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Analyzing How Stylistic Devices Construct Resistance in Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

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Abstract

Resistance poetry turns experiences of racial oppression into artistic and political agency, yet much existing scholarship privileges themes over the linguistic means through which resistance is built. This study analyzed how stylistic devices construct the theme of resistance in Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" (1919) and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" (1978). Guided by postcolonial theory and stylistics, a qualitative comparative textual analysis was conducted. The two poems were purposively selected as primary texts, while scholarly books and articles served as secondary sources. Close reading, thematic coding, and stylistic analysis of imagery, diction, pronouns, repetition, tone, symbolism, rhythm, and form were applied to both poems. The results show that McKay builds collective and confrontational resistance through a rejected animal image, martial imagery, plural pronouns, a repeated conditional opening, a militant tone, and a tightly controlled sonnet form (iambic pentameter, abab cdcd efef gg) with alliteration and enjambment that converts the threat of death into honourable defiance. Angelou, in contrast, constructs individual and psychological resistance through the refrain "I rise" and its shift from "I'll rise" to "I rise," an addressed "you," natural and prosperity imagery, rhetorical questions, a confident tone, and ballad-like quatrains whose musical rhythm turns historical humiliation into self-affirmation. Both poets reject dehumanization, reclaim dignity, and use repetition and imagery as ideological tools, although McKay stresses communal action while Angelou stresses personal empowerment. The findings confirm that resistance in poetry is made through language as well as theme, and that style and context must be read together. The study examined texts rather than classrooms or learners, it offers tentative pedagogical suggestions tied to its textual findings and recommends classroom-based research to test them.

Keywords: Stylistic devices; Resistance; Poetry; Comparative analysis

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Introduction

Resistance has long been a central concern of literature produced by communities that have experienced racism, colonial domination, and cultural marginalization, and contemporary criticism increasingly recognizes that it is expressed not only through open political confrontation but also through language, tone, and form (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Scott, 1990). Poetry is a particularly productive site for such expression because its compressed language makes every choice of image, word, and rhythm meaningful (Simpson, 2014). Claude McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die," published in 1919 in the aftermath of the racial violence of the Red Summer (Cooper, 1987), and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," published in 1978 in the post-civil rights era (Lupton, 1998), are among the best-known African American poems of resistance. Although written almost six decades apart, both confront dehumanization and affirm human dignity, yet they do so through strikingly different stylistic means. Scholarship on the two poets has tended to emphasize the themes of oppression, survival, and empowerment, whereas less attention has been paid to how resistance is constructed linguistically, and the two poems are seldom examined side by side from a stylistic point of view. This gap matters because resistance is not only what a poem says but also how it says it. The present article therefore analyzes how stylistic devices construct the theme of resistance in the two poems, using a qualitative comparative textual analysis guided by postcolonial theory and stylistics.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to analyze how stylistic devices construct the theme of resistance in Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise." Specifically, the study sought:

(i) to examine the stylistic devices through which McKay constructs resistance in "If We Must Die";

(ii) to analyze the poetic techniques through which Angelou articulates resistance in "Still I Rise"; and

(iii) to compare the stylistic strategies of the two poets in order to identify convergences and divergences in their portrayal of resistance.

Literature Review

In literary studies, resistance has moved from a narrowly political idea of open confrontation toward a broader understanding that includes irony, tone, metaphor, and other linguistic strategies through which subordinated groups contest domination. Scott (1990) argues that subordinate groups often voice opposition through disguised or indirect forms of speech, while Ashcroft et al. (2002) show that postcolonial writers reshape the dominant language by abrogating its authority and appropriating it for their own purposes. Said (1993) likewise treats cultural expression as a field in which resistance to domination is imagined and organized, and Fanon (2008) links resistance to the struggle of racialized people to recover a humanity that oppression denies them. Postcolonial theory, which offers a vocabulary for examining language, identity, and power (Ashcroft et al., 2013; see also Tyson, 2015), therefore frames this study. A recognized limitation of postcolonial readings is that they can foreground political meaning at the expense of aesthetic form, which is why the framework is paired here with stylistics.

