



The Art of Resilience: Post-Traumatic Growth in Selected Poems by Maya Angelou

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Abstract. In this study, the two most famous poems of Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” and “Still I Rise” are analysed using Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) as developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun. The poem is usually interpreted in terms of resilience, but this present study posits that resilience is not the only aspect of Angelou's poem. Using the five domains of PTG (relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual/Existential change), a close-reading methodology, the analysis illuminates the way Angelou's formal features (meter, stanzaic transformation, diction, and rhetorical address) reflect the shift from trauma to growth, rather than simply narrating it. In “Caged Bird” and the cumulative refrain in “Still I Rise,” the transformation from septet to quatrain, and the repetition of the refrain, respectively, provide literary correlates for PTG, placing Angelou's work in a literary genre that embodies growth. The study's implications are for trauma studies, cognitive literary studies and African American criticism, and provide a model which could be replicated in the reading of poetry using the PTG framework.

1. Introduction

Suffering and creativity go hand in hand in African American literature. Poet, memoirist, performer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou (1928-2014) made her career with her startlingly dignified and defiant writing from a life scarred by racial violence and personal tragedy. Her poetry has been often praised by critics as "resilience" and "survival. Resilience, however, as a psychological phenomenon is a recovery to former functioning following adversity, but Angelou's poetry constantly suggests something more radical: a transformation that makes the speaker more, rather than just bigger.

This is the motivation of the present study. This paper makes the case for viewing Angelou's chosen poems

as instances of growth, or positive psychological change that emerges from the experience of suffering trauma, on the basis of the psychological model of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) created by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun.

1.1 Research Problem

Resilience is a theme that is present in Angelou's poetry but existing criticism does not differentiate resilience from growth, and rarely examines a systematic psychological approach to show how poetry itself works at the form and language level to transform the reader.

1.2 Aim and Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the five domains of PTG in the texts of “Caged Bird” and “Still I Rise” to demonstrate that Angelou's formal and rhetorical strategies textually enact PTG.

1.3 Research Questions

- How does Angelou's poetry highlight the difference between growth and survival?
- How does the growth of perspective change over the course of the book?
- How is the theme of growth further explored in the book?
- What are the formal features that are associated with the specific PTG domains—in meter, stanzas, diction, and address?
- What does reading Angelou through PTG contribute to the criticism of her work?

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research uses a qualitative close text analysis with explicit psychological approach. Two poems are chosen as the corpus: “Caged Bird” and “Still I Rise.

The selection is purposive and it is justified on three grounds. First, both poems are representative test cases, both of them being canonical and most anthologized and discussed in Angelou's work. Both poems are also representative test cases in that they are canonical and frequently anthologized and discussed in Angelou's work. Second, both make a point of oppression and its overcoming, making them eminently fitting for a framework of overcoming through struggle. Third, and most importantly, the two poems represent two rhetorical modes: the symbolic-allegorical ("Caged Bird") and the direct-confrontational ("Still I Rise") that can be compared and contrasted with the PTG framework. The goal of the study is not to offer a statistical generalisation of the entire corpus of Angelou's work, but to build up a model of interpretation that can be transferred to other works. The limits and scope of this design are discussed explicitly in Section 9, and in the discussion of the aim of the study is the construction of a transferable interpretive model, rather than a statistical generalisation of Angelou's entire corpus.

Analytical framework is Post-Traumatic Growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun describe PTG as positive psychological change that occurs as a result of the struggle with extremely stressful life circumstances, and growth is not a direct result of the traumatic event itself, but rather of the cognitive and emotional processing after the event (Tedeschi and Blevins 324–33). In this study, PTG is typically broken down into five domains, the results of which are used as an analytical framework for each poem:

- (1) In relation to others — enriched/transformed interpersonal relationships.
- (2) New possibilities – being recognized in new ways or along a different path.
- (3) Personal strength — a greater feeling of personal strength in order to withstand and overcome.
- (4) Appreciation of life — an increased valuing of life and freedom.
- (5) Spiritual/existential change — change in meaning, or a reordering of meaning.

