The Voices of the Underdogs

Written Task 2

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**Prescribed Question:** How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?

**Title of Text for Analysis:** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Maya Angelou 1969

**Part of the course to which the task refers:** Part 4 – Detailed Study

**Thesis:** African-Americans throughout Angelou’s autobiography were portrayed as powerless and insignificant compared to the Caucasian race as a way for her to give voice to the underdogs so readers can appreciate them, while giving added recognition toward African-American women.

**Argument 1:** African-Americans had to treat Caucasians with upmost respect despite the treatment they received in return

* The conformity African-Americans had is exhibited between differences in the conversation between the “powhitetrash” and Momma, and the conversation between Mrs. Bertha Flowers and Momma

**Argument 2:** The lack of power African-Americans have compared to the Caucasian race

* This is seen when Angelou interacts with Mrs. Glory who was named Hallelujah but her mistress changed it to Glory for her own convenience

**Argument 3:**  African-Americans were considered trivial to society and often neglected

* This point is exemplified during Angelou’s elementary school graduation in which she realizes that Caucasian children would have the chance to become anything they chose, where African-Americans could only become athletes

**The Voices of the Underdogs**

What seems only as a critique on racism, based on the fact the author, Maya Angelou, had grown up during the Jim Crow era, her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also serves as her bildungsroman. It highlights her quest for self-identity, personal dignity, and independence following the event of her rape. Angelou is raised during times when racial segregation in the United States is at its peak, and being of African-American descent, has to conform to the laws set by Caucasian men in power. These laws, which are implemented based on racial discrimination, create obstacles in which African-Americans have to face is highlighted throughout her autobiography. The African-Americans in Angelou’s autobiography are portrayed as powerless against Caucasians, and insignificant to society, in order for her to illustrate the difficulties and injustices the African-American race faced. This is done to shed light on their stories so they, as a whole, can be appreciated as well as give special recognition to African-American women.

Throughout Angelou’s autobiography, the theme of racial discrimination creating limitations of power and privilege is presented. From the beginning of the autobiography, readers are able to get a sense that African-Americans have to treat the Caucasian race with utmost respect despite the treatment they receive in return, depicting their oppression. This is seen in the conversations between the “powhitetrash”, the poorest Caucasians, who lack in courtesy, and Momma, Angelou’s grandmother, in which she replies “‘Bye, Miz Helen, ‘bye, Miz Ruth, ‘bye Miz Eloise” (Angelou 32) after the “powhitetrash” make a mockery out of Momma. The use of “Miz” to address another, versus “Sister” which is used to address those of familiarity, is equivalent to present day “Madam” and is most commonly used to address those of higher authority. Angelou states how the “[powhitetrash] were dirty, mean and imprudent” (32), however Momma still addresses them with extreme formality. With Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who is seen as “the aristocrat of Black Stamps” (93) and deserving of this formality, Momma does not address her in the same way, but rather as “Sister” due to the fact that she is of African-American descent. This demonstrates how African-Americans have to treat the Caucasian race, regardless of their social class, as superior. Angelou represents the African-American race this way, aside from the fact that it was the basic truth, to highlight the conformity she compiles with while living in a country that has no respect for the colour of her skin.

The lack of African-American power is most prominently shown during times when Angelou resides in Stamps, Arkansas due to the fact that she associates more with the African-American community there than in St. Louis, Missouri. Angelou comments on African-American lack of power which is presented through her encounter with Miss Glory. In order for Angelou to mature into adulthood, the tradition calls for African-American “girls in small Southern towns to [undergo] extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood (104)” which is usually learned from the kitchens of Caucasian family homes. Miss Glory, who is the cook for one of these families, informs Angelou that her “Ma named [her Hallelujah] but [her] mistress gave [her] “Glory” and it stuck” (109). The fact that Miss Glory let “some white lady rename her for her own convenience (109)” is an allusion to how powerless the African-Americans are. They are not able to have control over their own identity which is expressed by Angelou representing one’s name to symbolize one’s own self integrity. African-Americans are presented in this light as a way for Angelou to comment on their victimization from the Caucasian race. This is used to further express the amount of difficulty African-Americans would face while trying to become important figures in society as they often found themselves suffering from severe Caucasian prejudice. Readers should praise African-Americans conquering this type of prejudice to become important figures in society as they are often, if not always, seen as trivial.

Not only are African-Americans powerless within society, they are also considered as unimportant. The insignificance of African-Americans to society is highlighted when Angelou states how “the white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madam Curies and Edison and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises” (179). The Caucasian children were able follow their dreams to hold any career they chose, whereas African-American boys, and boys alone, could only become athletes. When African-American boys try to hold other careers, they “had to pay penance for [their] skin colour” first (179). This results in a society dominated mainly by Caucasian supremacists casting aside the African-American race and neglecting their existence. Angelou illustrates the unimportance of African-Americans to society as a way to comment on the fact that they were almost expected to amalgamate to nothing. This further enhances Angelou’s statement of acknowledging important African-American figures, as they are often “seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and [deserved] respect if not enthusiastic acceptance” (272).

The portrayal of the powerless and inconsequential African-Americans throughout Angelou’s autobiography convey the appreciation and acceptance readers feel for them when able to become respectable figures. Any African-American who emerges as a recognized character within this time period should be met with great admiration, however Angelou wants to specifically point out the added admiration that should be felt towards African-American women. The fact that African-American men could hold some degree of social status in society, African-American women, on top of having “Black lack of power” (272), also face “masculine prejudice” (272). This was Angelou’s overall statement towards the even greater acceptance that should be felt towards these women since “if growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult” (4). Angelou’s autobiography is not only written for her own story to be told, it is written for every African-American man and woman to be applauded and honoured.

Word Count: 993

**Works Cited**

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969. Print

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***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – Maya Angelou**

*How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?*

* Blacks verses whites, the differences in power as well as freedom
  + Blacks must conform to the rules and regulations set by whites
  + Treating whites as higher class
  + Blacks hold careers as athletes were whites have the option to follow the direction of their dreams
  + Explain the difficulty of being black during this period of time
* Why are they represented in this particular way? – Black women
  + To express and show the difficulty Angelou experienced as a black woman growing up during the time when racism was at its highest
  + Relating to Angelou’s preface, and how black women should be praised when they hold respected careers
  + Reference to court case when the judge and other whites had laughed when hearing that a black woman was a store owner

Gives voice to the underdogs, so readers can appreciate their story

* Chapter 4
* Chapter 23
* Chapter 15
* Chapter 16
* Chapter 3
* Chapter 5
* Chapter 18
* Chapter 19
* Chapter 24
* Chapter 34 (beginning and ending)