Applying postcolonial theory to African American poems requires justification, and three considerations support it here. First, McKay was born in Jamaica, then a British colony, and began his career there before settling in the United States, so his sonnet is the work of a colonial subject writing within the African diaspora as well as of an African American poet (Cooper, 1987). Second, the Black diaspora has been theorized as a transatlantic space in which the memory of slavery and colonial domination shapes Black expression on both sides of the ocean (Gilroy, 1993); this makes concepts such as the appropriation of a dominant form and the recovery of a denied humanity (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Fanon, 2008) applicable to Black writing in the United States. Third, racial domination inside the United States has been described as a form of internal colonialism (Blauner, 1969), and Angelou's closing references to her ancestors and to "the slave" connect her speaker to that colonial history. Postcolonial theory is therefore used here as a lens on language, power, and dehumanization, not as a claim that the United States is a postcolonial nation in the strict sense. Scott's (1990) hidden transcripts are used differently: because both poems resist openly and in public, the concept serves as a point of contrast with disguised resistance rather than as a description of either poem.

Stylistics supplies the complementary method. It explains how meaning arises from patterns at the levels of lexis, syntax, sound, rhythm, and imagery (Simpson, 2014), and it treats foregrounded patterns such as repetition and deviation as signals of artistic and ideological purpose (Leech & Short, 2007). Standard guides to literary terms also define devices such as imagery, tone, refrain, and symbolism, which this study uses as analytical categories (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). Critical work on the two poets has largely approached them separately and thematically. Studies of McKay situate his sonnet within the militancy of the Harlem Renaissance and the violence of 1919 (Cooper, 1987; Gates & McKay, 2014), whereas studies of Angelou stress themes of overcoming, pride, and self-definition (Lupton, 1998). Comparative analysis offers a way of reading such texts in dialogue rather than in isolation, although it must avoid forcing similarities where none exist (Damrosch, 2020). Taken together, this body of work leaves a gap: resistance in the two poems is well established thematically, but how each poet builds it through stylistic choices, and how those choices compare, has received little systematic attention.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design using comparative textual analysis. A qualitative design was appropriate because the aim was to understand how meaning is created through language rather than to measure variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study was library-based and involved no fieldwork, human participants, or experimental procedures, so the research site was the text itself. Postcolonial theory and stylistics guided the interpretation, and the comparative approach placed the two poems in dialogue so that convergences and divergences could be identified (Damrosch, 2020).

The population consisted of two poems, McKay's "If We Must Die" and Angelou's "Still I Rise," which were selected through purposive sampling because they are widely recognized representations of resistance from different historical periods and poetic forms (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Purposive sampling prioritizes relevance and richness over representativeness; consequently, the findings are interpretive and are not generalized to all resistance poetry. The primary data were the poems as first

published (McKay, 1919; Angelou, 1978). The secondary data comprised books, scholarly articles, and critical essays used to support interpretation and to situate the findings within existing scholarship.

Data analysis combined thematic analysis and stylistic analysis. Each poem was read closely several times, and lines expressing resistance were coded and grouped into themes following the phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These lines were then examined for imagery, diction, pronouns, repetition, tone, symbolism, rhythm, and form, following the levels of language analysis described by Simpson (2014), and the results were compared across the two poems. To strengthen credibility and dependability, interpretations were tied to specific textual evidence, grounded in established theory, and documented transparently so that other readers can trace the reasoning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical practice meant representing the texts accurately, acknowledging all sources according to the APA 7th edition, and avoiding plagiarism. Quotations from the poems follow one convention: McKay's sonnet is cited by line number (ll.) and Angelou's poem by stanza number (st.), counting the stanzas as the poem is conventionally printed. Because "Still I Rise" remains under copyright, it is quoted only in short phrases and single lines needed for critical analysis; any longer reproduction of either text would require permission from the rights holder.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented poem by poem and then comparatively. Each set of findings is discussed in relation to the literature reviewed above, and Table 1 summarizes the main stylistic patterns.

