**Reading 2: Different Cultures poetry**

**Task: A comparison of 'Still I Rise' by Maya Angelou and 'Taint' by Grace Nichols.**

I am going to compare two poems called 'Still I Rise', by Maya Angelou and 'Taint' by Grace Nichols.

Both of these poems are about the slave trade and how it affected the poets and their ancestors.

However, each poet has a different perspective on her experiences, one a positive view and the other a

more negative view.

I am going to start by analysing, 'Still I Rise' by Maya Angelou. In this poem Maya Angelou talks about

the way her race has been treated differently and discriminated against in the past, and how people do

not like the way she acts because of her race. It gives an insight into how Angelou overcomes this trial.

This poem addresses the people who have discriminated against her particularly white men.

The first thing that hits you about the poem is the title. For such terrible times, one would have thought

that black people, like Angelou and her ancestors, would have given up hope, but this title contradicts

that belief. The words 'rise' and 'still' create a positive and persevering slant. These words are repeated

throughout the poem emphasising this upbeat view.

The opening lines:

You may write me down in History

With your bitter twisted lies...'

indicate that she feels people have lied about her and her race. The words 'bitter' and 'twisted', create

a negative view of the people who have done this to her. She goes on to say:

'You may trod me in the very dirt

But still like dust I rise.'

These two lines are very different. The first is very negative; it creates images of cruel faceless men

treading innocent people into the dirt, like worthless animals and shows how inhumanely their people

were treated. The word 'dirt' emphasises the worthlessness and low status that these people were

given. However, the next line shows how Angelou triumphs over this harsh treatment. The word 'still'

denotes that even though this is happening to her she keeps going and persevering. In the next stanza,

Angelou, uses rhetorical questions and they have a sarcastic tone. She wants to show she is happy

and content and how the offenders are always gloomy. She says:

'Does my sassiness upset you?'

This quotation reveals Angelou's true personality and the word 'sassiness', meaning feisty and

confident, shows after all that has happened to her, she is still strong and confident. She then wants to

show that although she hasn't got much in terms of money, riches and jewels, she still has her dignity

and still holds her head up high. She says:

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room...'

The word 'oil' instantly indicates wealth, as oil is a very valuable substance vital to the future of the

world. The whole first sentence reveals how she holds her head up high and walks as if she has riches.

In the third stanza, Angelou, uses nature to prove her point. She uses the moon and the sun as her

first point and the tides after that.

'Just like moons and like suns

With the certainty of tides...

Still I rise'.

Angelou uses the moon and sun because everyday they rise into the sky and never stop, just as she

will keep rising. She then uses the tide because tides are very strong and no-one can prevent them or

stop them, like her, as she won't stop rising above the evil.

In the fourth stanza, Angelou goes back to using rhetorical questions. In this stanza she has an angry

tone as she is showing what the people wanted her to be like and how to act. She says:

'Did you want to see me broken

Bowed head and lowered eyes...?'

This shows that the people who were doing this to her wanted her to be depressed and 'broken'. The

language she uses is very emotive and her description suggests how white men would expect slaves to

behave. Therefore this gives the impression that she doesn't listen to what the oppressors want her to

look like. She doesn't let them belittle her as they did to the slaves and she does not succumb to their

evil.

The next stanza is very similar to the second stanza. She points out one of her characteristics and then

uses sarcasm to suggest her strength and that she is above these people. She says:

'Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard...'

The word 'haughtiness' is her characteristic, and means pride. She still doesn't believe herself to be

inferior to anybody. In the second line she is sarcastic as she doesn't really care what they think

because they have hurt her and her race. The tone here is patronising as well. She is showing them

fake pity. In the last two lines she then acts, once again, as if she is richer than them.

'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines

Diggin' in my back yard.'

In the next stanza, Angelou wants to show that the oppressors can try as hard as they like but nothing

will make her feel low or worthless and that she will always rise above their evil. She says:

'You may shoot me with your words

You may cut me with your eyes

You may kill me with your hatefulness.

