

**Masaryk University in Brno**

Faculty of Arts  
Department of English and American Studies

## Theme of Survival in Maya Angelou`s Poetry

Petra Janoušková

Supervisor: Mgr. Kateřina Prajznerová, Ph. D.  
November 2005

I declare that I have worked on this bachelor thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary literature listed in the bibliography.

Petra Janoušková

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mgr. Kateřina Prajznerová, Ph. D., for guidance and support.

CONTENT.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
CHAPTER 1. SURVIVAL THROUGH GENERATIONAL CONTINUUM	
1.1 Lost struggles and destruction .....	10
1.2 Pride and courage.....	13
1.3 Black women and feminism.....	17
1.4 Work.....	19
1.6 Strong individuals and grandmothers.....	23
CHAPTER 2. SURVIVAL THROUGH HUMOUR, MUSIC AND RELIGION	
2.1 Laughter and irony.....	27
2.2 Spirituals and religion.....	28
2.3 Blues and jazz.....	30
CONCLUSION.....	34
WORKS CITED.....	36

## INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou is sometimes called a “America’s renaissance woman” (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/ang0bio-1>) as she is an author, poet, historian, songwriter, playwright, dancer, stage and screen producer, director, performer, singer, and civil rights activist. Her best known autobiographical novels are: *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *Singin` and Swingin` and Getting` Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which was nominated for the National Book Award. Among her volumes of poetry are: *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993), *And Still I Rise* (1987), *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983), *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), and *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. All of these collections of poetry were published in one volume of poetry in 1994 as *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. More volumes of poetry have been published since but they are not going to be analyzed in this thesis. Thanks to the poem “On the Pulse of Morning” which was a President Clinton’s inauguration poem in 1993, Maya Angelou has become known world-wide.

In the 1950s Maya Angelou moved to New York, where she joined the Harlem Writers Guild and took her place among the growing number of young black writers and artists associated with the Civil Rights Movement. She acted in the historic Off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* and wrote and performed a *Cabaret for Freedom* with the actor and comedian Godfrey Cambridge.

In 1959, at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. From 1961 to 1962 she was associate editor of *The Arab Observer* in Cairo, Egypt, the only English-

language news weekly in the Middle East, and from 1964 to 1966 Angelou was feature editor of the *African Review* in Accra, Ghana, where she met Malcolm X and “corresponded with him as his thinking evolved from the racially polarized thinking of his youth to the more inclusive vision of his maturity” (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/ang0bio-1>). She returned to the United States, shortly before Malcolm X’s assassination, to help him with his new Organization of African American Unity. Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. that happened on her birthday in 1968, together with previous death of Malcolm X, left her devastated.

Maya Angelou has become the first black woman director in Hollywood. She has written, produced, directed, and starred in productions for stage, film, and television. In 1971, she wrote a screenplay and musical score for the film *Georgia, Georgia*, that was nominated for Pulitzer Prize. She has also written and produced several documentaries, including Golden Eagle Award- winning “Afro-Americans in the Arts”. Maya Angelou was twice nominated for a Tony award for acting: once for her Broadway debut in *Look Away* (1973), and again for her performance in *Roots* (1977).

Maya Angelou speaks six languages and she was married four times.

Maya Angelou was born on April, 4th 1928 in St. Louis in Missouri. Her original name was Marguerite Johnson. She adopted her name Maya Angelou after her debut performance as a dancer at the Purple Onion cabaret. Her childhood is described in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her best-known novel. Her parents divorced when she was about three years old, and she was sent together with her brother Bailey to a small segregated town Stamps in Arkansas where they lived with their deeply religious grandmother, whom Maya called “momma”. Angelou learned what it was like to be a black girl in the South. She has experienced racist dentists, lynching and she dreamed

of having blond hair as did almost every black girl at the time. Maya Angelou was sent back to her mother in Saint Louis when she was eight years old. There she experienced one of the worst things in her life when she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. The abuser was found guilty and three days later found kicked to death. After this incident Angelou stopped talking for almost five years and was sent to her "momma" again. Thanks to the literature, she was introduced to, she started to find confidence and pride she once had. In 1940 both Maya and her brother were sent to live with their mother again, this time in San Francisco. Life with Angelou's mother was a bit too chaotic for a young girl, so she left to live with her father, but she found almost the same there. Angelou lived with homeless children in the streets for a month before she returned back to her mother. At the age of fifteen, Angelou found herself pregnant. She graduated from high school few weeks before giving birth to her son Guy. Angelou, before she has become a writer and lecturer, worked as a first African American female cable car conductor, waitress, Creole cook, nightclub singer, madam and even a prostitute. She toured Europe as a prim ballerina in the opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1954. She became a poet at the age of forty-three.

This thesis is going to concentrate on Angelou's poetry published before 1995. It is poetry that she has started to write first, and she has considered herself being more of a poet than a writer for a long time. I have decided to analyze her poetry because not many critics have done it so far. It might be so because her poetry has been, generally, seen by white critics as "thin stuff" (R. B. Stepto) and "easy reading" (Carol Gargan) in terms of style. My analysis is going to be thematic. I selected poems that touch a theme of survival. Survival of human beings is something that has always attracted Angelou. "All my work, my life, everything is about survival", Maya Angelou once declared, "But not just bare, awful, plodding survival. Survival with some style, with faith"

(Conversations with Maya Angelou 13). Poems with the theme of survival are divided into two parts according to who is surviving in what kinds of conditions and what means they use.

The first chapter deals with survival that can be achieved through generational continuum. Every generation of African Americans has struggled for freedom. Throughout the struggle each generation has experienced some kind of loss, destruction or even deaths. Maya Angelou writes about her people's and her own losses extensively. That is what I try to focus on in the first subsection of the first chapter. Second subsection concentrates on gaining pride and courage to overcome the lost struggles and deaths of close people. It deals with a black woman's pride, especially, and all the poems in that section have been written for women. The third subsection concentrates on feminism and relationship between white and black women as they have fought for their freedom, sometimes together other times apart. Fourth subsection includes poems about hard work that is a part of life of every black person, and without which they would not be able to survive. Last subsection contains poems concerning the important role grandmothers and other strong individuals have played in the survival of each generation.