Stylistic construction of resistance in "If We Must Die"

The analysis shows that McKay builds resistance first through imagery and symbolism. The poem opens with a negated comparison: "let it not be like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot" (McKay, 1919, ll. 1–2). Rather than likening the speakers to hogs, the lines name the condition of hunted livestock in order to reject it, so that the image of humiliation exposes the dehumanization of the oppressed while the poem defines its resistance against that condition. The oppressors are cast as "the mad and hungry dogs" (l. 3), "monsters" (l. 7), and a "murderous, cowardly pack" (l. 13), which sets up a moral opposition between the degraded condition imposed on the speakers and the honourable death they choose. Martial imagery of "the common foe" (l. 9), of one death-blow answering "their thousand blows" (l. 11), and of fighting back while "Pressed to the wall" (l. 14) then recasts resistance as heroic combat rather than passive endurance. This pattern supports Fanon's (2008) argument that resistance is bound up with recovering a humanity denied by oppression, and it is consistent with accounts that stress the militancy of McKay's response to the violence of 1919 (Cooper, 1987).

Diction, pronouns, and repetition reinforce this collective stance. The plural pronouns we, us, and our (for example "our accursèd lot," l. 4), together with the address "O kinsmen!" (l. 9), bind the speakers into a community of shared fate, so that resistance is presented as a common duty rather than an individual act. The conditional "If we must die" opens the first line and returns at the start of the second quatrain ("If we must die, O let us nobly die," l. 5), and this repetition moves the poem from the acknowledgment of mortality to a decision about the manner of death, converting fear into resolve. The apostrophe to the kinsmen at line 9 also marks the poem's turn, from reasoning about

the manner of death to a direct call to action. Such a movement illustrates the point made by Simpson (2014) and by Leech and Short (2007) that foregrounded repetition carries ideological as well as aesthetic force.

Tone and form complete the pattern. The tone is urgent, militant, and confrontational, carried by imperatives such as "let us nobly die" (l. 5), and the sonnet form imposes order on a scene of chaos. Its rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg, with a closing couplet ("pack" / "back," ll. 13–14) that ends on fighting back, and its lines are written in iambic pentameter, a steady five-beat measure that suggests that the rebellion is deliberate rather than desperate. Sound and syntax reinforce this effect. Alliteration, as in "Making their mock" (l. 4) and in the repeated h of "hogs," "Hunted," and "hungry" (ll. 1–3), binds the hunted victims and the hungry pack into one scene of degradation. Enjambment carries sentences across line endings ("hogs / Hunted," ll. 1–2; "shed / In vain," ll. 6–7), so that the syntax pushes forward against the pause of the rhyme and the poem's urgency is felt in its movement. Read aloud, the heavy stresses of the closing line ("Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!") strain against the pentameter pattern, enacting the pressure the line describes. Moreover, the use of an inherited European form to voice Black defiance can be read through the notion of appropriation in Ashcroft et al. (2002), in which the dominant form is taken over and turned to the purposes of the oppressed.

Stylistic construction of resistance in "Still I Rise"

Angelou's resistance is organized around repetition and the refrain. The recurring "I rise," together with the repeated assertion that she will rise still ("still, like dust, I'll rise," Angelou, 1978, st. 1; "Still I'll rise," st. 3), answers each accusation, insult, or attempt at humiliation with a renewed act of selfassertion, so that rising becomes inevitable rather than hoped for. This reflects the theme of overcoming that critics identify in Angelou's work (Lupton, 1998) and shows, as Leech and Short (2007) suggest, that a foregrounded pattern can carry the central argument of a poem.

