

## **“And Still I Rise” Proud Black Women**

### **Understanding the poetry of Maya Angelou through the lyrics of two female rappers**

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#### **Rationale**

Black studies, often limited to Black History Month and learning about Martin Luther King, Jr. (and perhaps Malcolm X), often fail to include an understanding of the very real pride and strength of black women. Indeed, lyrics of some contemporary rapper denigrate black women. The low self-esteem of young women of all ethnicities has been well documented. By examining the lives and lyrics of popular, positive black female rappers such as Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill, students can trace a direct line back to the inspirational writer and poet, Maya Angelou. Rap lyrics will help explicate poetry, and vice versa, in a way that students can emulate with lyrics and poetry of their choice. Segments on dance and graffiti art will further enhance students' understanding of the creative expression.

#### **Objectives**

The student will:

1. be exposed to important American poetry by a significant African American female writer;
2. sharpen their literary analysis skills, recognizing thematic and stylistic parallels between rap music and poetry;
3. discover positive meaning in popular music and poetry;
4. deepen their understanding of issues of racism, stereotyping, discrimination, and gender bias;
5. learn to express lyrical and musical creativity through dance.

#### **Audience**

This lesson is intended as an interdisciplinary unit for eighth grade students, with components in language arts (poetry), U.S. History (black studies), physical education (dance), and art (graffiti art). The lesson is also appropriate for high school English and American studies students, grades 9-12. It is particularly pertinent for celebrations of Black History Month and/or Women's History Month.

#### **Time Frame**

3-4 class periods, depending on the length of the class and whether additional enrichment activities are included.

#### **Materials**

CD/tape player; music and lyrics for selected songs; copies of 3 Angelou poems “Still I Rise,” “Phenomenal Woman,” and “Ain’t That Bad?”; copies of Angelou essay “They Came to Stay.” Optional: music and lyrics to TLC’s “Waterfalls” and copies of Angelou’s “Take Time Out.”

## **Background**

Present biographical information about Maya Angelou, her rise from poverty, the early rape that rendered her speechless for years, motherhood in her teens, and her careers as a dancer, an activist, a movie star, a college professor, and the inaugural poet for President Clinton. Present enough information about Queen Latifah, her Black Nationalist upbringing and her giving up her birth name for this Arabic one which means “delicate and sensitive.” Finally, mention Lauryn Hill as a songwriter, rapper, activist, and young mother. Ask interested students to find additional biographical information on the Internet (or in other sources) on these three women.

Next, contextualize rap music. Briefly trace the roots of rap to a long oral tradition of storytelling, to spirituals and to poetry in African-American culture. Touch on the different styles of rap, emphasizing that positive, socially conscious rap will be the focus of the lesson. Mention “call and response,” as well as rappers’ use of sampling, of using familiar phrases from previous works to strengthen a message. Some knowledge of the Civil Rights movements and Black Nationalism would be useful.

## **Procedures**

1. Allow students to share additional biographical information they have learned about the three women, Maya Angelou, Queen Latifah, and Lauryn Hill.
2. Encourage discussion of rap music and its lyrics to set guidelines for what will be acceptable to share in the classroom.
3. Distribute copies of Angelou’s essay “They Came to Stay.” Read the essay together and discuss the images of black women that Angelou presents. What negative images is she trying to counter? From where do these negative stereotypes come?
4. Distribute copies of Angelou’s “Still I Rise” and ask a student to read it aloud. How does this relate to her essay? What is the theme of the poem? (the strength of black women; believing in oneself, etc.) Ask students to brainstorm a list of words and phrases that convey positive messages. To what historical events might the poet be referring? What is the rhyme scheme? Try clapping out the rhythm or stomping with feet.
5. Play Queen Latifah’s “Come Into My House” two or three times.
6. Distribute the lyrics. What image of black women is found in Queen Latifah’s song? Can students identify the similarity of theme with that of the poem? Can they find an example of sampling? Of call and response? Can the rhythm be clapped?
7. Play “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” and distribute the lyrics. Have students discuss thematic similarities. What is the narrator’s tone? (one of pride) Pair the lyrics with Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman.” Break students into groups to discuss thematic similarities, narrative tone, rhyme and rhythm, in a way similar to that modeled earlier.

8. In physical education class, help students learn some basic breakdancing moves such as: freeze, swipes, windmill, flare, backspin, handstand, scramble. If students don't know some moves to teach others, there are several sites on the Internet with descriptions. Or, if the instructor is interested in a less gymnastic approach, street funk dance can be introduced. This is often offered at dance studios as an aerobic exercise and includes: grapevine, leaps, pivot turns, and isolations. It is very popular with students and lends itself to choreography.
9. In art class, students can talk about hip hop culture as expressed in fashion and graffiti art. Students can create a large mural that expresses the positive themes they discovered in the poetry and rap lyrics.

## Evaluation

1. To assess students' learning of lyrical analysis, connections between rap and poetry, and the black experience, distribute copies of Angelou's poem, "Take Time Out" and the lyrics to TLC's "Waterfalls." Play the song. Ask students to write a response to these artistic works, using similar questioning procedures of noting themes, positive and negative images, rhyme schemes and rhythm. Students can approach this as a small group cooperative learning project as well.
2. Ask students to choose a cumulative project for the lesson. Some possibilities include:
  - Bring to class appropriate rap songs that explore positive themes to share. Extra bonus given for complementary poems that are found!
  - In a group, choreograph, suing breakdance or street funk styles, Angelou's "Still I Rise" or another of her poems that we have studied. Express the connection between lyrics, music, and dance. Perform this dance for the class.
  - Read Angelou's poem "Ain't That Bad?" and research five of the African Americans referenced in the poem. Comment on why Angelou has included them in her poem.
  - Create a piece of graffiti art based on a poem or song of your choice and explain it to the class.
  - Write a poem about yourself and your ethnic identity, perhaps including stereotypes often assigned to your ethnic group.

## Selected Recordings

"Come Into My House" recorded by Queen Latifah (*All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Music, 1989)

"The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill," recorded by Lauryn Hill (*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Sony, 1998)

"Waterfalls," recorded by TLC (*Crazy, Sexy, Cool*, Laface, 1994)

## Enrichment/Additional Resources

Stomp is an extraordinary production that mixes music, dance, theater, and performance art. Stomp is billed as "the street, the beat, the sound" Great choreography, percussion from all kinds of street sources, colorful clothes and high energy make this show really

appealing to young people. A field trip to see this group would pull together the rap, poetry, and dance aspects of the unit in a energetic, enthusiastic, and visual way.

Students who are interested in reading more about Maya Angelou will enjoy the first volume in her five-volume autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Random House, 1970), which describes her early years, including the rape which silenced her voice for years and the birth of her son in her teens. Also of interest to students is the poem Angelou wrote for the inauguration of President Clinton, "On the Pulse of Morning." This is available on audiocassette, spoken by Maya Angelou.

Resources that provided background information for this unit include:

Maya Angelou. *And Still I Rise*. (New York: Random House, 1978).

Maya Angelou. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. (New York: Random House, 1994).

Maya Angelou. *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*. (New York: Random House, 1997).

Maurice K. Jones. *Say It Loud! The Story of Rap*. (Connecticut: Millbrook Press, 1994).

Miles Shapiro. *Maya Angelou*. (New York: Chelsea House, 1993).

Internet site: <http://www.ubl.com>

**Source:** The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (<http://www.rockhall.com/teacher/sti-lesson-34/>)