The second chapter focuses on survival through religion, humor and music that have been another crucial means of staying alive for black people in the United States. The first subsection of this chapter concentrates on the use of irony in African American humor, and the liberating power of laughter that together with the institution of church has had as profound impact on black people as has had the generational continuum. Spirituals sung in the church have had a strong influence on Maya Angelou's poetry. She says: "the first poetry I ever knew was the poetry of the gospel songs and the spirituals" (Conversations with Maya Angelou 87), and therefore they

have been analyzed in the subsection two. The last subsection of the second chapter deals with black music. Spirituals have evolved into more modern type of music- blues, and later on jazz. Power and strength to survive have been derived from it and from the poetry that was largely influenced by both genres.

## CHAPTER 1: SURVIVAL THROUGH GENERATIONAL CONTINUUM

### 1.1 Lost struggles and destruction

To understand fully the power of will to endure and the refusal of the human spirit to be hardened in Angelou's poetry we must first take into consideration poems that deal with threat of death and minimization of a person's existence. One generation after another had to cope with all sorts of oppressions and injustices. The first generations of enslaved black people had to learn how to survive in the most bizarre and horrible conditions. The knowledge and strength they acquired is being passed on and on until today. Nevertheless, the route towards liberation was not easy and many black people encountered lots of defeats and losses, they tried not to be defeated and remained erect. Maya Angelou has always been very impressed by the survival of her ancestors and previous generations, especially when she thinks about all their mishaps and misfortunes and then she remembers where she is now and what she has achieved. Some of her poems reflect the hopeless situation of her past generations and look back in anger and despair. That is why I am going to start with an analysis of poems with themes of lost struggles, inevitability of destruction and death.

It is a known fact that black poetry has been usually written in the first person plural or in the first person singular, where "I" means "we", as it speaks of collective consciousness. Maya Angelou explains: "I used the first person singular, but really what I meant was "we". We win, we lose, we die, we laugh, we cry" (Martin Love). In the poem "The Detached", which is from her first collection of poems *Just Give Me a Cool drink of Water 'fore I Diie*, Angelou says, "We die / Welcoming Bluebirds to our darkening closets / Stranglers to our outstretched necks". She expresses the idea that she dies together with all the powerless blacks who are giving up to white stranglers who, like Bluebirds, kill the innocent ones. Angelou, in the voice of a little girl, says, "I

couldn't force myself to think of them as being people. These others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife, weren't considered folks" (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 26). Therefore, Angelou is angry with her own people, and pitiful at the same time, because their offered necks suggest a shameful death. Though, the last two lines of the stanza, "stranglers who neither care nor / care to know that / DEATH IS INTERNAL", turn the whole gloomy atmosphere of invited death into a triumph of black wisdom that is hidden from whites and that is the belief that death is internal. It seems it does not matter whether they will make black people dead physically, because their mind and spirit might have been already dead. It also suggests that a person has the option of becoming internally dead before the body dies, or, on the other hand, its mind might live regardless of the physical state of the body. The statement that death is internal symbolizes internal decay of the society and human race which is built on inequality, exploitation and killing of one group by another. There is a notion that with each murdered black person something in the murderers dies as well. It does not mean, though, that the murderers must only be white people.

Black people were murderers of other black people as well as it is written in the poem "My Guilt" where Angelou speaks of dead Malcolm who was, shockingly, assassinated by a black person. Angelou states, "My crime is "heroes, dead and gone," / dead Vesley, Turner, Gabriel, / dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King". The enumeration of famous Civil rights activists illustrates the idea that it is "us" black people who are dead. It is the example where "I" is used as meaning "we". The last two stanzas of the poem are written in the first person singular and as if they were a typed confession of a black criminal at the court in front of a jury. It is also Angelou's personal confession where she lists Civil rights heroes of whom Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., were the closest friends. She was herself politically engaged and worked for them. The

assassination of her friend Malcolm has made her feel deeply betrayed by her own people. She asked: “Why were black people so indifferent” to his assassination? “I thought what a pathetic people we were” (A Song Flung Up to Heaven 37), not knowing that Martin Luther King Jr., is going to die too.

In the second stanza of the poem “My Guilt” the author envisions hanging but she does not want to die a shameful death. She is proud of herself and proclaims: “I do it to impress the crowd”. Her guilt is defined by the last lines of each stanza, “My crime is I` m alive to tell. / My sin lies in not screaming loud.” The victorious voice is typical for Maya Angelou.

Nevertheless, in the poem “Mourning Grace”, Angelou is doubtful whether her dying like a man would really make people mourn. The whole poem is constructed as a question:

If Today I follow death,  
go down its trackless wastes  
salt my tongue on hardened tears  
for my precious dear time` s waste  
race  
along that promised cave in a headlong  
deadlong  
haste,  
Will you  
have  
the  
grace  
to mourn for

me?

Her worries about the people's reaction to one's death are justified by the fact that later after this poem was released Malcolm X was killed, and most people did not care at all.

Angelou does not see death and life as opposites but rather as a result and a consequence of each other. Though, some of her lines may sound as oxymoronic, such as: "I keep on dying, / Because I love to live", in the poem called "The Lesson". Angelou believes in rebirth of things and personalities. She reckons that she can live only because some people had to die. She constantly lives with the "Memory of old tombs" on her mind. Nevertheless, she is always aware of death around her. She has got energy to live, and she seeks the challenge to overcome destruction, which she expresses in the following lines: "Rotting flesh and worms do / Not convince me against / The Challenge. The years". Maya Angelou heard about mutilation and murders of other black people for the first time from her brother, who saw a black person being mutilated and thrown into the river (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 31), and later from other people as well who all had the experience of the South, "a notorious site of slavery Reconstruction", and "a landscape of racial terror and widespread violence" (African American Literature 237). Death is not just an abstract idea but a physical reality that, fortunately, is understood and accepted by Maya Angelou, and therefore able to be overcome.

