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MAYA ANGELOU



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MAYA ANGELOU (1928–2014)

I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), written when she was forty-one, is a remarkable *bildungsroman* of a black female subject, a vivid recollection of personal misfortunes, racism and prejudices in the American South, once an infamous epicentre of slavery. It covers her life from the age of three when her parents divorced and abandoned her and her brother Bailey to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson in Stomps, Arkansas until the age of sixteen, when she becomes a mother. The work celebrates Black motherhood, identity and self-hood and made an important contribution to the wave of black feminist writing in the seventies. Five successive memoirs followed *Caged Bird— Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1977), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002). In all these works, Angelou confronts the traumatic events of her childhood and explores the evolution of her strong identity as an African American woman. The seventh and final autobiography, *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) focuses, for the first time, on Angelou's relationship with her mother, Vivian Baxter and chronicles her reunion and reconciliation with Baxter.

The title 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' was borrowed from her favourite African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1899 poem "Sympathy" which focuses on the role of compassion in human lives:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
when his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, ...
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

Commenting on the metaphors of 'caged bird' and 'cage', M.K. McMurry observes that Dunbar's caged bird sings from "the frustration of imprisonment; its song is a prayer, Angelou's caged bird sings also from frustration, but in doing so, discovers that the song transforms the cage from a prison that denies selfhood to a vehicle of self-realization." She

says that the cage is “a metaphor for roles which, because they have become institutionalized and static, do not facilitate inter-relationship, but impose patterns of behaviour which deny true identity.”(106)

Angelou was inspired by the African American writer James Baldwin and cartoonist Jules Feiffer to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*(henceforth *Caged Bird*) as a way of dealing with the assassination of her friend Martin Luther King, Jr. and to draw attention to her own personal struggles against racism. In her interviews Angelou has narrated how Robert Loomis, her eventual Random House editor, challenged her to write a ‘literary autobiography’ as it was “almost impossible” to write an autobiography as literature. She has admitted that it was not the challenge of writing autobiography per se that Angelou could not resist but the challenge implied in Loomis’ remark about the difficulty of writing autobiography “as literature”.

The work immediately became popular and remained on *The New York Times*’s best-seller lists for two years. It was translated into many languages. Newspaper reviews praised the work for being “simultaneously touching and comic,” “a heroic and beautiful book,” “an unconditionally involving memoir for our time or any time.” Critic Julian Mayfield saw in it the vicissitudes of African American life. She observed that it was “a work of art which eludes description because the black aesthetic—another way of saying ‘the black experience’—has too long been neglected to be formalized by weary clichés ... Anyone who doesn’t read Maya Angelou doesn’t want to know where it was, much less where it’s at.”(6)



YouTube Resources:

Here’s the link to a film based on Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, first aired on April 28, 1979 on the CBS, the American English-language commercial broadcast television and radio network:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JG1e7fzsrJQ>

Contemporary Reception of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Although *Caged Bird* generated a substantial body of criticism and established itself in the humanities curriculum, it remained a controversial work. According to Lyman B. Hagan, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, praised by many as a literary classic which should be read and taught to all African American young people, is one of the ten books most frequently excluded from high school and Junior high school libraries and classrooms." The reasons according to the critic Opal Moore were:

Caged Bird elicits criticism for its honest depiction of rape, its exploration of the ugly spectre of racism in America, its recounting of the circumstances of Angelou's own out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy, and its humorous poking at the foibles of the institutional church. Angelou inscribes her resistance to racism, sexism, and poverty within the language, the imagery, the very meaning of her text; her truth-telling vision confronts stereotypes old and new, revising perspective and discomfiting the reader seeking safety in the conventional platitudes of the status quo. Simultaneously, *Caged Bird's* profoundly moral stance challenges its audience to confront the contradictions of life and to create positive change, beginning with one's self and then one's community.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

I Know Why the caged Bird Sings is not a slave narrative but her forefathers in the US had a history of slavery behind them. In my lecture-notes on *The History of Mary Prince*, I have discussed slavery and its impact on the enslaved and the enslavers - it is important to revisit the topic once again. Slavery in the United States probably began with the arrival of "20 and odd" enslaved Africans to the British colony of Virginia in 1619 and officially ended with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865.