The refrain, however, does not stay the same. In the first half of the poem the speaker says "I'll rise" (st. 1, 3, 6), a future-tense promise made in answer to what "you" may do. In the last two stanzas the verb moves into the present tense and is set on its own line, "I rise" (st. 8–9), and the poem ends on three isolated repetitions of it. The change from "I'll rise" to "I rise" turns a defiant promise into an accomplished, continuing act: the speaker is no longer asserting that she will overcome but is shown overcoming. This shift is the poem's main structural device for moving from defiance to triumph, and it explains why rising seems inevitable rather than hoped for.

Imagery and diction extend the argument. Natural images such as "dust" (st. 1), "air" (st. 6), "moons," "suns," and "tides" (st. 3) present the speaker's endurance as a force of nature that cannot be stopped, while the similes of "oil wells" (st. 2) and "gold mines" (st. 5), attached to the way the speaker walks and laughs, replace scarcity with abundance and reject the inferiority traditionally attached to Black women (hooks, 2015). The speaker also addresses the oppressor directly as "you" through a series of rhetorical questions ("Does my sassiness upset you?" st. 2; "Did you want to see me broken?" st. 4) that challenge the expectation that she will appear broken, so that the confident, playful, and triumphant tone itself becomes a form of defiance. The addressed "you" is central to the poem's design. It is present in stanzas 1–7, where the oppressor is accused, mocked, and answered ("You may write me down in history," st. 1), and it disappears in the last two stanzas, where the speaker turns away from the oppressor toward her ancestors and the future. The poem thus stages

resistance first as public confrontation and then moves beyond the oppressor's gaze. Because this defiance is open, direct, and public, Scott's (1990) hidden transcript is better treated as a contrast than as an explanation: the irony, confidence, and playfulness of the poem are not disguise but performance.

Voice and rhythm complete the construction of resistance. The first-person singular pronoun places individual identity at the centre of the poem, and the form gives the poem the momentum of a declaration. The poem is built mainly on regular, ballad-like quatrains of short lines in which the second and fourth lines typically rhyme (st. 1–7, with some slant rhymes), and this song-like pattern is broken by the short, insistent refrain. The pattern then opens out in the last two stanzas, where the refrain is set on its own lines and the stanzas expand beyond four lines, as the speaker becomes "a black ocean, leaping and wide" (st. 8); form and image move together from measured defiance to expansive release. In its closing lines the speaker links her rising to "the gifts that my ancestors gave" and to "the dream and the hope of the slave" (st. 9), which widens a personal voice into a historical one. In this way, experiences of oppression are transformed into declarations of dignity and psychological freedom.

Comparative analysis and discussion

Table 1. Stylistic devices of resistance in "If We Must Die" and "Still I Rise"

Stylistic feature	McKay: "If We Must Die" (1919)	Angelou: "Still I Rise" (1978)
Form	Sonnet of 14 lines in iambic pentameter, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg, with a closing couplet	Mostly regular, ballad-like rhymed quatrains (st. 1–7) that expand in st. 8–9, with a recurring refrain and song-like movement
Voice and pronouns	Collective "we," "us," "our," and address to kinsmen	First-person singular "I" and an addressed "you" (st. 1–7)
Imagery	Hogs (a condition rejected: "let it not be like hogs"), mad dogs, monsters, open grave, combat	Dust, air, moons, suns, tides, oil wells, gold mines
Diction	Forceful words of struggle and honour	Words of pride, wealth, and movement
Repetition	Opening conditional "If we must die"	Refrain "I rise" and "still I'll rise"; shift from "I'll rise" (st. 1, 3, 6) to "I rise" (st. 8–9)
Tone	Urgent, militant, confrontational	Confident, defiant, celebratory
Rhetorical address	Exclamatory call to kinsmen	Rhetorical questions to the oppressor
Sound and rhythm	Iambic pentameter; alliteration ("Making their mock," l. 4); enjambment (ll. 1–2, 6–7)	Short-lined, ballad-like quatrains rhyming on lines 2 and 4; refrain set on its own lines in st. 8–9
Resulting resistance	Collective, honourable, physical defiance	Individual, psychological self-affirmation

