

Rita Dove's Exploration of Identity, Desire, and Agency in “I Have Been a Stranger in a Strange Land”

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Abstract

*Rita Dove, a prominent African American poet, creates complex works that delve into themes of identity, memory, and desire. Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1952, Dove's literary journey was influenced by her family's educational principles, and her formative experiences ignited a deep affinity for literature. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Thomas and Beulah* (1982), explores the lives of her African American grandparents, reflecting on their challenges and achievements. Dove's poetry frequently addresses the convergence of personal and cultural narratives, utilizing myth, memory, and historical context to offer a nuanced perspective on African American existence. In her poem “I Have Been A Stranger in a Strange Land,” she draws upon the biblical tale of Eve to investigate existential yearning and the intricacies of human desire. In this work, Dove reinterprets Eve's narrative in the Garden of Eden, portraying her as a figure of curiosity, agency, and the quest for self-discovery. Through striking imagery, Dove's poetry engages with the human experience, encapsulating both the beauty and the tension that accompany our search for knowledge and fulfillment. By challenging conventional narratives and embracing the complexities of identity, Dove provides a distinctive viewpoint on the challenges faced by marginalized voices. Her poetry promotes a richer understanding of African American heritage while emphasizing universal themes of exploration, longing, and self-awareness.*

Keywords: *Rita Dove, identity, desire, Eve, memory, African American poetry, existential longing*

Introduction

Rita Francis Dove was born on August 28, 1952, in Akron, Ohio. She grew up in an African American family that placed a strong emphasis on education. Her parents were dedicated to learning and made it a priority in their household. They encouraged their children to strive for academic success. This nurturing environment played a critical role in shaping Rita's future, as it ignited her interest in literature from a young age. Her father made history by becoming the first African American research chemist in the tire industry in the United States. This achievement provided Rita with a strong role model. She found inspiration in her father's hard work and dedication, which motivated her to pursue her own academic goals.

Rita's love for reading flourished under her mother's unwavering support. This encouragement led her to become not only a passionate reader but also an aspiring writer. As she excelled in school, her achievements were recognized when she was named a Presidential Scholar by the White House in 1970. This accolade marked a turning point in her educational journey and highlighted her potential.

Following her high school graduation, Dove attended Miami University in Ohio, where she continued to hone her literary skills. Her education took a significant step forward when she received a Fulbright scholarship. She spent the years 1974 to 1975 studying at the Universität Tübingen in West Germany. This experience broadened her perspective and deepened her understanding of poetry and literature.

In 1977, after completing her studies at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Rita Dove fully embraced her calling as a poet and writer. It was during this time that she began to create her first collection of poems. Her unique voice and exceptional writing abilities quickly gained recognition within literary circles. Rita Dove became an influential figure in the world of poetry, marking a significant chapter in American literature.

The publication of *Thomas and Beulah* in 1982 represented a major milestone in the career of the author, who received the esteemed Pulitzer Prize for this remarkable work. This collection delves deeply into the lives of her grandparents, highlighting their experiences as African Americans. Through her use of poetry, the author captures the essence of their struggles and triumphs, shedding light on their resilience in the face of numerous challenges. The intimate portrayal of their lives offers readers a profound understanding of the personal and cultural history that shapes their identity.

Following the acclaim garnered by *Thomas and Beulah* and the recognition of the Pulitzer Prize, the author continued to build on her success, earning various awards and accolades throughout her career. This trajectory ultimately led to her appointment as the first African American and youngest Poet Laureate of the United States, a position she held with distinction until 1995. Her contributions to literature during this time significantly influenced both the public and critical perception of poetry.

Thomas and Beulah and *The Darker Face of the Earth Sonata Mulattica* along with a rich collection of poems, showcase her talent and commitment to exploring complex themes related to identity, heritage, and the human experience. Her writing is deeply rooted in her identity as an African

American woman and is enriched by her family history and personal experiences. This strong connection allows her to create a writing style that resonates with a wide audience, enabling readers to engage with the narratives she presents. Through her work, she offers a voice to the experiences of individuals often overlooked, fostering a greater understanding of their journeys and struggles.

In contrast to many of her contemporaries, Dove seeks her freedom by stepping away from the common themes often found in twenty-first-century African American poetry. This particularly includes themes related to the Black Arts Movement and the newer New Black poetry movement. She was the first African American poet to win the Pulitzer Prize since Gwendolyn Brooks.

Dove's poetry often centers on the theme of identity. She explores how individuals see themselves and their place in the world. Her work embraces the complexities of personal identity while also paying close attention to the broader historical context of African American experiences. Memory and nostalgia are key elements in her writing. She often weaves these themes into her narratives, inviting readers to reflect on the past.

