

Final exam



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Insecurity of Gaining Pride in Oneself Have you ever considered how a young, insecure, black girl growing up in the South during the 1930s dealt with physical and verbal discrimination directed toward her African American race? This may not seem like a big deal at first, but consider that this was a time before the African American Civil Rights Movement; a time during which racism and segregation were a fact of life. It was a daily struggle for blacks to live in a society that clearly and openly did not accept them as equal people.

They were frequently ridiculed and disrespected Just because of the color of their skin. Since they were evidently treated differently, many despised the fact that they were black. As a result of their helpless circumstances, it was understandable that many blacks during that time lacked confidence and self-acceptance. Maya Angelou was an African American girl who grew up during this challenging time. During her childhood, she witnessed and experienced racial prejudice first hand. She had difficulty understanding and accepting the consequences that accompanied belonging to this race during this era.

Although she had several bad experiences as a child, she did not allow them to take over the rest of her life. Overcoming prejudice demands one to go through a long, ruthless Journey, particularly when the prejudice is directed towards oneself. This is unmistakably displayed in Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. At the beginning of the novel Maya, as a young child, dislikes her ethnicity. As the novel progresses

and she matures into a teenager, she gains a better understanding of her race and finds some comfort in it as well.

Towards the end of the novel, when Maya is a young adult, she shows complete acceptance and outright pride in her heritage. Therefore, as the novel progresses, Maya gradually develops her acceptance in her African American race. As a young girl, Maya Angelou's experiences cause her to believe that being black is an undesirable trait. In the beginning chapters of the novel, Maya remembered hearing "... the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth.

Other days he had to be satisfied with chocolate" (Angelou 40). In this remark, it is obvious that in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas, racism affected all blacks even down to what they ate. Simple offensive comments like this made Maya feel as though she was a whole separate breed than Whites. As said in Novels for Students, " During these years, she struggled against the odds of being black at a time when prejudice, especially in the South, was at its height" (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Novels for Students).

This gives support that blacks who resided in the South during the 1930s sometimes lived a brutal and harsh life. In addition, throughout the novel, Maya had to grow up more quickly than the children around her. Some of Maya's childhood experiences, such as her mother's boyfriend raping her, have added to the fact that she feels even more displaced and inferior to Whites. During her youth, she witnessed many disturbing things that went along with

being black such as physical and verbal discrimination. The "Harshness of Black Southern life" (Angelou 7) is such an example.

This includes the struggle of picking cotton on a daily routine, but not earning nearly enough money to support one's family. Maya despised the fact that she is black and would probably be sentenced to this kind of labor in her near future. Maya's early experience with a racist dentist also causes her to be resentful towards her ethnicity. A local white dentist refused to treat her toothache and told her that "... my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (Angelou 160).

Immediately after hearing this, Maya and Momma (Maya's grandmother) were taken back by this insulting remark and were absolutely speechless. The dentist did not even look Maya in the face when he said this which made her feel as though her race was inferior. This is a clear example of how her childhood experience scarred her and added to her resentment of her race. Throughout her youth, Maya also felt as if she was hideous and often compared her unattractive physical appearances to those of "sweet, little, white girls" (Angelou 1).

Maya Angelou recounts her feelings about being an "ugly" black girl: "Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? ... Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair,

broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil (Angelou 2).

In just the first few pages of the novel, Maya clearly is upset with the fact she is not an "ideal" young woman. She believed that an ideal woman was a white girl with long, blonde hair. Maya expresses her unhappiness with her race when she said that she wished she could look like a white girl having their hair instead of her own. In addition, Critic Pierre A. Walker comments on how "in the opening pages of the book, Maya suffered from a strong case of racial self-hatred, fantasizing that she was 'really white', with light-blue eyes' and 'long blond' hair" (Walker).

These two quotations simultaneously reveal Maya's jealousy of white girls and therefore her discontent with herself. She feels as though being black prevents her from fitting in with the rest of society. Her desire to be white along with her horrific personal childhood experiences demonstrate how Maya, at several points in the novel, is not in any way happy or proud with being black. As the novel progresses and Maya grows older, she experienced many mixed feelings about her race. During her eighth grade graduation she exhibits two very different opinions about her race.

After she hears Mr. Edward Donleavy's speech, stating that blacks could not succeed in life as well as whites, she says, "It was awful to be a Negro and have no control over my life. 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 153). This shows her unhappiness with being a young black female. This is because Maya feels as though there is nothing she can

do to defend the people of her own race. Towards the end of the graduation, she had a change of