## **1.2 Pride and courage**

Angelou as an experienced mature woman starts to understand the importance of self-esteem and taking pride in being African-American. She, again, remembers her ancestors, particularly her mother Vivian Baxter and her grandmother who both were

very proud and as much independent as the circumstances allowed. They taught her how to be a courageous woman and how to love life that is why Angelou is able to say: “We must replace fear and chauvinism, hate, timidity and apathy, which flow in our national spinal column with courage, sensitivity, perseverance and ... love. And by love I mean the condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage” (Even The Stars Look Lonesome 132), and Maya Angelou is famous for her courage.

Among the most popular Angelou`s poems are “Still I Rise”, “Life Doesn`t Frighten Me” and “Weekend Glory”. These are the poems that perhaps most explicitly reflect the courageous character and Angelou`s taking pride in being black. They were written by a woman to women as a result of heritage that was full of strength and wisdom and that enabled Angelou to grow into a person with healthy mind and body. She hopes that this heritage can be communicated through and can help further, outside her family circle.

The first stanza of the poem “Still I Rise” has a similar tone and pattern with a poem “Life Doesn`t Frighten Me”. In both of them the refrains are repeated and are the same as the individual titles of the poems. In the first poem “Still I Rise” she states all sorts of maltreatments she can be faced with, “You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt”, and then victoriously shouts: “But still, like dust, I`ll rise”. Similar thing can be observed in the second poem “Life Doesn`t Frighten Me” where Angelou enumerates unpleasant things, “Shadows on the wall / Noises down the hall / Life doesn`t frighten me at all”, and then, again, concludes bravely.

Maya Angelou always liked challenge of any kind. She challenges the stereotype and the expected behavior of a black person in “Still I Rise” in the following

lines: “Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?”, and she continues, “Did you want to see me broken? / Bowed head and lowered eyes?”. Her provocative questions are left to be answered by the reader.

On the contrary, the poem “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me” does not ask any questions but stays in the same victorious tone with solid statements and announcements. There is a stanza that reveals children’s racism in San Francisco where Angelou moved in her early teens and where, for the first time, she experienced mixed-race schools.

That new classroom where

Boys all pull my hair

(Kissy little girls

With their hair in curls) (28-31)

Angelou, when she was young, was not a kissy little girl, and besides, she had kinky hair that all black girls were afraid of since it could only be found in black women, therefore it was a mark of race. The concept of beauty was based on white-girl beauty with blonde hair and blue eyes. This idea appeared to be destructive when imposed on black girls and women who blamed their bad lives for their ugliness. Fortunately, Maya Angelou was once told by her uncle, “Ritie, don’t worry`cause you ain’t pretty. You smart. I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 67). This sentence helped Angelou to find her self-esteem and not to blame physical unattractiveness for a miserable life.

Maya Angelou takes pride in being black which has been probably expressed best in her other poem called “Weekend Glory”. Angelou became so confident about her life and herself that not only she is not frightened, she even lectures whites how to enjoy themselves. This is evident in the lines: “If they want to learn how to live life

right, / they ought to study me on a Saturday night”. All the problems, falls and misfortunes she encountered through her life then made her a stronger being with precise image of how to live a good life. She has grown up into an individual with stubborn and courageous mind. Maya Angelou confesses, “I will not allow anybody to minimize my life, not anybody, not a living soul-nobody” (Conversations with Maya Angelou 158). Angelou`s pride and conformity have often met with scornful looks and envy from the white people who regarded her behavior as being threatening and dangerous. Further in the poem “Weekend Glory” she says:

Folks write about me.  
They just can`t see  
how I work all week  
at the factory.  
Then get spruced up  
and laugh and dance  
and turn away from worry  
with sassy glance. (32-39)

Angelou, though, admits that everything is not perfect in her life: “My life ain`t heaven / but it sure ain`t hell”. Nevertheless, she is glad to be black for the blues and jazz that echo from night clubs: “I`m able to work and get paid right / and have the luck to be Black / on a Saturday night”, and that is traditional to black people and so unique to the rest.

These blues-like lines depict Angelou`s confidence in being African-American, and her ability to find joy in difficult situations in life, that are crucial qualities for the survival of African-American people in the economically, racially and politically oppressive society of 20<sup>th</sup> century United States.

### 1.3 Black women and feminism

The tactics of the survival of a black woman in a white American society have been different to the tactics and practices of a black man. Angelou remembers that black men have often felt anger and held grudge, and survival for them have been about fighting. Rape and other forms of sexual abuse present in black families have been another common means of subconscious, or even conscious, relief of frustration and anger. Later in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, frequently, black men started with white women. A black man was thinking “that by taking their bodies and their money, he was getting revenge on the white men, who were free to insult him, ignore him and keep him at the bottom of the heap” (Even the Stars Look Lonesome 188). Understandably, there have had not been a generation of women that would fight in a similar manner. They have invented other ways of protest in order to overcome all the obstacles that lives have brought them. They must have learnt how to survive without going insane. Angelou believes that women`s ways of fighting have been based mostly on their terrible self-discipline, patience, and pretended meekness. In the poem “Bump d` Bump” Angelou offers to a person: “Call me a name from an ugly south”, and she meekly responds: “I`ll play possum and close my eyes”. Though, the meekness and resignation are not genuine but only acted as she thinks “Both feet flat, the game is done. / They think I lost. I think I won” in the poem “Harlem Hopscotch”. Angelou likes and believes in strong women and to pretend, according to her, in order to save oneself`s lives is a highly appropriate and cunning thing to do.