Please find the link below for a visual timeline of slavery in the US history:

A History of Slavery in the United States
Browse through an interactive timeline of America's "peculiar institution."
National Geographic
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/interactive/slavery-united-states/>

1930s-1940s America: The Great Depression

The decades during which Maya grew up was a period of the Great Depression, a world-wide economic crisis which began with the stock market crash of 1929 and made worse by the 1930s Dust Bowl¹. Maya describes, “The Depression must have hit the white section of Stamps with cyclonic impact, but it seeped into the Black area slowly, like a thief with misgivings.” The black families were so used to being poor that it seemed for the first couple of years it seemed as if it didn't affect them much. However, eventually, the Depression brought about a loss in wages affecting people badly. Maya remembers surviving on powdered eggs and milk, even though her family was better off than most.

To read more on the Great Depression, please click on the link below:

<https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/great-depression-history>

This was also an era before the **Civil Rights movement**² when neighbourhoods and schools were segregated. Maya narrates, “In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like.” Black schools were not offered the same resources as their white counterparts. For black men, violence in the form of lynching was common. By the 1940s, World War II began, which meant that Japanese internment camps were utilized. Many black people could establish homes and businesses in the vacuum created by the terrible imprisonment of many of their Asian neighbours.

The story of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* begins in the segregated American **Jim Crow** South of the early 20th century and ends in San Francisco, shortly after the end of WWII. “Jim Crow” was a derisive slang term for a Black man. It came to mean any state law passed in the South that established different rules for blacks and whites. Jim Crow laws were

¹ Families were driven out of the once fertile great plains by massive dust clouds--one that rose to 10,000 feet and reached as far as New York City.

² The civil rights movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for Blacks to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The Movement began at the end of the 1950s in the South by students demonstrating against Black segregation. Under the leadership of Martin Luther King, it became a non-violent movement for racial equality that impressed the American nation and turned the attention of the political leaders to the plight of the Black Americans.

based on the theory of white supremacy and were a reaction to **Reconstruction**³, a period (1865-77) in the US history. In the depression-racked 1890s, racism appealed to whites who feared losing their jobs to blacks. Politicians abused Blacks to win the votes of poor white “crackers.” Newspapers fed the bias of white readers by highlighting and fabricating crimes by Black people.

This turbulent phase of American history reflects in her account of her life. She investigates the effects of systemic segregation and racism on the mind, body, and identity of Black individuals. In many ways *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* provides readers with a crucial account of the first half of the 20th century from the perspective of a Black southerner- the African Americans living in the Southern United States.

BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION IN 20th CENTURY AMERICA

In his seminal work, *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), Stephen Butterfield establishes the existence of a black autobiographical tradition that has its roots in the American slave narrative, a genre “so powerful, so convincing a testimony of human resource, intelligence, endurance, and love in the face of tyranny , that, in a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent black American writing.” He divides black autobiography into three periods:

1. The Slave Narrative Period (1831-1895): slave narrators were determined to fight a social system.
2. The Period of Search (1901-1961): autobiographers wanted to examine problems which made it hard to forge a unified black identity rooted in social reality.
3. The Period of Rebirth (1961 onwards) includes autobiographies by African-American women writers.

He acknowledges the influence of slave narratives on modern autobiographies such as Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). Some common features of these works are: resistance to slavery, struggle for education and a physical movement between various geographical regions. In fact , in modern African

³ In U.S. history, the period (1865–77) that followed the American Civil War is known as Reconstruction during which attempts were made to redress the inequities of slavery and its political, social, and economic legacy and to solve the problems arising from the readmission to the Union of the 11 states that had seceded at or before the outbreak of war.

American autobiographies- such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*(1955), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), and all the autobiographies of Maya Angelou- are marked by a common impulse to articulate their struggle, to awaken the conscience of humanity and to motivate future generations. Butterfield argues that Black autobiography represents a quest for freedom and the Black suffering at the hands of the Whites. He considers Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) as "the autobiography most worth reading of all the works of its kind in American literature, whether white or black"(155). James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) which Butterfield regards as a book with the historical significance.

