

## Notes on Africa by Maya Angelou:

In the first lines of the poem, Africa is portrayed as a complex and pretty ridiculously hot woman – eternal and eternally gorgeous. No, we're not at all jealous. Not at all.

Things take a turn for the worse in Stanza 2: Africa is invaded by brigands that steal men and women. There's lots of killing. And some forced religious conversion. It's all pretty awful.

Stanza 3 is where Africa starts to grab some power for itself. Now the passive woman who suffered throughout the years is "rising," ready and able to take on the world.

Line 1

Thus she had lain

OK, so this poem starts off pretty innocently, right? We could be talking about just about any girl or woman waking up from a nap. No biggie, right?

Well, read on, friends, read on. Things will heat up pretty quickly!

Lines 2-6

sugarcane sweet  
deserts her hair  
golden her feet  
mountains her breasts  
two Niles her tears.

Now we're talking. This isn't any old woman. In fact, she's so incredible that we can't really imagine her as a human woman at all. Maybe she's...Africa?

There's a rather long tradition of addressing a land (or nation) as if it were a woman. There's Mother Earth, Gaia, Lady Liberty, and Bharat Mata (Mother India), to name just a few. Why is the earth or the nation portrayed as a woman? Well, there are several reasons, and some of them are so sexist that we just won't go into them right now. Here, however, are some of our favorites:

Historically, men were the movers and shakers of the world. Hey, we're not saying it wasn't screwed up. We're just saying that that's how it was. What better way to get a man to believe in something than to describe that thing as a woman? After all, if we believe everything we hear, men think about sex just about all the time. Want to grab a man's attention? Talk about breasts. Even if they happen to be the "mountains" of a continent, you've probably got his attention. The earth makes things grow and come to life. You could even say that the earth gives birth to new life. Sort of like women – see the connection?

Women are often stereotyped as soft, defenseless creatures who need to be protected. Although this stereotype has little to no connection with the truth, it does seem to be persistent. Wait a second – why would Maya Angelou, strong woman extraordinaire, fall into such a stereotypical portrayal?

Well, for all the bad stereotypes, the sexy, alluring land myth is pretty potent. Maybe that's the image Angelou is seeking to create. Or maybe she's using some irony here. We'll have to read on to find out.

Lines 7-8

Thus she has lain  
Black through the years.

Repeating the first line (with a change from "had" to "has") as she wraps up the first stanza allows Angelou to emphasize the passivity of this image. After all, if you're lying around all day, chances are you're not getting all that much done. That's all well and good if you have a carefree life, but, as this poem is about to prove, nobody's life is without troubles for too long!

Lines 9-12

Over the white seas  
rime white and cold  
brigands ungentled  
icicle bold

The immediate interjection of "white" seas forms a contrast to the "black" land – making it possible that changes (and, well, problems) are on the horizon. It's interesting to note that Angelou doesn't ever refer to the people who perpetrate the crimes of slavery. It's only the seas that are white. It's almost like nature itself is attacking the land. Once we get around to lines 11 and 12, though, it's clear that intruders are on the horizon. Angelou's speaker isn't lulled into complacency by the arrival of these strangers, though. She's quick to point out the cold (even icicle-like) quality of their arrival. In case you were wondering, the "brigands" our speaker describes are probably boats – the boats that arrive on the African continent to carry slaves to the New World. We're not big gamblers, but even we feel pretty safe saying that this new development probably isn't a good one.

Lines 13-14

took her young daughters  
sold her strong sons

Notice how Angelou chooses to describe the kidnapping and enslavement of millions of Africans in generational terms? Africa isn't just losing her present, she's losing her future. After all, without daughter and sons, how do you get granddaughters and grandsons?

Lines 15-16

churched her with Jesus  
bled her with guns.

We've got to admit, we're pretty blown away by these lines. After all, anyone who feels like they can make up verbs and get away with it is probably worth watching. And Angelou is certainly getting away with it here!

Sure, "church" is a word, but it's a noun. Have you ever heard of the verb "to church"? We haven't, either.

Why would Angelou choose to make up this word? After all, she could easily have written a line that went something like "brought churches and Jesus." That would convey the same point and fit within the rules set by the fine folks at Merriam-Webster, right?

One of the powerful things about these lines, however, is the sense of violent action inflicted upon Africa. If you look at the way the two lines are structured, some pretty incredible parallels arise: "churched" and "bled" share the same verb-space – which also makes "Jesus" and "guns" structurally equivalent. It sets up the possibility that the speaker sees the two as harmful in the same way.

Line 17

Thus she has lain.

This is one of the strangest lines of the poem. Yes, we know, we've seen it before, so what's so weird about seeing it again? Well, for one thing, it's not the eighth line in the stanza. It's the ninth line. (If you haven't already checked out our "Form and Meter" section, do! We'll talk lots more about how this formal irregularity throws off our sense of balance and rhythm.)

This line sticks out like a sore thumb. Does it express our speaker's resignation? Her anger? Her sense of irony? It's hard to tell. After all, it could be a way to express sorrow at the fact that Africa's timeless survival seems to be the only weapon in its arsenal. Or the speaker could be noting her frustration at the fact that Africa seems to keep taking all the hits that the rest of the world is throwing its way. Without any more explanation, it's hard to tell.

Line 18

Now she is rising

Stanza 3 is all about moving on. If Stanzas 1 and 2 were about the past, Stanza 3 is about "now."

Even the verb tense is all about the present: instead of saying "now she rises," which could make the "now" into a more theoretical sort of present, Angelou chooses to describe Africa's rising by using the present continuous tense. That's when you use a form of the verb "to be" with a gerund (a verb ending in -ing). It's a super-immediate form of the present tense. When is Africa rising? Right Now.

Lines 19-21

remember her pain  
remember the losses  
her screams loud and vain

And now the speaker turns to her audience, drawing them into the work of the present by insisting that they remember all of the things that Africa has suffered. Repeating the verb "remember" makes sure that we, as readers, will feel compelled to participate in the work the poem is doing.

This poem becomes the scream that Africa herself can't make. It's got readers (us) and a message.

We're betting that the speaker is certain that her message will be anything but "vain." Africa can't speak for herself? Well, no worries, friends. That's what this poem is for.

Lines 22-23

remember her riches

her history slain

Here's the puzzle for this particular stanza: how do you kill ("slay") history? Our speaker doesn't offer many details, which makes these lines particularly haunting. Maybe it means that men and women were murdered as part of the slave trade. That would certainly be true. Maybe it means that transporting people away from their cultures is a form of genocide as well. That would also be true. In fact, there are lots of ways that history can be distorted, forgotten, or deliberately silenced. By refusing to specify which way Africa's history is slain, Angelou leaves the door open for all sorts of horrible potential silencings.

Once again, though, this poem steps in to offer a deliberate alternative to lost history. Sure, it's a literary re-creation of history – but that's a form of history just as much as the chapters you'll find in your social studies book.

Lines 24-25  
now she is striding  
although she has lain.

You may think these last two lines are part of the same old routine – after all, we've come across some version of both of them before, right? We're back where we were at the end of Stanza 2, or even Stanza 1 for that matter.

Notice, though, the change in the wording of these lines. Africa is now "striding/although she has lain." Why is that such a big deal? Well, it suggests that things are changing. Sure, she once sat passively and did nothing as generations were captured and slaughtered. But that's all over now. Now she's moving and shaking and doing things despite her long history of silent victimhood. It's a new era, folks, and it's one that the speaker is pretty happy about.