The idea of a strong woman was presented to her by her own mother Vivian Baxter who “thinks if no one gets in her way, she can get her freedom by herself, she doesn`t want even Martin Luther King to tell her where her liberation lies” (A Song

Flung Up to Heaven 31). Angelou's mother similarly to other Black American women achieved an egalitarian position with men thanks to the fact that they had to work too, as their husbands or fathers were not able to earn sufficient money to feed their families. Angelou writes a poem "Me and My Work", where she says about her job and situation following: "It buys some beans and collard greens / and pays the rent on time. / 'Course the wife works too". Also there is the "long tradition of female independence and responsibility" (Siphokazi Koyana) in the black community that helped to create the black feminist movements and that is also the phenomenon in which black feminism differs from the concept of white feminists. Key E. Vandergrift says: "From the beginning, white feminists have been declaring their liberation from various gender bindings while African-American women were necessarily more concerned with survival than liberation". Angelou has always seen herself as a womanist. Jacquetta Amdahl explains the term by saying that Alice Walker, who invented it, "constructs black women's experiences in opposition to those of white women. This meaning of womanism sees it as being different from and superior to feminism, a difference allegedly stemming from black and white women's different histories with American racism". Angelou, in the poem "No No No No" speaks from the position of a white woman saying: "I've let your mummies / steal from my kitchens", and then she adds: "What more can I do? / I'll never be black like you". She will never have the insight, the experience black women have.

African-American women did not experience the dichotomies of male and female work, of the division of public and domestic environment. Black women worked both outside and inside their homes. Unfortunately, drawing the firm line between what is male and what is female "disregards black women's realities" (Koyana). Therefore they "had to reinvent themselves" and "they became realities only

to themselves” (Even the Stars Look Lonesome 42). The whole America has seen the standards of beauty in fairy-like Shirley Temple who has been adored by both men and women. In the poem “Let` s Majeste” Angelou poses a question that bothers many black women in America, “and when the rousing kiss is given / why must it always be a fairy, and / only just a Prince”. Angelou`s reinvention of the African- American woman is strongly connected with the idea of physical beauty that is understood by white American women as being one of the best virtues.

Maya Angelou describes the feelings of a black girl in this way: “When in disgrace with fortune and men`s eyes / I all alone bewep my outcast state / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries” (“Angelou`s fight - with poetry”). Hopefully, the notion that black is evil embedded in the earlier writings has been erased by the proclamation “black is beautiful” that miraculously started to change the idea that only white women can be beautiful. Thanks to this Africa-American women can see themselves from a different, the right perspective.

#### **1.4 Work**

African Americans have a history of hard work. They worked mostly as cotton-pickers in the South, where they had to get up early in the morning and went to beds late in the evening. Angelou remembers: “the pickers would step out of the backs of trucks and fold down, dirt-disappointed, to the ground. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn`t enough” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 8). Mundane and never-ending work has filled the days of African Americans in the north where they worked as cooks, nannies, factory workers, servants and so on. Angelou herself has been through numerous jobs and must have confronted losing them often and having no

money to pay for her accommodation or food for herself and her son many times in her life.

Her poems about hard work are usually full of irony, pride as well as bitterness and protest. Angelou uses irony in the poem “They Ask Why” and puts into contrast her exceptionally tall figure, she was 6foot tall, and the small amount of money she earns:

A certain person wondered why  
a big strong girl like me  
wouldn` t keep a job  
which paid a normal salary (1-4)

Maya Angelou replies with a wit: “Even minimal people / can` t survive on minimal wage”.

African-American women`s wisdom and cunning ways have been saving their lives for years and years as it written in the poem “When I Think about Myself”: “Sixty years in those folks` world / The child I works for calls me girl, / I say “yes, ma`am” for working`s sake”. These lines defend the servility of the black woman. “By being servile for an entire lifetime, she has provided sustenance for another generation who may find better conditions” (Lyman B. Hagen). Black people were trapped between two sides, two identities. On one side they were Civil rights movement supporters in their free time, and on the other side they had to play obedient servants at work.

Having and keeping a job is a very important thing to a black person because “without work and steady salaries, the people could not envision tomorrows” (A Song Flung Up to Heaven 64). The irony used in the poem “When I Think about Myself” is doubled when we consider that there are two groups of black people, those so called

“niggers” and those “colored” ones who are rather rich and try to adopt values and standards of white middle-class families. This dichotomy is well expressed in the poem “Sepia Fashion Show”, where “The Black Bourgeois,

Indeed”, they swear, “that`s what I`ll wear  
when I go country-clubbing.”

I`d remind them please, look at those knees,  
You got at Miss Ann`s scrubbing. (13-16)

In this last stanza of the poem, Angelou is very critical of the betrayal and arrogance of her own people as they all came to America circa 400 years ago as slaves. There was no difference between male or female, or status. They all went through the same cruelties, indignities and horribly appalling conditions. Black men were lynched and mutilated and black women got raped. That is why the sudden stratification of the black society and its adopted distorted values seem so outrageous.

The tendency of going from one job to another has not been, unfortunately, a rare phenomenon. Thousands of African-Americans have had similar experience to Maya Angelou`s at her times let alone the tragic irony of slavery when strong, healthy and beautiful people were denied appropriate salaries and freedom whatsoever. Therefore it is not surprising that many of Angelou`s poems deal with the theme of racism at work as it is, for example, in “Harlem Hopscotch”.

In the air, now both feet down.  
Since you black, don`t stick around.  
Food is gone, the rent is due,  
Curse and cry and then jump two. (5-8)

The rhythm of the poem may suggest rhythm of the machines in the factories, the repetitiveness of the same situation of every week or month when she has to pay the rent. It also evokes the periodicity with which Angelou has been changing her jobs.

Angelou's voice changes from the critical but rather light-hearted one she adopts in the above poem to total anger in the poem called "No No No No" where she plays with significant contrasts to highlight the urgency in changing conditions for poor mothers. She expresses hopelessness and sadness of the starved mothers who pray to saints for help and miracles: "The plastered saints gazing down / beneficently / on kneeling mothers", but who receive none, while they are "picking undigested beans/from yesterday's shit". Angelou emphasize the importance of work, but she also reminds people not to accept just any job.