These five domains are mapped onto textual evidence for each poem (formal, prosodic and lexical features). This is summarized in Table 1 and then elaborated via close reading. It is an interpretive, not an empirical approach: The approach of PTG is not a clinical diagnosis of the poet, but is employed as a heuristic tool in literary analysis.

3. Conceptualizing Post-Traumatic Growth

For a large part of its existence, the psychology of trauma has focused on pathologies, the negative effects experienced after exposure to a dramatic and

overwhelming event. In recent years, however, the focus of attention has been on the concepts of resilience and then growth (Windle 152; Stratta et al. 1604). Established in the mid-1990s, the PTG framework is a revolutionary paradigm that suggests that the nature of adversity is not just to cause debilitating effects, but also to trigger positive transformation as well (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1).

An important conceptual difference is the fundamental of this study. Resilient people cope well and resume their previous functioning, while those who have PTG are changed by facing adversity (Tedeschi and Shakespeare-Finch 6). In this account, growth is a process and a product; cognitive and emotional reworking which can lead to behavioural change and to a new identity. Importantly, normative maturation is not a part of PTG, but rather what sets growth apart is its source in the process of understanding and coping with a crisis (Tedeschi and Blevins 324).

Theoretically, this difference is significant in literary criticism. When reading Angelou's poetry as resilient, one is able to focus on how she survived; when reading her poetry through PTG, one is able to focus on the aspect of the poem that registers a qualitative transformation of the self, which is exactly what this study aims to focus upon.

4. Literature Review

Angelou's poetry has been subject to a huge amount of criticism. The caged-bird motif from Paul Laurence Dunbar became a symbol of collective and personal aspirations for freedom, and was the focus of early biographical and critical studies (Kallen 19; King 22). Later prosodic readings highlighted the musicality of Angelou's verse and the interaction of her metrical forms and the tradition of ballad (Pettit 14; Shapiro 31).

A second line of scholarship centers on Angelou's presentation of her work as the politics of African American women's self-assertion and sees 'Still I Rise' as a counter-discourse to racist and misogynist structures (Coulthard 3; Witalec). The autobiographical continuity between her memoirs and her poetry has been considered in a more recent critique, especially in regard to how she develops a voice after experiencing childhood trauma.

Recent scholarship has started to view Angelou from more inter-disciplinary perspectives. Following Caruth's pioneering work on trauma as an unassimilated experience which returns late in language (Caruth 4-7), trauma-theoretical criticism

has been used to account for the presence of literary form in African American writing, which marks the return of the unassimilated and belatedly present experience. In the framework of this research, scholars like Vickroy have investigated the role of narrative and poetic form in itself as a kind of testimony and recovery (Vickroy 28). In parallel cognitive literary studies, formal features such as meter, repetition, syntactic patterning have been argued as not mere decoration but cognitively and emotionally meaningful and useful in their shaping of the experience and processing of the represented experience (Zunshine 11).

The shift in paradigm to Post-Traumatic Growth as an interpretive tool is relatively new. Drawing on Tedeschi and Shakespeare-Finch's synthesis of PTG theory, literary scholars have begun to recognize the difference between the PTG and resilience in the context of trauma (Balaev 1–3; Henke xv). In the field of African American women's writing, there has been a focus on the potential for collectively experienced trauma to be transformed into an individual and collective empowering tool (Davis 47).

But what is not developed is the coming together of these strands. Previous Angelou criticism offers an

evocative use of the term resilience, but tends to focus on rupture and testimony rather than growth; trauma-theoretical studies focus on rupture and testimony; and cognitive studies rarely have specific focus on Angelou. While recent scholarship has started to fill in aspects of this gap—Angelou's prosody and performance (Gillespie 212), her autobiographical project in the context of contemporary trauma and resilience theory (Mohammed and Hassan 45), and the politics of voice in her verse (Lupton 88) – none has been applied to the formal texture of the poems in light of the five-domain model of PTG. This study fills that void, while simultaneously tackling issues of trauma study, cognitive literary study, and African American literary criticism, in the sense that the very form of the poetry itself offers a model for post-traumatic growth.

