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The Caged Bird Sings

Zoe Barger

Birds, the elegant, feathered creatures that soar through the air with grace and dignity, are commonly associated with freedom and potential. However, when birds are locked up in cages, they transform into symbols of captivity and oppression. In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou narrates her tumultuous childhood in which she is caged by displacement, abuse, racism, and sexism. Her work is an empowering read that concludes with Maya, as a nearly grown woman, metaphorically singing as she achieves growth despite her oppressors. The title of this autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, contains what is perhaps one of the most powerful symbols in the entire text. Through Angelou's depiction of her younger self as a caged bird, she reveals to her readers the possibility to thrive even if they live in a world where the cards are stacked against them.

One of the first things readers learn about Maya is that she and her brother, Bailey, were sent, at the ages of three and four, respectively, to live with their grandmother following their mother and father's decision to end their marriage (Angelou 6). From this fact, readers might foresee that Maya will struggle with displacement and defining her family figures, and she does indeed. When their parents sent them Christmas gifts, Maya's and Bailey's reactions were not of joy, as would be the case for most children. "The gifts opened the door to questions that neither of [them] wanted to ask. Why did they send [them] away? And what did [they] do so wrong? So Wrong? Why, at three and four, did [they] have tags put on [their] arms to be sent by train alone from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, with only the porter to look after [them]? (Besides, he got off in Arizona)" (Angelou 52). For Maya and Bailey, these gifts served only as a painful reminder of their displacement. Maya faces both physical and emotional displacement again when her father uproots her and Bailey from their lives in Stamps and takes them to St. Louis, leaving them with their mother. However, in St. Louis, Maya is held captive by another oppressor. Lacking a proper father figure in her life, she is left susceptible to sexual assault, which she innocently mistook as a normal display of paternal love, which

she had never received before. After Mr. Freeman's initial act of inappropriate sexual conduct, Maya "felt at home" (Angelou 72). This demonstrates how one oppressing factor in her life led to another. The rape incident that followed became a new cage in Maya's life, as she dealt with the resulting emotional trauma.

Finally, Maya is caged by both racism and sexism. Maya's review of Mr. Donleavy's speech at her eighth grade graduation justly sums up the disadvantages Maya faced as a young black woman. She writes, "The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises" (Angelou 176). In his speech, Mr. Donleavy promotes the racist perception that only white male children can grow up to become intellectuals, succeeding in science and medicine, while black male children are capable of success only in athletics at best. Furthermore, he omits girls from the picture entirely. At this time, society was constantly sending the message to young black girls that they were inferior to boys and white boys in particular. Maya despises the fact that Mr. Donleavy, a white man, is attempting to dictate what she, a black female, is and isn't capable of. She was keenly aware of the fact that her generation of young people were placed at a disadvantage because of individuals like Donleavy. She writes, "It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense" (Angelou 178). Maya and her peers were birds, full of potential, but they were caged by the world's perception of black people and women, and they were conditioned to accept these racist and sexist ideas. Nevertheless, Maya found a way to sing.

Despite the cage that Maya lived inside, for she was locked up by displacement, abuse, racism, and sexism, she grew to move past her oppressors. By the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, readers get to see Maya becoming a confident young lady who would someday write this autobiographical work to share her story of encouragement with others. Perhaps the turning point in Maya's coming-of-age story is when she first truly stands up for herself. Her fight with Delores, which results in her injury, as well as her subsequent decision to run away, is when she first gets to sing against an oppressor in her life (Angelou 241-246). Up until that point, Maya, as a young child, was expected to stand by as a spectator when faced with insults. One example of this is when she is at the dentist

office with Momma. The dentist refuses to treat her because of the color of her skin, a racist insult. She is asked by Momma to leave the scene and is then left only to imagine what occurs between Momma and the dentist (Angelou 187). In contrast, when Delores insults her mother, Maya's reply is shocking and bold. She finally expresses a rage that has likely been boiling inside of her for her entire life. Maya writes, "I walked to Dolores, enraged at the threat. 'I'm going to slap you for that, you silly old bitch.' I warned her and I slapped her" (Angelou 242). While these actions of Maya's were an act of rebellion and disrespect in many ways, it was a sign of her growth, maturity, and confidence.

The next way in which Maya found she was able to sing was during her time spent in the junkyard. Her experience there was perhaps one of the most crucial periods in her life, shaping her into the woman she would become. This is where her views on racial differences changed. For most of her life, she had felt displaced by her race. However, in the junkyard, she lived in harmony among children of several different racial backgrounds (Angelou 250). She writes, "After a month my thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself...The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me and set a tone of tolerance for my life" (Angelou 250). In the junkyard, she was able to sing louder than her oppressors of displacement and race.

Another way Maya sings against oppression in her life is when she demonstrates bold resistance to racial discrimination on her quest to obtain a job. She wanted a job on the streetcars, but black people weren't allowed jobs on streetcars (Angelou 260). However, this did not stop Maya; she was determined. In order to get this job, she "wove a cat's ladder of near truths and total lies" (Angelou 265). Her efforts were successful as she was eventually hired as the first black person to work on the streetcars in San Francisco (Angelou 265). Her achievement by means of lying is a significant demonstration of her mature understanding of the racist construction of the world. Like many activists, she understood that bold defiance was sometimes the only way to bring about change.

In conclusion, Angelou's autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, reads much like a novel, complete with symbolism. Her depiction of her younger self, as a caged bird learning how to sing, is appropriately and symbolically titled. Perhaps Angelou's reason for including this title as a symbol was to help

readers view her story in light of a bigger picture. Maybe she wanted to help her readers make the connection between that of Maya's oppressors and the way in which she learns and grows despite them. She overcomes displacement, abuse, racism, and sexism, and, through this book, she sings about her growth. In the end, Angelou leaves readers with an encouraging true story, inspiring them to find a way to sing louder than their oppressors.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Random House, 2015.