Angelou believes that a bad job, a job where a person is not respected and does not find at least some satisfaction is not worth doing as it can ruin any relationships a person has. She says: "You become mean and narrow and small to your children and friends and lovers" (Conversations with Maya Angelou 119). It does not change only relationship of a mother towards her children, but most frequently it has caused home violence and abuse from the husband's/father's side as it is described in the poem "Coleridge Jackson". Coleridge is a black man who is constantly humiliated at work by his "weasley little / sack-of-bones boss with his / envious little eyes". Unfortunately, Coleridge cannot find a way how to defend himself in the racist society so his anger is directed towards his family with "black eyes and the bruised / faces, the broken bones". Coleridge's schizophrenic life, he is meek at work and an aggressor at home, is similar to the lives of other black people, only with a variation that they will protest, rebel and release their anger later and together, not against their families but against the oppressors.

The double life of a black people who play Uncle Toms and Auntie Jamimas at work and then after that they go and support sit-ins in public places, go and listen to Martin Luther King, or they boycott buses which is a theme of a poem called “Worker’s Song”. A black person says: “[I] Start the factory humming/ I work late/ Keep the whole world running” and then he adds: “And I got/ something...something/ Coming...coming...”

Similarly, the portrayal of the double-life of an African-American woman is present in the poem “Weekend Glory” where a woman says: “My job at the plant / ain`t the biggest bet,/ but I pay my bills”/ and stay out of debt”. The notion that there is a protest and “something coming” at the end of the day is present in the lines: “I get my hair done / for my own sake” and then she goes “to my friend girl’s house / where we plan our round”. In both poems, “Worker’s Song” and “Weekend Glory”, there is always the untold secret that once revealed to the white world will bring out changes or will have an impact on everybody’s future lives.

### **1.6 Strong individuals and grandmothers**

Today` s reader of African American poetry would not be able to read much if it were not for the brave and strong individuals among the enslaved African Americans who through their suffering and sacrifice have managed to give freedom and space to the coming generations. Maya Angelou would not be probably a poet and writer if she did not have the great love of her grandmother and if she was not lucky enough to meet Mrs. Flowers who introduced her to the poetry of Shakespeare, Langston Hughes and others. Angelou is aware of that, therefore she many times pays tribute to her ancestors and friends who died in the name of a better future for the colored people. This chapter

can be introduced with the lines of the last stanza of a poem “Elegy”: “I lie down in my grave / And watch my children / Grow”.

The importance of family plays an immense role in the lives of black people. That is the heritage that was brought from old Africa and that lent a hand to generation after generation in surviving the oppression black people in America had to face. Angelou says that people do not realize “how important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!” (<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mayaangelo105186.html>). Angelou’s poetry is a homage to the previous generations, especially the grandmothers, and the strong individuals outside the family circle who manage to prepare the soil for the seeds of their dreams and hopes.

One of the biggest figures in Angelou’s life was her grandmother who she called “momma” and who carefully and patiently led her through the dangerous life in segregated Stamps in Arkansas. Her poem “Our Grandmothers” praises the grandmother figure of the slavery and post-slavery times. Though, “She heard the names /, swirling ribbons in the wind of history: / nigger, nigger bitch, heifer, mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon”, Angelou’s grandmother was determined not to be moved. She believed: “I have certain way of being in this world, / and I shall not, I shall not be moved”. This poem deriving from an old spiritual and shows how important it was to keep a clear mind and strong will in order not to believe what is being said to a black woman throughout her entire life. Only due to her determination that she has certain way of being in this world could other generations learn how to stay upright, straight and unbroken. No wonder that Angelou as a child thought that her grandmother “was a God, but she wouldn’t tell anyone” (Oprah Winfrey), after all the humiliation experienced but faced with dignity. In the poem “Our Grandmothers” she also praises

all the African American women throughout United States: “These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple, / honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted / down a pyramid of years”. These faces are given noble names: “She is Sheba and Sojourner, / Harriet and Zora, / Mary Bethune and Angela”. All these strong women were her ancestors. They appear to be so ordinary and so noble.

Another very important person in her life was her crippled uncle Willie who is described in the following way: “People called him “uncle”, “Boy” and “Hey” / Said, “You can’t live through this another day.” Obviously, not only was he black and poor in segregated Stamps, but he was disabled too, and therefore felt lower within his own family and community as he was not able to provide for them. But Angelou remembers him as a strong person and that is why, in her poem, she lets him say: “He said, “I am living / in the games that children play”. Angelou wants him to be eternal and thus connect several generations.

The last poem of the volume called *I Shall not be Moved*, “speaks of the power of great souls on the lives of others” (Key E. Vangrft). The poem’s title is “Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd, Killens, and Mayfield”. Angelou writes: “And when great souls die, / after a period peace blooms”. Every death of a person stirs up emotions, but then things calm down again and lives go on. Nevertheless, when an important person dies the stirred up emotions often bring about changes, because: “Our senses, restored, never / to be the same, whisper to us.” Angelou sees a big power of an individual to achieve things beyond his or her existence. She believes that because “they existed. / We can be. Be and be / better. For they existed”. Angelou suggests as well that with every intelligent and important person who dies some knowledge of those who live vanishes as well: “we are not so much maddened / as reduced to the unutterable ignorance / of dark, cold”. She is afraid of ignorance as it often produces evil.

There are other poems written in a similar manner by Angelou where the idea of “I” equal “we” can be broadened to “you” equals “me” as it is in the case of a poem “To a Freedom Fighter”. She writes: “I hear the moans, / you die a thousand’s death”. The thousand` s death of one person gives hope to a thousand’s life of another.