5. Analysing the PTG Framework with reference to the Poems

To ease students into the process of analyzing the poems through close reading, Table 1 below shows the mapping of the five PTG domains to the specific textual features in each of the poems. The sections that follow elaborate on each of the correspondences and the table serves as the analytical backbone of the study.

Table 1. Connecting the five PTG domains to the elements of text in “Caged Bird” and “Still I Rise.”

PTG Domain	“Caged Bird”	“Still I Rise”
Relating to others	The caged bird sings “of things unknown / but longed for still,” addressing a “distant hill”—song as outreach beyond confinement.	The speaker invokes a collective ancestry (“I am the dream and the hope of the slave”), binding individual rising to communal solidarity.
New possibilities	The free bird “names the sky his own”; the open-ended fourth stanza (no terminal period) figures unbounded possibility.	Anaphoric “I rise” projects a future not determined by the oppressive past; rising names a new horizon of selfhood.
Personal strength	Despite confinement, the bird “opens his throat to sing”—voice asserted as agency under constraint.	Defiant rhetorical questions (“Does my sassiness upset you?”) and similes of dust and air dramatize indestructible strength.
Appreciation of life	The free bird “dares to claim the sky,” dipping in “orange sun rays”—sensory celebration of freedom's value.	Imagery of wealth (“gold mines,” “oil wells,” “diamonds”) revalues the self as precious and abundant.
Spiritual / existential change	The septet-to-quatrain transformation releases the “caged” form into the ballad's open music—form enacting transcendence.	The closing crescendo (“I rise, I rise, I rise”) elevates personal triumph into a quasi-liturgical affirmation.

6. “Caged Bird”: Form as Enactment of Growth

The energy and strength of “Caged Bird” comes from the continuous juxtaposition of the two birds, free and caged, and from Angelou's use of prosody to create a structural contrast. The imagery is the most connotative and arresting aspect of the poem, but it is the way its form moves that most closely reflects the movement from restraint to development that the PTG model outlines.

The Grammar of constraint and Diction (6.1)

The grammatical differences between freedom and confinement can be noted in the lexicon that Angelou uses. The syntax of the actions of the free bird is additive and open-ended, as many coordinating conjunctions as are repeated, “and”, are used to connect the repeated actions, “leaps”, “floats”, “dips”, “dares”, which suggest limitless possibility. In contrast to this, the stanzas of bird in prison start with the adversative “But” and the conditional “so” – the bird “opens his throat to sing” not because he is free, but because he must be (Pettit 14). This opposition is, like the PTG domain of new possibilities, directly related to the syntax of an unbounded future – in this case, the additive “and.”

6.2 The Septet-to-Quatrain Transformation

The main formal event in the poem is metrical. The repeated stanza containing the image of the caged bird is a septet of mostly dimeter lines, short, vertical and tight, the compression of which imitates entrapment. In the stanzas of movement, however, this form grows: the paired dimeters broaden out into wider tetrameter lines, and the septet is refashioned into the song and ballad's quatrain (Shapiro 31). This reading is in line with the known prosodic literature on the ballad measure, where the quatrain of tetrameter alternating with a quatrain of trimeter is the standard vehicle of song and communal song, the latter being the common mode of the community song (Attridge 76). In other words the “caged” form has in itself the potential of musicality of the open ballad.

The contrast turns into real if the lines are scanned. The caged-bird stanza is in clipped two beat units (stressed syllables are represented by / and unstressed syllables by ~):

~ / ~ /
 a CAGED bird STANDS (dimeter, 2 stresses)

~ / ~ /
 composed of two stresses (dimeter) on the GRAVE of DREAMS

In contrast, the free-bird stanza expands out into a more expansive 4-beat phase:

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 and DIPS his WING in the ORange SUN rays (4 stresses, 4 beats)

The doubling of stresses per line (from two to four) is the metrical substance of the transformation: the same base rhythm is permitted to expand, and constriction can be heard opening up to the spaciousness of the ballad line. The prosody is not just an accompaniment to the theme of release, it is the performing of the theme of release.

