

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

An Outline of Literary Observations

- Contrasting life style of mother Vivian Baxter in St. Louis (loose atmosphere, partying, sophisticated) vs. the Grandmother in Arkansas (church gatherings)
- Symbolism of Silence
- The liberating role of literature and reading in Maya's recovery.

- **Point of View:**

A child who is artfully recreated by the adult narrator. Angelou is able to tell her unique story while at the same time sharing the contributions of black writers who came before her. In that sense, the point of view becomes a collective one, the voice of the African American literary community.

- **Structure (Language, Formal Divisions and Organization) and Setting:**

The structure creates a triangular journey representing California, Arkansas, and Missouri. The journey on one level is an escape from an impossible circumstance while in another level a journey toward awareness. In closing, she presents the sacredness of motherhood "immaculate pregnancy" preparing the stage for the blessed journey into motherhood. In the second side of the triangle, St. Louis, Maya is left vulnerable to assault. The triangle then becomes complete in San Francisco where she finds harmony.

Setting designates how characters interact. Her rape, for example, would not have likely happened in Stamps, with its close-knit community and its rigid moral code. In Stamps, she engulfed with feelings of rejection and abandonment, countered with her love for Momma Henderson and her love of poetry. In Stamps, she is naive and innocent. She has fancies of power involving her grandmother and herself as they conquer racism.

- **Plot development:**

Of the various incidents in the plot that have a negative effect on Maya, two of them are extremely disruptive:

1. Being raped on a visit to St. Louis at the age of eight, and becoming pregnant as a result of trying to prove to herself she is not lesbian. The rape scene, so powerful in its physical and emotional impact, contains narrative elements that are magnified to the extent the reader might think of the rape as the essence of the plot. Ironically for Maya, the rape is the ultimate learning experience. Through her pain she becomes aware of being small girl in a world controlled by men.
2. Second, for many young women, teenage pregnancy might end in trauma, abortion, or parental rejection. For Maya, the pregnancy ends in her mother's acceptance and the birth of her son. It is an affirmation of self; with the birth of her child, Maya is herself born into mature engagement with forces of life.

- **Character Development:**

Maya's character can be investigated as a child and young adult, with attention to how she acts in three specific areas: in the family, in the black community, and the in the white community.

Maya's performance in these areas reveals the diversity of her character and gives a sense of the various moods, attitudes and strategies involved in her survival as a black child in a world manipulated by the images of whiteness. Her relationship with her brother, grandmother and mother tend to solidify her experiences. Maya is unable to accept her grandmother's position that for Southern blacks to survive in a racist society, they must develop a strategy of obedience. She disagrees with Annie Henderson's passive stance but fears how whites might react to Bailey's having witnessed a black man's death at their hands.

Her father is absent from her life, literally and figuratively. In her father's absence, Maya finds substitute father figure like Mr. Freeman, who will give her attention her father cannot, or she makes fun of men so they become undesirable to her. She enjoys joking with Bailey about pompous fatherly types like Reverend Thomas, who visits Annie Henderson to take advantage of her home cooking. Uncle Willie, her father's blood brother, is a substitute father in the strictest sense.

The black community of Stamps is her extended family. Through her interaction with the black community people of Stamps, Maya develops her character, growing stronger and sharpening her wit by associating with people like Sister Monroe, Reverend Thomas, Mr. McElory and Mrs. Flowers.

Through her experiences with the strong women of Stamps, Maya develops her sense of survival in a racist society. She is able to articulate her observation of racism, if not loud at least in her thoughts. She can witness the Joe Louis' fight and fear that in his possible defeat each blow to Louis's body is like a black man being beaten or a black maid being slapped for being "forgetful".

Literary Style:

The narrative is rich, humorous and engaging. Her use of tabooed and inhuman word "nigger" is meant to emphasize the clash between the dentist's presumed profession as healer and the low-level nature of his language and philosophy.

Another feature of her style is the use of sharp and direct dialogue to convey the distinctive language of a character.

The dentist refusal of putting his hand in her mouth is metaphorical. The discussion of Maya's rape looks closely at the use of metaphor to communicate overpowering pain. The references to Negroes as dogs places Angelou's use of metaphor within the stylistic tradition of black protest literature.

Humour is also developed through caricature of the Southern black folks who have got religion. For example, Sister Monroe makes up for her absences on Sunday services by being shouting loud when she is actually present. Another figure of ridicule is Reverend Thomas, a repulsive church official who comes to Stamps four times a year; on those occasions he eats "like a hog" at the home of Annie Henderson.

Angelou's most valued technique as a stylist may be the precision that she describes places and objects, a precision so sharp that readers carry the descriptions with them, even when the book is closed. Her observations are sensitive, keen to the senses of smell, sound and sight. Her writing resembles a series of photographs or fragments of music: snapshots taken from many angles, notes played from a variety of instruments.