

EQUALITY

You declare you see me dimly
through a glass which will not shine,
though I stand before you boldly,
trim in rank and making time.

You do own to hear me faintly
as a whisper out of range,
while my drums beat out the message
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free.

You announce my ways are wanton,
that I fly from man to man,
but if I'm just a shadow to you,
could you ever understand?

We have lived a painful history,
we know the shameful past,
but I keep on marching forward,
and you keep on coming last.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free.

Take the blinders from your vision,
take the padding from your ears,
and confess you've heard me crying,
and admit you've seen my tears.

Hear the tempo so compelling,

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hear the blood throb through my veins.
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.
Equality, and I will be free.

Written by Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou's poem, "Equality," published in 1990 ("EQUALITY - Maya Angelou. African - American Poetry," 1990), addresses how black women are seen and treated in the eyes of men, and calls for an end to gender and racial inequality. Through her use of references to a historical pattern of oppression, along with her use imagery, and other powerful poetic techniques, Angelou's poem calls for the recognition of the racial and gender inequality that she faces as a black woman.

The poem begins with Angelou addressing her oppressor: "You declare you see me dimly/ through a glass which will not shine." Through this stanza, Angelou is suggesting that although men see her, they objectify her. The time at which the poem was published (1990) marks a time in which black women were often ignored or objectified in mainstream culture. As evidenced by the popularity of movies such as *Coming to America* (1988), black and African women were often presented in roles that were misleading or demeaning (Landis, 1988). Further in the stanza, Angelou states that she is only heard faintly, "as a whisper out of range." She is neither seen nor heard accurately, and this is why her call for equality is so insistent.

Her use of imagery continues into the next stanza, with reference to a historical cycle of oppression: "While my drums beat out the message, /and the rhythms never change." Her reference to drums can be seen as culturally specific, considering the importance percussion instruments have had in black culture ("The History of African-American Music - Student Resources in Context," 2013). The unchanging rhythms can be thought of as symbolic of Angelou's call for equality within a repeating cycle of inequality—a cycle that began with slavery and gender inequality in the U.S. and that is now perpetuated by the racial and sexual oppressor whom Angelou refers to as "you" in the poem. It is likely that this "you" that she addresses is men—both white and black.

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Angelou employs an ABCB rhyme scheme, and utilizes it to gain the reader's attention to the most important aspects of the poem. The scheme is broken with the repeated phrase "Equality, and I will be free." This disrupts the rhythm of the poem, but it is also figuratively used to break the rhythm of the oppression black women face. In the fourth stanza, Angelou continues to employ the same poetic devices, but focuses specifically on black women and their hypersexualization: "You announce my ways are wanton,/that I fly from man to man,/but if I'm just a shadow to you, / could you ever understand?" The use of the word "wanton," which defines someone as sexually promiscuous, demonstrates that men see the speaker of the poem in a sexualized way, but fail to view her as the human being she is. Further in the poem, instead of addressing the previously mentioned "you" a "I" group, Angelou shifts focus and states that "We have lived a painful history, / we know a shameful past." by using the term "we", Angelou is seeking solidarity within the African American community. A particularly powerful part of this section is how Angelou begins with addressing the black community as a whole, but ends with stating how she moves forward: "But I keep on marching forward,/and you keep coming on last." This suggests that Angelou feels as if men are responsible for perpetuating the detrimental portrayal and treatment of black women in society. By "coming on last" Angelou means that they fail to acknowledge the inequality, and that they need to become active in putting an end to it.

The last section of the poem continues with "Equality and I will be free." but Angelou uses this section as a call to action. With an insistent tone, she states how her oppressor should "Remove the blinders from your vision, /take the padding from your ears, /and confess you've heard me crying, /and admit you've seen my tears." Angelou does not go as far as to call for the end of oppression, but rather realizes that the first step in the process towards equality is the

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recognition of inequality. She ends with the personalization of the instructions, by stating how the rhythms of her drums will never change. This means that even if equality isn't reached, Angelou will continue in her pursuit for an equal society.

“Equality” brings about a variety of interpretations, but I think Angelou’s focus was African American women and the important place they have in society. In addition, I feel that Angelou wanted to speak about the special discrimination black women face regarding their sexuality and appearance. The poem contributes to the understanding of race in the United States by addressing the combination of racism and sexism, and how black women have been subject to it since their appearance in our society. The poem also helps us understand the black female experience with constant objectification.

I believe, just as Angelou implies in her poem, that the first step in reaching racial and gender equality is the recognition of inequality. This recognition can be taught by implementing the general acceptance of the theory of intersectionality. This theory, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, suggests that gender bias and racism often intersect to create even more harmful types of bias (Crenshaw, October 2016). In addition, this intersectionality manifests itself not only in sexism, but also in economic inequality. According to the American Association of University Women, black women make about 63 cents to every white man’s dollar (“The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap Spring 2017). This gap is wide for many reasons, but can be largely attributed the lack of legislative infrastructure that allows black women to work and take care of their children at the same time. I believe that the way to decrease the wage gap is to implement legislation that gives black women access to affordable childcare, along with a sufficient amount of family days off.

The next point of action should be the destruction of harmful stereotypes, specifically those that depict black women as sexual objects. Black women are often portrayed in select ways, either in sexualized “jezebel” roles, or in asexual, nurturing “mammy” roles (Selling Sexy: Dr. Dionne Stephens, n.d.). When Angelou speaks of black women as being portrayed as wanton, she too is recognizing these harmful stereotypes. Diversifying the images of black women we see every day will normalize the idea that they are a diverse set of people, a thought that would bring us closer to equality. Additionally, ending this hypersexualizing would put into practice Angelou's call for taking blinders from eyes and padding from ears. As Angelou once stated: “...In diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”

Although these goals may be difficult to achieve, I believe they are necessary for the creation of a society in which everyone can coexist, free of oppression that is rooted in gender and racial bias. Angelou, through her inspiring poem “Equality,” presented a strong voice for the black female population. The conditions she spoke against continue to persist in black women's lives, but her poems inspire a future generation.

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