All three active verbs are very strong and they may denote the evil she has seen and felt herself. Using

the words 'You may' gives the impression that they can do all these things to her, yet it still won't affect

her. It also reflects on the way that these people used to harm the Black race by shooting, cutting and

killing them but now they can't do that anymore and the only way of harming Angelou and her race now

is by saying things or giving looks of disapproval. In Maya Angelou's case, this doesn't affect her at all

and makes the oppressors seem weak and Angelou strong.

The words in this verse evoke images of men trying to harm her in everyway possible, but still nothing

touches her, not even the spite of their words. After these lines, she says: 'But still, like air, I rise' which

proves that nothing can affect her, no matter what they do, she will survive.

In the penultimate stanza she, again, goes back to her character and how the white people don't like it

yet she doesn't care and she still feels rich anyway. Another example of this is:

'Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise?'

The second line indicates that the evil people didn't expect her to be sexy or confident after what they

did to her ancestors. They expected submissiveness in black women but she is not prepared to be like

this. This shows how strong she is and this makes her seem very confident as well as sassy.

In the final stanza, after every one or two lines, Angelou writes 'I rise'. In the first line the words,

'History's shame' may refer to the fact that history wasn't very proud of what they did to the black

people. The word 'out' shows she is moving forward. The word 'huts' refers to the kind of place the

slaves lived in or may represent an enclosed, dark place.

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Angelou then says 'I rise, Up from the past rooted in pain.' Here, she wants to show that she has moved

onward and upwards from the bad past. The word 'up' creates positivity, as it means moving forwards

and upwards or rising to something new. The words 'rooted in pain' give an impression of a plant's

roots which are rooted deep in the soil and cannot be pulled up or changed. I think here Angelou is

referring to the fact that although she cannot change the past she can change the future, and although

the pain will always be there, she will try and move on with a positive outlook.

After this, again, she repeats 'I rise'. She then uses a metaphor:

'I'm a black ocean leaping and wide

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide'

I think she calls herself a 'black ocean' because oceans are big and cannot be controlled and black

people are not prepared to be controlled any longer. The word 'leaping' suggests that she is alive and is

leaping forwards or upwards. The words 'welling' and 'swelling' denote her increasing confidence and

strength. In the next line, Angelou wants to show her transition from something dark and evil to

something new and fresh. She says: 'Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear.' The word 'daybreak'

suggests a new start. The word 'clear' represents something that is without evil or oppressors or

something that is flawless. Angelou then says:

'Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.'

I think that the gift that she talks about is life as well as strength and courage and so she thinks she

should use these gifts rather than fade away or be beaten.

In the next sentence where she says the 'hope of the slave', it shows that she is like an example to

others and she has stepped out and stood up for herself and so the other slaves would look up to her

and try to become like her.

The re-emphasis of her confidence in the last three lines ('I rise') shows how she is liberated and how

she has literally risen above the evil.

I think the main message of this poem is to overcome evil in a passive way. Also, it is to have faith in

yourself and to persevere through all the evil. And finally, it is to have the freedom of mind, body and

soul. Angelou breaks all the stereotypes and is able to contradict all the preconceptions of this

historical time.

The poem I am going to compare is 'Taint' by Grace Nichols. This is also about the slave trade,

however, in this poem, Grace Nichols is writing about someone else's experience rather than her own,

although her poem is in first person.

'Taint' comes from a completely different perspective compared to 'Still I Rise'. It has a much more

negative outlook on the whole experience.

The first thing that hits you about this poem is the title. 'Taint' is a very negative word meaning spoil or

tarnish. You instantly go from a positive atmosphere in 'Still I Rise' to a negative atmosphere when you

switch to reading 'Taint'. The title is an introduction of what is to come. Grace Nichols starts off her first

stanza with 'But'. This would usually suggest a response to a previously asked question, so it gives the

reader the impression that she may have been having a conversation with someone. She goes on to

say:

'But I was stolen by men

The colour of my own skin.'

