Q1: Describe the speaker in lines 1-4 of the poem? What specific language supports your description? In the opening stanza the poet is clearly angry and defiant. Her language is strengthened by the use of alliteration of B and T sounds in ‘bitter, twisted lies’. Not only does this seem to spit defiance at the speakers of the lies, but shows a clear understanding of the liars themselves: bitter because, presumably, they resent the idea of a black female becoming so successful.

Q2: Why does the poet use the image of dust in line 4? How does this image contribute to the tone of lines 1-4? The stanza concludes with the first statement of fact – she will ‘rise’ like the dust. The simile suggests not just the current position of blacks at the bottom of society but also links to the Biblical image of Adam and Eve being created from the very dust of the Earth. The language is calm – the rise is inevitable and she knows it.

Q3: What 3 other images in the poem contribute to the poem’s tone? Explain the effect of each image.

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries?

This simile manages to link the physical appearance of the downtrodden slave, wearing a metaphorical yoke to weight down the shoulders with the physical distress caused by slavery, likening the slope of the shoulders to the constant dropping of tears.

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I’ve got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

A knowing simile – the speaker is well aware that her confident sexuality is highly attractive and that men cannot resist watching her. More than this, the use of ‘diamonds’ both shows the degree to which she values her sexuality and also the extreme attractiveness of her as a potential sexual partner.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I’ll rise.

The moons and suns in this simile are not just visual representations of wonder – both life giving in that the moon is an ancient fertility symbol in many cultures, but also suggests a never ending cyclical process – as she rises, a blazing sun, the moon – a cold and white symbol- must inevitably sink.

Q4: The speaker poses 7 questions in the poem. What is the purpose/effect of these questions?

To force the reader to re-evaluate their pre-conceived perceptions of her as a black woman. Angelou challenges her readers in highly sensitive societal areas – wealth and sexuality. It is worth remembering that miscegeny (mixed-race sexual relations) was a deep-seated fear of many of the Southern States of the USA.

Q5: What is the effect of the repetition in the poem?

The poem relies on the creation of a sense of inevitability. As the repetition becomes more intense, almost as though there is a congregational joining of the affirmation of the message, the inevitability becomes unstoppable. The tone becomes that of a rally or a church service.

Q6: Who is the audience (the reader) for this poem? How does the speaker portray this audience?

Both an audience of similar women to herself – her repetition of the ‘still I rise’ message linked to the figurative images of wealth and sexuality are designed to give others the confidence to express their feelings in this way – and a potentially hostile (white) readership who rest their short-sighted attitudes on the single story of the black woman of loose morals who is a threat to their well ordered society.

Q7: Briefly explain the connection between the language and syntax of the title and the theme and style of the poem “Still I Rise.”

‘Still’ carries two layers of meaning – one level is the basic sense of an event which continues through time, another is the sense of an event happening despite all attempts to prevent it. Put together, there is a sense of growing inevitability to the ‘rise’ of the speaker. This idea combines both the social norm of rising in society and also contains ideas relating to more religious imagery – a form of resurrection perhaps. This idea is reinforced in the structure of the poem in the second section:

Out of the huts of history’s shame

I rise

Up from a past that’s rooted in pain

I rise

I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

Here the repetition becomes swifter and more ecstatic. The cries of ‘I rise’ suggest that the event is actually taking place until the final 3 lines present an unstoppable momentum to the poem. Combined with the positive imagery of a new dawn and the ‘dream and hope of the slave’, the message is clear. This is happening and nights of fear (lynch mobs and other threats being real fears) are being consigned to the past.