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## Protagonists In Still I Rise By Maya Angelou And Significant Cigarettes By Rose Tremain

Have you ever thought of what it would be like to be treated unfairly? All because of your skin color and gender? Have you ever had to struggle to make a living? Even while your best friend lies dead? Even today, despite most progress, there are still numerous places and people around the world, facing the same struggles faced by the heroes in “Still I Rise,” written by Maya Angelou, and “Significant Cigarettes” written by Rose Tremain. Both texts present protagonists struggling to live life –one, due to inequality, and one due to a lack of hope for the future. They both make a journey through struggles into freedom and hope for the future, as well as a clear and bright image for the future.

The poem “Still I Rise,” portrays hope and successes for the speaker and struggles faced in order to get there. When Maya Angelou, compares herself to being “like moons and like suns,” the simile signifies that she is extremely optimistic about the future and she compares herself to being as powerful as extraterrestrial objects and that she is unstoppable in her determination to rise. She presents ideas about “gold mines,” “diamonds” and “oil wells” which link to the semantic field of wealth, prosperity, and determination. This may show that she is desired by all and that she is as powerful as the objects lying outside the human reach and that she is unbreakable by anyone or anything. She also refers to her past as “rooted in pain,” which could portray that pain is fundamental to her journey to success. She is proud of the struggles she and her ancestors faced in their quest for equality and freedom for African-Americans and women. The word “root,” could suggest that this pain is an essential part of her character and will stay with her forever. It shows the incredible strength of her pain - the building blocks of her success and her journey. Rising from this pain leads to her seeing her future as “wondrously clear,” painting her future as successful and full of opportunities. She may also refer to this success as the “gifts” and the “dreams” that her ancestors gave her. She uses this metaphor to thank her forefathers for her ability to speak, her womanhood, and the strength and resilience they gave her to fight to make her point heard. She also thanks to them for giving her black skin. She believes this as an essential trait inherited by her as, through having to overcome such adversity, she has developed the ability to fight for her voice to be heard - her skin color and gender were seen as barriers to progress but is because of these, that she has and she is now respected. Finally, the word “dreams” shows that she feels she is desired and wanted by everyone and that they aspire to be as successful and influential as she is.

In Still I Rise, Maya Angelou rises from struggles to freedom and hope for the future. She does this on her own and without a lot of aid from others. However, in “Significant Cigarettes,” Lev also rises from struggle to hope about the future, but he does so with the help of another character, Lydia. Hope is presented through Lydia’s optimistic attitude and influential behavior. Lydia changes Lev’s statement, “May you help me,” to “May I help you.” She uses this reversal of pronouns to make Lev stop relying on others for help, but to help others in their problems and to become self-sufficient and not require anyone’s help. She does this in order to give Lev a more optimistic approach towards life, as he would feel joy as he helped people. The book she was reading was called “The Power and the Glory,” and she read this book to indirectly influence Lev into possessing these qualities to succeed in his life - qualities which Lydia possessed. Lev “envied Lydia,” who was reading her English book. This portrayed that

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Lydia had a positive influence on Lev to learn English, as he was weak at it. This could also show that Lev looks in awe at Lydia, in hopes of gaining some of the qualities she possessed. Lydia shows her “schoolyard,” “high fence, and the apartment block” as a polysyndetic list of her being trapped in the dull countryside and that she is escaping it along with Lev, in a quest for a better life. However, Lydia had an optimistic and hopeful approach towards this, but all Lev sees is the negatives of even positive things.

Despite the hopeful and successful images painted in the texts, both the protagonists had to go through struggles on their journey to success. In “Still I Rise,” refers to her “soulful cries.” The adjective “soulful” intensified the pain she had felt. This also gives an allusion to her race and where she came from. The noun “cries” also shows the amount of pain she is in and how she is completely broken from the inside. She cannot hold the struggle in herself anymore and lets it out of herself. She repeats “you may,” three times in the beginning of the sixth stanza. This anaphoric tricolon of rhetorical questions shows how Maya Angelou is accusing the audience of being sadistic. This portrays a painful image of time back then. She says that the people would “cut,” “shoot,” and “kill” her. Using this semantic field of physical violence, Maya Angelou accuses the audience of racism and sexism of her being black and being a woman. People with black skin and women were severely mistreated at the time, showing how the metaphors represent the pain and mistrust she had on people back then. They were also mistreated through “bitter, twisted lies,” showing that she was wrongly accused of committing a crime, despite her being innocent. She could not fight her case for justice, due to her skin color and her gender. However, this could also portray that she has broken free from this mistrust when she said they “may,” thus portraying that she now has a voice of her own and she is confident of who she is. She also believes that the people want to see her “broken,” showing that people treat her wrong in hopes of seeing her destroyed and devastated, as that is what they believed black people were meant to face, absolute mistreatment and injustice.