Here I think she wants to show what happened to her. The word 'stolen' gives the impression that she

was a possession. She also mentions the fact that she was not only stolen, but she was stolen by men

of her own skin. She resents the fact that she was betrayed by men of her own skin because she

would have thought they would have had more loyalty seeing as they were the same race. It also

sounds as if she may have found it less painful if white men had stolen her as she could have dealt with

it more easily, but because it wasn't she feels betrayed.

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This is different to 'Still I Rise', because in that poem it is clear that the abusers were white, and that

they were more bothered by Angelou's personality rather than Angelou being bothered by them,

whereas in 'Taint', Nichols seems completely concerned and affected about the fact that they were of

the same race rather than opposite colours in race.

She then goes on to say:

'Borne away by men whose heels

Had become hoofs

Whose hands had turned to talons'

Here I think that Nichols wants to show how the men acted like animals. The language evokes images

of devils tearing away at her skin and grabbing her like she was a piece of meat. Also the word 'borne',

which means carried, emphasises her helplessness as it shows she was taken and carried away.

The last two lines of the stanza are to show that she was being held against her own will and that she

was being taken to places that she didn't want to go to. The lines state:

'Bearing me down

To the trail of darkness'

The first line signifies that she was held against her own will because 'bearing me down' may reflect

that she may have been struggling to get away because she had to be restrained. In the second line,

the word 'darkness' signifies the unknown. This is very different to Angelou's poem because in her

poem she talks about daybreaks that are wondrously clear but Nichols talks about darkness. This

reflects on the mood of the poem as Angelou's is more positive and optimistic as well as more pure

where as Nichols' poem reflects a more pessimistic and impure place.

In the second stanza Nichols talks about how she was traded and sold away for petty little things, really

quite worthless in value. This shows how she was considered very low in value.

'But I was traded by men

The colour of my own skin'

In these two lines, she repeats two things shown in the opening two lines. She repeats the 'but' and

she repeats 'The colour of my own skin'. This shows that these two points are very important to her

and the fact that she re-unites them, shows she wants to re-emphasise these points. She then goes on

to show how worthless and inhuman she felt:

'Traded like a fowl, like a goat,

Like a sack of kernels I was traded

for beads for pans

for trinkets?'

She compares herself to animals, which are considered to be 'lower' in status than humans, and the

animals she compares herself with (fowls and goats) were often traded in these places for small

amounts of money. She then compares herself to small, cheap objects like trinkets and kernels and

this reflects on her worthlessness and low status.

Also, the fact that she uses a question mark at the end of the sentence may reflect her disbelief at

these things and at how they treated her. This is all very different to 'Still I Rise' where Angelou feels

rich and powerful. On the contrary, Nichols' character feels worthless and weak as well as low in

status. This shows how they both coped differently with what was happening to them. In Angelou's

poem, she became stronger and in Nichols' poem she became weaker.

In the last two lines of the poem, Grace Nichols, wants to show how she feels betrayed and how she

cannot move on with her life.

'Daily I rinse the taint

Of treachery from my mouth.'

The fact that she uses the word 'daily' shows that the treachery of her own people is still very much in

her mind. She also uses the word 'taint' which may imply that she and her people will never be free of

the stain.

This is different to Angelou's poem which ends very positively. Here, Nichols, ends in a negative way

and there doesn't seem to be any positivity. Angelou talks about moving on whereas Nichols shows no

sign of moving on. You can pity Nichols more than Angelou.

After looking at both poems I preferred 'Still I Rise' by Maya Angelou. The reason for this is that

Angelou proves that it doesn't matter who you are, you can still be strong and overcome your problems.

These poems both show two extremes of coping with what has happened to them. One shows a much

more positive view where the reader is drawn to this positivity and the other has a much more negative

view where the reader is able to sympathise with the person in the poem.