Oxford University Press.
- Henderson, S. (1973). *Understanding the new black poetry* (p.30). New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.
- Levine, L. (1977). *Black culture and black consciousness: Afro-American folk thought from slavery to freedom*. New York.
- Stepo, R. B. (1979). The phenomenal woman and the severed daughter (Maya Angelou, Audre Lourde). *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 8(1), 313-315.