This is the poem's literary correlate of post traumatic growth. Whereas PTG finds growth in the experience and engagement of suffering, Angelou will not leave the narrow shape behind but will change it from within. The cage isn't broken open, it's broken through, its structure begets song. This formal transcendence is related to the realm of spiritual / existential transformation where suffering is reworked into a more meaningful form. Cognitive-poetic accounts of meter that more strongly associate prosodic changes with changes in a reader's physiological and emotional response to text lend support to this claim that, in some sense, prosodic transformation represents existential change (Zunshine 14). The ballad's sense of release from the claustrophobic, dimeter (4 lines) of the septet to the expansive, tetrameter (8 lines) of the ballad might be considered an existential reorientation, performed by the reader in his or her own experience of the line.

It is also the domain of appreciation of life that is easily readable. The free bird is not just walking, but enjoying – “he dips his wing in the orange sun's rays,” and “dares to claim the sky.” The specificity of colour and light is a freedom that is not an abstraction, but a greater appreciation of lived embodied life. This sensory abundance is a dramatization of just the heightened appreciation of life that PTG theory finds to be a domain of growth (Tedeschi and Blevins 328).

6.3 Voice, Outreach, Tradition

The caged bird sings of things unknown, but longed for still, and its song is heard on a distant hill. Song here is not a lament but an act of relating to others across the barrier of the cage: this is an act of outreach. Bird-poems (Keats, Shelley) are part of a Romantic tradition of which Angelou is part, but whose sorrow is not her own; instead, she focuses upon fear, rage, and the desire for freedom (Kallen 41). The song is therefore a declaration of personal agency: agency that takes place in the face of constraints.

7. “The Rhetoric of Growth”: Rhetoric as the Enactment of 7. “Still I Rise”.

“Caged Bird” is about growth in a formal change, while “Still I Rise” is about growth in rhetoric. An African American woman with a deep self-awareness speaks this poem, addressing racism and misogyny and asserting her identity in a world that would like to erode her identity (King 27).

7.1 The Anaphora of Rising is a remembrance of the risen Lord.

The structure of the poem is the use of the refrain “I rise.” The refrain is repeated and then followed by a crescendo, but this is not a single event, it is a cumulative ability, a signature of the process of growth and development, not of its culmination. As each “I rise” returns, it brings with it a new future, separate from the oppressive past, and implements the PTG domain of new possibilities. The force of all the anaphoras turns the personal assertion into a quasi-liturgical affirmation, and marks the space of existential change.

Failing to comply with the school's rules or policies.
Not adhering to school rules and/or policies.

Addressing the oppressors directly, she asks them, rhetorically—“Does my sassiness upset you?”—with the answers she expects. She doesn't let go of the “haughtiness” and “sexiness” that others may find threatening, instead she does not bow down her confidence to fit into the insecurities of others (Witalec). This defiant self-possession is the rhetoric that embodies the PTG domain of personal strength: that it's not about not being harmed but it's about being sure you'll be able to overcome it.

As a group, answer the following questions: As a class, respond to the questions below:

The speaker's diminutive self is abundantly valued by Angelou's imagery: the speaker walks like he has oil wells, laughs like he has gold mines, and claims he's filled with “diamonds” (lines 19–20). This figural overabundance is a kind of radical celebration of the fullness of life and value, recording a body that had been historically undervalued by the economics of slavery as a place of unlimited value. The revaluation is not just a rhetorical posture; it rather makes the point of the PTG domain of appreciation of life, which is that life itself is precious, despite efforts to devalue it (Tedeschi and Blevins 328). In an important way, the poem expands from the personal to the collective: the speaker identifies herself as “the dream and the hope of the slave” (line 40), making her own rise up to the dreams and hopes of her enslaved ancestors (Pettit 22). The transformation is, therefore, not individual but relational, because growth is related to a community, fulfilling the other domain of relating to others.