## CHAPTER 2. SURVIVAL THROUGH HUMOUR, MUSIC AND RELIGION

### 2.1 Laughter and irony

One of the most important and maybe most typical things for African Americans are their humor and frequent laughter. It has been a crucial, and sometimes the only weapon to use against the life-threatening situations they have found themselves to be in. In fact, Angelou says that black people never told whites what they really think. They have been instructed: “If you`re sad, laugh. If you`re bleeding inside, dance” (Conversations with Maya Angelou 89). It has been observed that “black humor often satirizes or parodies the demeaning views of non-blacks, celebrates unique attributes of community life, and focuses on outwitting perceived oppressor” (<http://www.cofc.edu/~jacobs1/blackhumor.html>). Black people have been laughing in the face of adversity for many years. The suffering they must have endured through generations taught them to laugh as much as possible as it was the only means of emotional salvation. Angelou thanks older generations for their gift of laughter in few of her poems.

A liberating power of laughter is the theme the poem “Old Folks Laugh” concentrates on: “When old folks laugh, they free the world”. They laugh, though, they are “slyly knowing / the best and the worst / of remembering”. Laughter, in this poem, serves as a personification for wisdom and generosity. “When old folks laugh, they consider the promise / of dear painless death, and generously / forgive life for happening” to them. In spite of the feeling of appeasement there is a very sad realization that their lives will not be better, and the only thing they can do about it is to forgive.

Similarly, the poem “Song For the Old Ones” talks about the sad “lowly Uncle Tomming / and Aunt Jemima`s smiles”, and though they have used “the finest cunning

/ their naked wits and wiles” it has not been of much help as “they’ve laughed to shield their crying / then shuffled through their dreams / to write the blues with screams”. Angelou explains further that all of it has derived “from living on the edge of death / they kept my race alive”. Laughter is something that fills in the space between life and death. It is Hermes of good and bad news.

Often the laughter is ironical, as it is in the poem “When I Think About Myself”: “I almost laugh myself to death, / My life has been one great big joke, / A dance that’s walked”. Life and death as well as crying and laughing are close companions in African American poetry and they are not necessarily antonyms. Irony is “the rhetorical weapons of choice for cultural minorities—for those marginalized by sex, race” (Linda Hutcheon), it is a noble and favorite form of Maya Angelou’s protest.

## **2.2 Spirituals and religion**

When Africans were shipped to the American continent as slaves they brought with them their folklore that was based mainly on oral stories and songs. It is the musicality, the songs, children’s chants, religious spirituals and sad blues that supplied them with strength to “withstand the slings and arrows and lynch mobs” (Angelou Even the Stars Look Lonesome 125). The spirituals, African Americans have sung, “represent a brilliant assertion of humanity and perseverance by an enslaved community that ingeniously blended its experience in the American slavocracy with patterns and themes of African creative discourse” (African American Literature 117). One of the most important institutions for maintaining the African American culture was church, as Angelou explains: “We go to church not for duty’s sake, but for the joy of it, the music, the excitement” (Conversations with Maya Angelou 202-203). Enslaved blacks in America went to church services every night after the work to

gather strength, courage and will to go back to plantations the next day. Attending church was an escape into a different world of hilarity, ecstasy and joy. “The church was a central meeting place where one could listen to and participate in the music” (Conversations with Maya Angelou 87), Angelou explains. The poor people relieved their anger, sadness and despair through gospels and spirituals that were sung and “lived” with tears and laughter at the same time. “Our Grandmothers” and “Still I Rise” are among the poems by Maya Angelou that derive from old traditional spirituals. Lyman B. Hagen states that “Still I Rise” is inspired by the traditional spiritual lines “Oh rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory! / Oh rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory!” (Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer and Soul of a Poet 128). The same may be observed in “Our Grandmothers”. The author borrows the last part of a line “Like a tree, down by the riverside, I shall not be moved” from the old spiritual again.

It is quite striking that black people adopted the Bible and religion of their enslavers on one hand, on the other hand it is understandable as “the enslaved were artistically and politically seduced by visions of an ultimately just God” (African American Literature 118). Nevertheless, the “spirituals reflect more than religious servility” (African American Literature 118). They contain few lines that can be understood as secret codes about protests, uprisings and escape. In the poem “Lord, in My Heart” Angelou modifies the old spiritual line “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” into “Golden chariot / Swinging low” which according to some interprets may mean the Underground Railroad that would take them up to the north. A parallel can be drawn between the river Jordan mentioned in the line from Angelou’s poem “Lord, in My Heart”: “Jordan’s cold / and briny deep” and the river Mississippi. Both rivers can be seen as paths from death to eternal life as the river Jordan “is a symbol of the path

between the conscious and the unconscious” (<http://www.actus.org/setting.html>), and the river Mississippi is path between slavery and freedom.

Black people often associate themselves with the people and events from the Bible. In the poem “Lord, in My Heart” the two Jews “Meshach and / Abednego” are mentioned to demonstrate that God will protect the faithful Jews as well as black people even in the midst of persecution and oppression. Another example is the poem “Just like Job” with the lines: “I chanted Your name / Just like Job”, or a poem “Thank You, Lord” where “A Malcolm / Martin, Du Bois” are mentioned in the same way as Christian prophets and martyrs.

### **2.3 Blues and jazz**

Spirituals, as older form of black music, are together with blues and jazz the most typical musical characteristics of Black culture. Blues is “closely related to African American folk music like work songs and incorporate descriptions of vast range of Black experience” (African American Literature 451), whereas jazz “stems from several musical sources” (African American Literature 452). Blues can be seen as an identity factor for black people. It , generally, speaks of hard times, sad lives and obstacles the black people have experienced as it is illustrated by Angelou`s poem “A Good Woman Feeling Bad” with the lines: “The blues may be the life you`ve led / Or midnight hours in / an empty bed”. Blues has developed directly from the church music and songs so “a stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between songs sung a few minutes before [in the church] and those being dance to in the gay house” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 132). Not just because of the similar rhythm or form with lots of repetition, but also because of the similar message. Angelou expresses

one's sorrow over a person's life that is sad as blues and that leading a bad life together with the feeling of emptiness stalk his or her consciousness.