The comparison shows that the two poems share a deep purpose but pursue it through different stylistic routes. Both reject dehumanization and reclaim dignity, and in both poems repetition and

imagery function as ideological tools rather than as ornament. This convergence supports the view that resistance literature restores a humanity that oppression denies (Fanon, 2008) and confirms that poetic devices carry political meaning (Simpson, 2014). The divergences, however, are equally significant. McKay's sonnet answers immediate physical danger with a collective, militant, and confrontational voice, whereas Angelou's song-like, quatrain-based poem answers a longer history of psychological and social humiliation with an individual, confident, and celebratory voice. Form works differently as well: McKay's closed fourteen-line sonnet holds its speakers within a single argument that ends in a couplet, whereas Angelou's recurring quatrains open out into the expanded final stanzas, so that her form can be read as moving from confrontation with the oppressor to release. McKay therefore constructs resistance as honourable collective action, while Angelou constructs it as self-affirmation and inner freedom.

These differences are best explained by the historical contexts and poetic aims of the two writers. McKay wrote in the shadow of racial violence (Cooper, 1987), and his urgent tone and martial imagery match that moment, whereas Angelou wrote in the post-civil rights era and turned to pride, abundance, and ancestry to counter lasting stereotypes (Lupton, 1998; hooks, 2015). The findings thus extend thematic readings of the poems by showing how resistance is built at the level of language, and they support the claim that style and context should be interpreted together rather than separately (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Damrosch, 2020). Because the analysis rests on two poems and on an interpretive method, the conclusions describe patterns in these texts and are not claims about all resistance poetry.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analyzed how stylistic devices construct the theme of resistance in McKay's "If We Must Die" and Angelou's "Still I Rise." In response to the first objective, the results show that McKay constructs resistance through a rejected animal image and martial imagery, collective pronouns, the repeated conditional opening, a militant tone, symbolism, and the controlled sonnet form, with its iambic pentameter, alliteration, and enjambment. In response to the second objective, Angelou constructs resistance through the refrain "I rise" and its shift from "I'll rise" to "I rise," an addressed "you," natural and prosperity imagery, rhetorical questions, a confident tone, a first-person voice, and ballad-like quatrains with a musical rhythm. In response to the third objective, the comparison reveals shared rejection of dehumanization and shared use of repetition and imagery, alongside a contrast between collective, confrontational resistance and individual, empowering resistance. The study concludes that resistance in poetry is created through language as well as stated as theme, so that stylistic analysis and contextual interpretation are inseparable.

Because this study analyzed texts and did not examine teaching or learners, the following recommendations are tentative suggestions, each tied to a specific finding, and not conclusions about classroom practice:

1. Resistance in both poems is created by specific devices, such as McKay's negated hog image and sonnet form and Angelou's shift from "I'll rise" to "I rise," literature teachers may wish to guide learners to examine how imagery, repetition, tone, and form create meaning, rather than limiting reading to the literal content of poems.

2. Two poems from different periods and in different forms reach the same rejection of dehumanization by different routes, curriculum developers may consider including a range of resistance literature in secondary and tertiary literature programmes; whether doing so develops critical thinking and awareness of injustice, identity, and human dignity is a question for future classroom research and not a finding of this study.

3. The comparison shows that collective, confrontational resistance and individual, self-affirming resistance rest on different stylistic choices and historical contexts, teachers may find comparative reading useful for showing how different authors treat the same issue through different styles and historical contexts.

4. This study rests on two poems and an interpretive method and did not examine learners, future researchers should extend this analysis to other African American, African, and postcolonial poets, examine gendered perspectives on resistance, and test the instructional value of stylistic analysis of resistance poetry through classroom-based studies.

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