The women from the 'third period' whom Butterfield takes up are Ida B. Wells, Anne Moody, and especially Maya Angelou, whose *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) is not really about "the struggle of the bird" but "the exploration of the cage, the gradual discovery of its boundaries, the loosening of certain bars that she can slip through when the keepers' backs are turned" (207-08). She does not submit tamely to the cage but repeatedly thrust into situations where she must act on her own initiative to save herself and thereby learns the strength of self-confidence." In contrast, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, Julius Lester, Malcolm X, and H. Rap Brown project selves that are in harmony with a revolutionary movement designed to break the chains of white hegemony. Butterfield regards Lester's *Search for the New Land* (1969)as the finest work of the third period: its uniquely blended formal elements enhance Lester's search for a revolutionary human identity, and, as a consequence, the book extends the African American autobiographical tradition.

Maya Angelou traced her development as a writer and a committed civil rights worker. Inspired by the writer and activist John O Killens, she joined the Harlem Writers' Guild⁴ and was inspired by prominent authors such as James Baldwin and Paule Marshall.

⁴ Harlem Writers Guild, formerly (1950–52) Harlem Writers Club, group of African American writers established in New York City in 1950 as the Harlem Writers Club by ambitious young black authors who felt excluded from the mainstream literary culture and who sought to express ethnic experiences and history in their work. John Henrik Clarke, Rosa Guy, and John Oliver Killens were among the emerging talents who sought an alternative forum in which to develop their craft.

Because of her civil rights' work, she came in contact with leaders of the Movement like Martin Luther Jr. Bayard Rustin, Malcolm X.

By the time the *Caged Bird* was published, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were dead, and it seemed the only hope for black politics were strong-willed female politicians as Shirley Chisholm and Barbara Jordan, two of the first black women to serve in Congress. Chisholm and Jordan, products of the colonial West Indies and the Old South, respectively, "pinned their speeches to the idea of a changing United States, and it was their brand of rhetoric—a fierce criticism of the past blended with a kind of survivor's optimism, a belief in the future of the urban family—that cleared the way for Angelou's narrative of damage, perseverance, and eventual triumph."

MAYA ANGELOU AND *CAGED BIRD*

She traces her life as writer back to those silent years when as an eight year old girl, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. She dissociated herself from everyone - her mother and her St. Louis family- except her brother Bailey. Instead of speaking, she wrote songs and taught them to Bailey; he in turn taught her songs to the children who were their friends. For five years, Bailey became her voice. The result of that dissociation was her "chosen muteness". In one of her interviews , she described her silence as the mark that her voice was "eluding" her. She said, "We all bring almost unnameable information from childhood ... If we are lucky, we make transitions, and don't live in that time of pain and rejection and loneliness and desolation. But there will understandably be bits of it which adhere to us" (qtd. in Martin 2). Angelou has often said in her interviews that as a writer she learned to choose to describe episodes that would give hope to readers; her intent in writing autobiography was not to maim either people or their memories:

What I have left out of *Caged Bird* and all the books is a lot of unkindness. I've never wanted to hurt anybody. So many of the people are still alive. The most difficult part for me has always been the selection of the incidents. To find one which is dramatic without being melodramatic or maudlin, and yet will give me that chance to show that aspect of personality, of life which impacted on me ... from which I drew and grew (qtd. in Martin 1).

Her writing “liberates the reader into life simply because Maya Angelou confronts her own life with such a moving wonder, such a luminous dignity.” Angelou’s genius as a writer, Sidonie Smith states, “is her ability to recapture the texture of the way of life in the texture of its idioms, its idiosyncratic vocabulary and especially its process of image making.”