Dove incorporates myth and references to historical figures, enriching her poetic storytelling. This integration of history and personal narrative creates a layered understanding of African American life. By using these tools, she connects her readers to significant moments and figures in history while highlighting the ongoing impact of these experiences on contemporary identity. Her ability to merge the personal with the historical sets her work apart and deepens its emotional resonance. Through her poetry, Dove captures the complexities of life, ensuring that the experiences of African Americans are reflected and remembered.

Rita Dove is celebrated as a significant voice among African American poets. In her poem "I have been a stranger in a strange land," she introduces a female character who roams through a natural setting. This character moves from "bush to arbor," taking in the sights around her. During her journey, she stumbles upon another person who is busy "off cataloguing" the universe. The speaker views this individual, likely a man, with a critical eye. His actions reveal an inflated sense of self-importance. The speaker's comment, "...pretending he could organize / what was clearly someone else chaos," highlights this perception.

As the poem progresses to the second stanza, the speaker turns inward, expressing self-mockery with the lines, "...all that happiness / the aimless being there." This reveals her own feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction. She reflects on both her existence and that of the man she observes, capturing a shared sense of discontent.

A crucial moment unfolds when the speaker declares, "That's when she found the tree." This marks a shift in the narrative, merging the elements of the woman, the man, and the tree. The imagery becomes evocative of the Garden of Eden, a powerful cultural reference. However, Dove carefully avoids directly naming figures like Adam and Eve, instead creating a more intricate story. The tree she describes possesses "dark, crabbed branches," evoking a picture of twisted, compact limbs. These branches bear what she describes as "speechless bounty," suggesting both beauty and restrictions.

In Dove's rendering, Eve is depicted as acting independently of divine guidance. She intuitively realises, "this was forbidden," indicating her awareness of the consequences related to this discovery. The final stanza is especially impactful. Dove makes a bold decision to exclude the figure of Satan, asserting, "there was . . . no whispered intelligence lurking in the leaves." Eve's choice to reach for the forbidden fruit emerges as an act of personal agency. The fruit, described as "the red heft of it / warming her outstretched palm," represents her desire and assertion of control over her fate.

This longing is portrayed as an "ache," an experience that transcends individual circumstance. Dove defines this intense feeling as "desire," a fundamental aspect of human existence. Driven by this yearning, Eve chooses to risk "everything," signifying her willingness to confront the unknown. In this way, Eve embodies the stranger in a strange land, a restless soul navigating a world that responds to her desires and her assertive choices.

Rita Dove's poem "I Have Been A Stranger in a Strange Land" explores the complex relationship between the ordinary and the remarkable in our lives. It illustrates how the beauty of life is fragile. Each aspect of existence seems to work against the very magic it holds. This sentiment echoes the reflections of Emily Dickinson, whose thoughts on the nature of experience shed light on the human condition.

Life, as portrayed in the poem, is not merely about happiness. True joy comes from the simple moments found in daily routines. The protagonist dedicates significant time to the patterns of life,

moving through days filled with sensory details—touching objects, smelling familiar scents, and tasting various flavours. She immerses herself in the art of maintaining a household, all while existing in what appears to be a magical world. Yet, even amid these joyful experiences, there looms a daunting sense of monotony, a persistent cycle of existence that can feel unchanging and wearying.

In response to this sense of repetition, she decides to take a journey. From dense thickets to structured trellises, she pauses along the way to look into a pond, its surface disturbed by unseen forces. Meanwhile, another character, possibly a friend or companion, is absorbed in cataloguing the stars, trying to convince himself that he can bring order to a world that is inherently chaotic.

During her travels, she comes across a tree with twisted branches that seem heavy with untold treasures. In that moment, she instinctively recognizes that this tree's bounty is not something to be possessed. The beauty it offers is too profound for anyone to claim as their own. The richness of the tree represents a deeper truth about existence—some experiences are beyond ownership and comprehension.

In this encounter, there is a striking lack of internal chatter. There are no quiet thoughts urging her to analyse the moment. Instead, a deepening ache emerges, signifying her loss. It is a loss not of material possessions but of everything except for her yearning. The intense desire she feels is almost palpable, warming her hand as she reaches out. This instant encapsulates the tension between longing and the transcendent beauty of what is not hers to have.

Rita Dove's poem, "I Have Been a Stranger in a Strange Land," invites readers to experience a slow revelation. The poem unfolds in layers, much like an onion. Each scene and image adds depth, gradually building a narrative that only reveals its true meaning at a climactic moment. This is the moment that can be described as a figurative "Bam!" At this point, the reader understands everything that has come before, leading to a moment of realization. One might exclaim, "Oh, so this has been a poem about Adam and Eve!"