In Significant Cigarettes, Rose Tremain presents the character of Lev, as a struggling male in hopes of finding a better life. We see that he is portrayed as “handsome,” however his possessions are “grey-toned,” “old” and “dented.” this semantic field of poverty juxtaposes his external persona. This portrayed him as a young man who was exposed to an extremely impoverished lifestyle. He suffered from poverty, hopelessness, and hardship. He says that an “unlit cigarette” was his only companion and friend. This portrayed him as introverted and confined to a life of isolation and loneliness. This could also portray how the adjective “unlit” could show how he thought his future would be – meager, uninteresting, and harmful, just like the cigarette. He also shows how he had “lain for five nights” beside his wife Marina’s bed, while she was “dying.” This shows his dedication towards his family, despite him being resourcefully poor. He portrays himself lying on the “linoleum flooring” beside his wife’s bed. This showed him trying his best to dedicate his life towards his family, despite him sacrificing his own comfort and freedom for them. Lev also makes a reference to the “darkness” in the bus. This could portray the light conditions in the bus. Additionally, it could also show his mental condition, as he is devastated by the death of his beloved wife, who he loved the most. This may have scarred an image of his wife dying in his brain, leading to his unlit and hopeless mental state.

In “Still I Rise,” structure plays a large role in the effect the poem has on the audience. The poem begins with her struggling in life, facing problems of inequality and sexism. She portrays herself as “falling,” “broken” and being “trod” on. She then creates a contrast in the end, and switches to a positive tone, when she portrays herself as a “black,” and “leaping” ocean, ready

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to take over the whole world with her newfound self-confidence and her victory over inequality and mistreatment of women. She has honored her journey as successful and fruitful with her belief in herself now. There is a volta at the 29th line of the poem, where there is a change from Quatrains in the beginning and there is also a change of rhyme scheme. This shows that she is not the same as she was and has changed from being mistreated and looked down upon, to have a voice of her own and is now a role model to a lot of people, and she is proud of this. The tenses in the poem also change to support this point, when she changes from saying "I'll rise" in the future tense, to saying "I rise" in the present tense. This portrays a progression in her tone to now achieving what she wants and standing at the top. When Maya Angelou says that she is the "dream" of the future, she refers to the speech made by Martin Luther King, when he tried to eradicate the barrier between the way black people were treated at the time. She was influenced by this and thus why she refers to the noun "dream" in her poem.

In "Significant Cigarettes," Rose Tremain uses structure as a vital part of the story to portray Lev's journey and progression in the above. The story goes from Lev being pessimistic in his life, about not having "enough" money to survive and losing his job at the "Baryn Sawmill," and also being isolated when he "huddled against the window" to then contrasting his tone to being optimistic about his life and wanting to be at the forefront of the action and he would "make [the people] share" their luck and prosperity with him. This portrays his determination and hope for the future, which was sparked when he met Lydia. Lydia's hope juxtaposed Lev's pessimism and negative approach. When Lev talks about running "out of trees" and how he lost his job because of it, Lydia seemed positive and queried "What other work" Lev could do, showing her progressive mindset, which had a positive approach on Lev. Lev's age also juxtaposes his physical appearance, when we were told that he will "soon be forty-three." This contrasts his "Grey toned," and "old" appearance. This shows the poverty he was exposed to and lived in all his life.

In conclusion, both texts portray protagonists as struggling in the beginning, with Lev "huddling" against windows, having "unlit" cigarettes as a "companion" and being jobless now, contrasting with the freedom and determination for his life he now has and a large amount of hope for his life, as well as a bright image for his future, when he wants to help others and feel happy about doing so. In "Still I Rise," Maya Angelou talks about being mistreated by "bitter" and "twisted lies" to show the life of hardship and struggles faced by black and African American women in the era, and how they were severely mistreated. However, she rises to self-confidence and a voice of her own when she says "I rise," compared to her future tense of the phrase earlier on in the poem, thus showing a progression in her beliefs. Both the texts have a strong message to present to the youth about being positive and always having the right mindset, despite the constant wrong going on in the world today.