Angelou’s friend and critic Joanne Braxton gave an apt metaphor for the writer’s autobiographical method. She compares what she calls Angelou’s “discontinuous narrative form” to the creation of a memory jar, “a monument honouring a deceased loved one.” Somewhat like making a quilt (using fragments of clothing or other material that in themselves evoke memories) , a memory jar consists of layers, with small objects embedded within one layer or another, all surrounded by a plaster that holds the design in place. In contrast to an autobiography that works toward political argument, or one that narrates the achievement of a single subject, Maya Angelou’s serial autobiographies, according to Braxton, create stories of both her culture and what Braxton terms “the Maya-myth” (Braxton 20) . One of the reasons critics have been so attracted by Angelou’s accomplishment in autobiography is the versatility — and the unusualness — (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 29)

ANGELOU’S WRITING TECHNIQUE AND USE OF MEMORY

Extract: An interview of Maya Angelou by Joanne Braxton

I (Braxton) asked Angelou about her writing technique and, specifically, how she uses memory to "re-enter" historical time.

JOANNE BRAXTON: If you think now about the actual historical moment and what was going on in your mind when you were a child and then when you think of what memory has done to that moment, does the memory seem very different?

MAYA ANGELOU : What I remember I remember completely. Whole scenes play themselves against roads and farmland. I can remember the aroma in the air, the background sounds.... On the other hand, if I don't try to remember it, then whole things are lost completely. It has been that way with me all of my life.

So what happens when I write autobiographies is that I try to suspend myself from the present. I get myself into a time, into a particular day and I'm there. Each time that I do that, I am also aware that I might not come out, that I might be trapped in that time--It's frightening.

I keep a hotel room and I go to it about live thirty in the morning and pull off my coat. I have a

yellow pad and the Bible. I get on the bed and try to find that entry. It is so scary. It is so physical that by twelve o'clock I'm just wet. Soaked. Then I get up and take a shower at the hotel and go home. Sometimes I will cook, make a pot of soup, say, and then go back to the hotel again and write.

BRAXTON: How does it feel to sit there holding that tattered old paperback copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with this nearly thirty-years-younger Maya Angelou on the cover?

ANGELOU: It's like seeing a movie, one that's known, maybe one that's written. It's not painless to remember.

BRAXTON: The life is not painless ... the remembered life? Or the writing?

ANGELOU: All of them! I just turned to (putting down the book) something I haven't thought about in a long time. When my father ... see, so many things come to mind. . . . I mean, I was very kind in this remembrance. . . . When I left my father's house, or the house that he took me to . . . he came back to give me a dollar and a half.

I grew up that day terribly.

BRAXTON: In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, you write about many terrible experiences. How did you emerge from the chrysalis of Maya's vulnerability? What enabled you to heal yourself where another person might have been destroyed? What was the difference?

ANGELOU: I can't remember a time when I wasn't loved by somebody. or even in the bad, really bad times, in Saint Louis, my brother, Bailey, helped. When I couldn't really trust my mother or her mother, or my uncles . . . they amused me, of course . . . they were funny . . . but to trust them????

During our conversation, Angelou spoke at length about shattering experiences of racism, sexism, and poverty represented in the *Caged Bird*- experiences viewed through the lens of memory. (7)

ANGELOU: Writing is very hard for me. Writing well, that is, telling the truth, is almost impossible. Anything I write, I write because I have to write. And I have to tell the truth about it, not just facts about it. If I could get away with it, inside myself, I would write the facts. But if I start to write, I have to write the truth.(12)

I am always amazed to see photographs of myself. I always look like. I'm about to cry, and I have reason for it. (13)

MAJOR ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN THE *CAGED BIRD*: CRITICS AND CRITICISM

- a. One of the earliest and most useful criticism on *Caged Bird* is by George E. Kent in his 1975 essay "Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Black Autobiographical Tradition."

"I Know Why... creates a unique place in black autobiographical tradition... by its special stance toward the self, the community, and the universe, and by a form exploiting a full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity.

- b. Myra K McMurry: "Role-Playing as Art in Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird*" (1976)

Momma serves as a role model for Marguerite/Maya, and indeed for all people fighting racism. "She triumphs not only in spite of her restrictions, but because of them. It is because, as a Black woman, she must maintain the role of respect toward the white child that she discovers another vehicle for her true emotions. She has used her cage creatively to transcend it."