While the poem references Adam, it is predominantly focused on Eve. Traditionally, the biblical account appears to center on Adam, yet a closer examination reveals that the essence of the story rests more heavily on Eve's journey. Eve embodies a crucial force in this narrative, representing the beginning of humanity's intricate relationship with knowledge and existence.

Eve is characterized as the mother of all, the Creator of the World, the Giver of Consciousness, and the Affirmation of Humanity. Her story is significant because she takes the bold first step that sets everything in motion. Driven by her curiosity, she grows restless and dissatisfied with the perfection of Eden. Her courage rejects the expectation of a passive, uneventful existence in paradise.

Eve refuses to accept a life devoid of challenge and stimulation. Instead, she is determined to move beyond the monotony of endless days in a tropical paradise. She breaks free from the constraints of a bland, unchanging existence, shedding limitations imposed by her surroundings.

Eve introduces the concept of the fig leaf. This act symbolizes the entrance of mystery and hidden desires into the world. She transitions from the simplicity of nakedness in paradise to a complex existence filled with longing and discovery. Eve's choices set the path for exploration and revelation, leading to deeper connections grounded in the human experience of flesh and desire.

Her encounter with the apple is a pivotal moment. It represents a bold challenge not only to herself but also to Adam. Eve's actions are not simply rebellious; they are an invocation for Adam to join her in claiming the world. This act, often viewed as a transgression, supposedly brings about divine wrath. However, one might argue that God, who created both Eve and Adam, must have secretly admired her bravery. Her willingness to embrace curiosity and take a step into an uncertain future reflects a profound act of agency.

In Eve's declaration, "Yes!" we hear her resolve to engage with the world around her. She embraces desire and takes initiative. While Adam flounders in the garden, Eve moves forward with purpose. Her outstretched hand eagerly reaches for the apple. She is bold and unwavering, unencumbered by doubt or the need for external validation, whether from the serpent or anyone else.

Eve's choices enhance the human experience. She carries our consciousness and leads us into a world filled with beauty and suffering. Her actions mark the transformation from a life of mere existence to one of meaningful engagement with life's complexities. Eve is not merely a figure from a distant story; she is an embodiment of curiosity and the spirit of exploration that defines humanity.

"I Have Been A Stranger in a Strange Land" reflects on the theme of existential exploration and the contrast between ordinary life and the pursuit of deeper meaning. The narrator describes a

sense of disconnection, feeling like a stranger in an unfamiliar environment, despite moments of beauty and happiness found in everyday experiences. The imagery of nature, particularly the tree with its “dark, crabbed branches,” symbolizes both temptation and the allure of the unattainable. The narrator's experience is marked by a longing for something beyond the mundane, suggesting that true bliss may lie in the simplicity of existence rather than in the chaos of ambition. The mention of “forbidden” fruit evokes a sense of desire that transcends ownership, highlighting the complexity of human emotions and the inherent ache that accompanies longing. Ultimately, the text captures the tension between the desire for fulfillment and the acceptance of loss, emphasizing that desire itself can be a powerful, if bittersweet, force in life.

To conclude, Rita Dove's poem “I Have Been A Stranger in a Strange Land” offers a rich exploration of complex themes such as existential longing, personal agency, and the intricate nature of human desires. At its core, the poem uses the metaphor of Eve's experience in the Garden of Eden to examine deep issues of identity and the relentless pursuit of knowledge. Eve, as a character, embodies the universal human struggle with the desire for understanding and the pain of yearning for what seems just out of reach.

Dove reframes traditional interpretations of biblical stories, presenting Eve not simply as a figure of temptation but as a courageous seeker. Her journey is one of exploration and self-discovery, which resonates with the human experience of wanting to learn more about ourselves and the world around us. This active pursuit of knowledge reflects a fundamental aspect of being human: the quest to understand one's place in the universe and to challenge existing norms.

The poem's imagery and language are powerful, drawing readers into a vivid emotional space. Dove effectively marries personal reflections and broader historical contexts, making her themes relatable and universal. Readers are encouraged to confront their own feelings of longing and to consider their journeys of discovery. Through her unique voice, Dove reinterprets a well-known narrative, offering new insights into the emotional challenges that accompany human existence. Overall, the poem serves as a reminder of the complexities that define our lives. By weaving together personal and historical narratives, Dove's work invites a deeper reflection on the nature of aspiration, discovery, and the ongoing search for meaning in an often confusing world.

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