Lastly, the last movement of the poem marks the field of spiritual/existential transformation. “Personal assertion takes a liturgical turn in the build-up to the final “I rise” (Davis 51), which make the cadence

sound more like a call and response or a spiritual, a mode of expression found in African American religious expressions. The self that 'rises' is reorganized at the level of meaning: the self is no longer subject to inherited subjugation, but a subject of transcendent dignity. In this way, “Still I Rise” fully accomplishes what “Caged Bird” does in terms of reorienting the reader's (or listener's) sense of the self in this existential way, through the power of rhetoric.

8. Discussion

The two poems, read together within the framework of the PTG, develop a general literary logic. In both, hardship is not acknowledged as reality or simply put up with, but dealt with and changed. In “Caged Bird,” this transformation is formal, freeing a compacted metrical form from its cage, in “Still I Rise” this transformation is rhetorical, transforming the language of oppression into an accumulation of ascent. The five PTG domains are not forced upon the poems from the outside, but rather they are apparent in the diction, meter, structure and address of the poems.

This reading will help provide clarity to the beginning of the study. “Resilient” is an accurate, but incomplete description of Angelou's poetry: resilient implies a return to previous functioning. The poems examined here stage something more: a qualitative expansion of the self that is set up in the face of trauma, and not despite it. This is what PTG theory outlines and what a reading that is focused on resilience can easily forget.

The analysis also shows the methodological merits of the mapping of psychological constructs onto formal features. In place of poetry-as-contents the study has illustrated the ways in which growth is written into the materials of poetry—providing a model that is replicable and could be extended to other poets who work in the wake of trauma.

Theoretical contribution. The three neighboring fields are all advanced in the study. Yet it provides an alternative vocabulary for the trauma, which has been more concerned with rupture, belatedness and failure of representation, because it highlights the possibility of growth, and demonstrates that literary form can capture not just the wound, but its metamorphosis. It provides a tangible proof for cognitive literary studies, that prosodic and syntactic items have affective and existential values which are read directly by readers. With regard to African American literary criticism, it pushes back the dominant discourse of “resilience” to make a space for “qualitative self-enlargement,” a self-enlargement that is enacted in Angelou's poems, and for the collective and spiritual aspects that are unique to the tradition. This is not a clinical label

imported into the PTG framework, but rather a bridge concept which makes the three conversations mutually legible.

9. Limitations and Directions for future research

The results are subject to a number of restrictions. First, the corpus is purposefully small (a mere two poems) so that the conclusions are not generalizations about Angelou's entire creative work but rather an extrapolation about how PTG is enacted in these representative poems; a hypothesis on what might happen in other poems should be viewed as a proposition that needs to be tested in more texts. Second, the analysis is interpretive and as such, is not meant to be a clinical evaluation of the poet, but rather a heuristic for literary reading; the mapping between psychological domains and formal features, although evidence-based, is a critical construction that is subject to alternative readings. Third, there is a translation inherent in using a system created in the context of empirical psychology and transferring it to literature: the poems are not data about a person's recovery but are aesthetic artifacts and the PTG domains illuminate the poems by analogy, not by measurement.

The restrictions noted above suggest research avenues for the future. To see if formal signatures found here occur again in a larger corpus; the model could be applied to Angelou's longer autobiographical prose to find out. It might also be used as an analytical method in other genres of African American poetry, or it might be used to analyze the reader's reception of the prosodic changes described, making empirical reception study a part of the analysis.

10. Conclusion

In this study, the concept of post-traumatic growth has been suggested as a more appropriate interpretation of Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" and "Still I Rise" than the interpretation of "survival." The formal transformations and rhetorical strategies of Angelou's work have been examined through a close reading and analysis, with the five PTG domains as a lens with which to analyze, and have demonstrated that these are not simply representations of resilience, but rather enactments of a movement from trauma to a transformed and enlarged selfhood. Formal evidences of growth in this narrative are the septet that evolves into a ballad and the refrain that blooms into affirmation.

This study makes a contribution to both the psychological and the rhetorical approaches to

prosodic and rhetorical analysis, by introducing a framework that is interpretatively fruitful and methodologically transferable. The analysis suggests a model for reading poetry precisely, since it distinguishes growth from survival and finds that growth in the materials of poetry itself—the question of transformation of suffering into voice, a central and constant preoccupation of African American poetry.

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