- c. In "Paths to Escape"(1987) Susan Gilbert examines the two voices of *Caged Bird*, "the child, growing to consciousness of herself and the limits of her world, and the author, experienced, confident, and didactic." Unlike the hero of the *bildungsroman*, Marguerite, the lonely and isolated heroine of *Caged Bird*, like many others in the black female autobiographical tradition, narrates a collective story wherein she transcends loneliness and pain and ultimately finds her way to survival, fulfilment, and the realization of a self-defining identity.
- d. In "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity" (1990) Mary Jane Lupton argues that Maya Angelou's autobiographical series is, "like an unfinished painting," an "ongoing creation, in a form that rejects the finality of a restricting frame." "What distinguishes . . . Angelou's autobiographical method," Lupton argues, "is her very denial of closure. . . . Angelou, by continuing her narrative, denies the form and its history, creating from each ending a new beginning, relocating the center to some luminous place in a volume yet to be." Lupton argues that, at this point, there can be no closure to Angelou's continuing narrative. A careful look at the body of Angelou's oeuvre confirms Lupton's argument. The volumes of Angelou's autobiographical writing that follow: *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) and her essays and poetry, many of which have autobiographical content, suggest a fluidity of form and a layered or accretive approach to self-representation that transcends any narrow definition of genre.

Each of the five volumes explores, both literally and metaphorically, the significance of motherhood. I will examine this theme from two specific perspectives: first, Angelou's relationship to her mother and to mother substitutes, especially to Momma Henderson; second, Angelou's relationship to her son as she struggles to define her own role as mother/artist. Throughout the volumes Angelou moves backwards and forwards, from connection to conflict. This dialectic of Black mother-daughterhood, introduced in the childhood narrative, enlarges and contracts during the series, finding its fullest expression in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*.

- e. Mary Vermillion. "Re-embodying the Self: Representations of Rape in "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*".(1992)

Mary Vermillion writes about 'Somatophobia', or fear of the body, specifically the fear of the black female body in her essay "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*". She examines issues of rape, voice, and literary empowerment. According to Vermillion, "The woman who records her own rape must- if she does not wish to do with her pen what Lucrece does with her sword – close the distance between her body and whatever her society posits as a woman's integral self (i.e., sexual reputation, mind, soul, desire, or will)."

Vermillion argues that a fear and disdain for the body leads to the oppression of Black women in somatophobic societies. The prevalence of 'somatophobia' complicates wildly the task of the African- American woman who would remember publicly her own rape. Vermillion asserts that the black woman writer "must recover and celebrate her body without reinforcing racist perceptions of her as mere body." Moreover, she argues that *Caged Bird* continues in the tradition of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by challenging and subverting the 'somatophobia' inherent in patriarchal societies that posit blacks and women as being more body like, more sensual.

- f. Pierre A. Walker in his essay "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing*(1995) writes about *Caged Bird* as "literary autobiography," focusing on form. He proposes the "difficulty of writing autobiography 'as literature.'" Analyzing Angelou's seamless narrative and "the formal ways *Caged Bird* expresses its points about identity, words, and race," Walker comments on the "internal organization of chapters" and their thematic juxtaposition and demonstrates that in *Caged Bird*, "the political and the formal [are] . . . inextricably related" both to each other and to the development of Angelou's aesthetics.
- g. Dolly McPherson: "Initiation and Self-Discovery"(1999)

Her essay establishes a literary and cultural context, examining the ways in which *Caged Bird* forever reconfigured African-American autobiographical expression and paved the way for future generations of black women writers. In McPherson's words, "[Critics] had no reason to think that a first book by an entertainment personality would be of particular importance. . . . For Angelou, however, the autobiographical mode was to become the means to an enduring public career."

- h. Suzette A. Henke: *Traditions , Voices, and Dreams*(2014)

This autobiographical work, in presenting a voice that is not often heard, "has the potential to be... a revolutionary form of writing. In the "comic and triumphant" end of the novel Marguerite's "victory suggests an implicit triumph over the white bourgeoisie whose values have flagrantly been observed.

To conclude, autobiographies of African American women establish their integrity as a tradition within a tradition and derive not from the categories of race or sex, but from the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment and over succeeding generations.

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