The poem "A Good Woman Feeling Bad" articulates a wild-goose chase to achieve something important or good but without success: "a psalm to love that's / left unsung" or "Rivers heading north / but ending south". The psalm to a loved one cannot be sung as well as the hope of the Southerner to get a better life up north is not fulfilled and he is ironically returning home with funeral music in his mouth. The whole poem conveys a feeling of melancholy: "All riddles are blues, / And all blues are sad", and the message that living is difficult no matter how hard one tries. It also suggests that one does not have power over his life that is unfair to him and he cannot change it. In this respect the content is similar to some of the old spirituals that asked the question: "How long, oh God? How long?" (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 132).

The same type of the question can be spot in the poem "Caged Bird" that is a parable on slavery that seemed to black people that it would never end,

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful thrill  
Of things unknown  
but longed for still  
And his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
For the caged bird  
sings of freedom. (15-22)

Maya Angelou might have been inspired by both Dunbar and his poem "Caged Bird" and Martin Luther King, as these lines remind of his famous speech "I Have a Dream"

where he says let the freedom ring out of every hill and mole hill and molehill of Mississippi” (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/Ihaveadream.htm>).

Church sermons that were almost sung, gospels, as well as jazz and blues, gave black people a means of free expression, enjoyment and work. They helped many, each in their own way, to survive both emotionally and physically the hardships in their lives. Maya Angelou can serve as a true example. Her own life has always been full of music. When she was little she lived with her religious grandmother who used to sing solos in the church every Sunday. Angelou also found lots of music and dancing at her mother`s later on, though, the songs sung were no longer spirituals but rather bar blues songs. Angelou herself earned a living as a night-club calypso singer for many years of her adulthood which provided for her and her son. Later she started to write poems of which some may be categorized as “shouting poems” (Hagen 127). An example can be a poem called “Still I Rise” and “ Ain` t that bad?”. Its short lines and lots of repetition evoke Native American chants: “An` ain` t they bad? / An` ain` t they Black? / An` ain` t they fine?”. Some of which were used for healing purposes. They were needed to restore person`s lost mind or soul, to bring back memories dating even generations back to help create person`s lost identity.

Similarly, black American music serves the healing and remembering purpose. Angelou`s “Georgia Song” is constructed as a chant that brings back memories of sounds: “Feet running, or dancing, / and the liquid notes of / sorrow songs”, and places in both America and Africa: “waltzes, screams and / French quadrilles float over/the loam of Georgia” The running feet remind us of chases for slaves in Africa, or running away from the cruel master, running up north. Sharply contrasts with dancing feet that allude to joy. Other contrasts are between high society waltzes and screams during the presence of French quadrilles. The poem has a lullaby refrain that soothes, “Sing me to

sleep, savannah” and it ends with a line “Chant for us a new song. A song / Of southern peace” that expresses a desire for a better future, the end of slavery, and later on segregation and racism in the South.

Lots of repetition is used in the poem “Worker`s Song”, but here it serves a different purpose. This time there are no lines or phrases repeated but mere words that do not convey any meaning: “`cause of my back / Whoopa, whoopa / whoopa, whoopa” This poem is one of few Angelou`s jazz poems that are inspired by jazz music. We can follow the continuity of jazz poetry that started with Harlem Renaissance, went through the Beat movement and was present in the Black Arts Movement, and Angelou uses it still today.

## CONCLUSION

The poetry of Maya Angelou is very popular among the public. She is a people's poet and she has always wanted "very much to write books that are accessible to the widest audience possible" (Bell Hooks) that is why her poetry "aims at audiences of all colors and creeds" (Conversations with Maya Angelou 83). She inspires, amuses and gives strength to many women and men as I could see at the Cheltenham literary festival this year. Her life has been a big struggle many times but her motto: "You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated" (Conversations with Maya Angelou 96), has made her overcome them all. I have chosen to write about the theme of survival in her poetry because it is so much part of her life. She is a person that creates a myth of survival as "literature, particularly poetry, continues to play an essential role in the evolution of myth, and vice-versa" (Estella Lauter), and her poetry is so much popularized.

Angelou's poetry pays tribute to "her people". She has always been amazed by their survival that has been possible only through many decades of hard work, strong will and courage. The numerous deaths of well known people that have been outnumbered by the deaths of anonymous individuals have gradually had a huge impact on the liberation of more recent generations. Female struggle for liberation have been also achieved gradually, where the woman's pride played an important role, and where the grandmother figure served as a lighthouse in the sea of chaos and dismay. A majority of Angelou's poem has been written on these topics, and that is why the first chapter encompasses two thirds of the thesis.

The second, smaller chapter deals, in fact, with the survival through culture. Culture is very important as it creates person's identity. Interestingly enough, Angelou does not seem to see culture as something higher, as an entity that forms people's

minds. She rather notices people, the individual human beings, as they create culture around them. Most of her poems deal with humans and their behavior, the way they interact and communicate. Only few poems, in comparison, have religion, humor and music as their main themes. Nonetheless, people survive through the means of religion, music, humor, literature or poetry, and that is what she does as well.

Before I finish with the conclusion, I would like to mention only briefly something about the criticism Angelou`s poetry has received. My analysis may serve as a counter balance to many negative critiques her poetry received throughout the years. I do agree, though, that her poetry is stylistically quite simple and that sometimes “her addiction to rhyme betrays her to banality” (Review of And Still I Rise 87). On the other hand, her poetry is meant to be recited aloud. It obtains a different dimension when a person listens to the rhythms, to the voice of Maya Angelou, who sometimes even sings her poems. It is also interesting that her poetry meets positive reactions mostly from people from ethnic minorities. Maybe it is because, as Angelou believes, they can hear a “sort of “in” talk” (Conversations with Maya Angelou 27), which is not often recognized by white readers and so they find it difficult to identify with Angelou`s poetry. Though, I reckon, if it was so, she would not have such a wide multi-ethnic audience.

Maya Angelou`s poetry has always been a light verse poetry and will probably stay at the periphery of high-brow critical recognition. Though, her passion for survival has motivated many ordinary people all over the world.

## WORKS CITED

- African American Literature. Ed. Gilyard, Keith, Anissa Wardi. New York: Longman 2004.
- Amdahl, Jacquetta. "MyVoice, My Choice: Identity Issues in Black Feminist/Womanist Discourse". 27 Nov 2005. <<http://www.k-state.edu/english/janette/installations/Jacquetta/womanism.html>>.
- "America`s Renaissance Woman". Academy of Achievement. 29 Aug 2005, 27 Nov 2005 <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/ang0bio-1>>.
- Angelou, Maya. A Song Flung Up to Heaven. New York: Random House, 2002.
- - -. Conversations with Maya Angelou. Ed. Jeffrey M. Elliot. London: Virago Press, 1989.
- - -. Even the Stars Look Lonesome. New York: Random House, 1997.
- - -. Gather Together in My Name. New York: Random House, 1974.
- - -. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. New York: Random House, 1970.
- - -. Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water `fore I Diiie. New York: Random House, 1971.
- - -. The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou. New York: Random House, 1994.
- - -. The Heart of a Woman. New York: Random House, 1981.
- - -. Winfrey, Oprah. "Oprah`s Cut with Maya Angelou". 29 Oct 2005 <[http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/200012/omag\\_200012\\_maya.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/200012/omag_200012_maya.jhtml)>.
- "Angelou`s Fight-with poetry". 20 Sep 2003. BBC.Co.Uk 14 Nov 2005 <<file:///G:/BBC%20NEWS%20%20World%20%20Americas%20%20Angelou`s%20fight%20-%20with%20poetry.htm>>.
- "Black Laughter/Black Humor" 27 Nov 2005. <<http://www.cofc.edu/~jacobs/>>

blackhumor.html>.

Blundell, Janet Boyarin. Rev of Shaker Why Don't You Sing?, by Maya Angelou

Library Journal 108.7 (1983): 746.

Gargan, Carol. Rev. of And Still I Rise, by Maya Angelou. Best Sellers 38.12 (1979):

404.

Hagen, Lyman B. Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet: A Critical

Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou. Lanham: UP of America, 1997.

Hooks, Bell. "There`s No Place to Go But Up" Shambhala Sun Online 27 Nov 2005

<<http://www.shambhalasun.com/archives/Features/1998/Jan98/Angelou.htm>>.

Hutcheon, Linda. "There Will Always Be Parody and Irony" 27 Nov 2005

<[http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/french/litera/Revue\\_Texte/HUTCHEON.pdf](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/french/litera/Revue_Texte/HUTCHEON.pdf)>.

Koishikawa, Masahito. "The Setting" The Paradigm of Christ 21 Dec 2000, 27 Nov

2005 < <http://www.actus.org/setting.html>>.

Koyana, Siphokazi. "The Heart of the Matter: Motherhood and Marriage in the

Autobiographies of Maya Angelou" The Black Scholar (32:2) 2002, 35-44.

<[http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R01657346&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1133168816\\_3354&trailId=1073BA12291&area=abell&forward=critref\\_ft](http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R01657346&divLevel=0&queryId=../session/1133168816_3354&trailId=1073BA12291&area=abell&forward=critref_ft)>.

Lauter, Estella. Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century

Women. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

Love, Martin. "This Much I Know" The Guardian 19 Oct 2003. 14 Nov 2005

<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/biography/story/0,6000,1066028,00.html>>.

"Martin Luther King Jr.,: "I Have a Dream"". 27 Nov 2005 < [http://www.american](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/Ihaveadream.htm)

[rhetoric.com/speeches/Ihaveadream.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/Ihaveadream.htm)>.

Rev of And Still I Rise, by Maya Angelou. Publisher`s Weekly 214.5 (1978): 87.

Sigal, Clancy. "Bitter Sweet." The Guardian 16 May 1985. 14 Nov 2005

<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,95992,00.html>>.

Stepto, R.B. "The Phenomenal Woman and the Severed Daughter." Parnassus: Poetry  
In Review 8.1 (1979): 312-20.

Vandergrift, Key E. "And Bid Her Sing: A White Feminist Reads African-American  
Female Poets." SCILS 14 Nov 2005. <[http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/  
Books/KAY65.pdf](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/Books/KAY65.pdf)>.

The Maya Angelou: Poems Community Note includes chapter-by-chapter summary and analysis, character list, theme list, historical context, author biography and quizzes written by community members like you. Another recurrent theme in the poetry of Maya Angelou is gender inequality. As mentioned before, in *Woman Work*, the life of a woman is seen akin to that of a slave. She writes about the quotidian struggles faced by a woman because of the discrimination that has been internalized in the society that makes the woman an inevitable victim of patriarchy. Love. A less polarizing and arguably more universal theme that permeates across the poetry of Maya Angelou is that of love. This love can be individual love or one for humanity. Maya Angelou (1928-2014), an African American memoirist and poet, is best known for her autobiographic novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and her long poem "On the Pulse of Morning" which she was invited to read at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993. As a contemporary black female writer, she distinguishes herself by infusing her art with consistent cultural consciousness, personal and cultural experience. Her poetry reveals themes of survival, development and self-discovery of African Americans. Point of View: Maya Angelou ( she is telling the poem). Imagery: "Oil wells pumping in my living room", etc. Angelou uses different examples and scenarios that people might do to her such as, "you may write me down in history with your bitter twisted lies..." but she will always rise above it. Maya Angelou portrays confidence and will to always get up when put down. Theme. The theme of "Still I Rise" is really about self respect, and confidence. In the poem, she reveals how she will overcome anything with her self-esteem. She shows how nothing can get her down. She will rise to any occasion and nothing, not even her skin color will hold her back. This theme helps convey her message Maya Angelou Poetry Collection from Famous Poets and Poems. See also: Poets by Nationality African American Poets Women Poets Thematic Poems Thematic Quotes Contemporary Poets Nobel Prize Poets American Poets English Poets. Maya Angelou Poems. Back to Poet Page. Sort by: Views | Alphabetically. Total Poems: 18. 1. Still I Rise.