

I know why the caged
bird sings by maya
angelou: three stages
of spiritual reviva...



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“ I know why the caged bird sings. Ah, me, when its wings are bruised and its bosom sore”, wrote Paul Laurence Dunbar in his famous poem Sympathy (Dunbar).

Having been written several decades before the Brown v. Board of Education landmark case, Martin Luther King’s speeches and the work of the Civil Rights Movement, this poem became the symbol of African Americans’ spiritual power and aspiration for freedom in all its senses. These lines gave the name to another outstanding work of literature devoted to the rights of African Americans, Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (Angelou 2002).

The novel is about a “ caged bird” Maya, an African American girl in captivity of racial discrimination and her own fears and diffidence.

The events described in the novel are sometimes so shocking that seem almost unbelievable; having got familiarized with the life story of the protagonist Maya, a reader sees that having faced numerous troubles and challenges, the girl did not give up and escaped from the “ cage” - her fears, uncertainty and racial prejudices directed at her.

The process of Maya’s spiritual revival included three stages: facing and recognizing the problems, receiving emotional and intellectual support from her environment, and making first independent, resolute steps into the adult life.

Maya's inner restrictions, fears and low self-esteem were born by the environment she faced during the first years of her life. Does a reader see just a weak, inexperienced girl afraid of the sorrows she is facing?

The situation described by the narrator is much more complicated and terrifying: the life of Maya, the protagonist, is the illustration of position of an African American woman in that took place in the society for centuries - "... A black woman has two strikes against her - being a woman and being born black" (Cordell-Robinson 13). The aggression towards black people combined with disrespect towards women formed a " cage" that seemed impossible to break.

The racial discrimination in the country in 1930's was merciless: the society was deeply prejudiced towards black people. The terrifying lynch mobs did not allow the girl to remain calm and careless; Maya faced cruelty of the modern world and lost self-confidence. This period in Maya's life played significant part in her future destiny having created problems she had to overcome for decades: living with her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, Maya faced numerous problems connected with her racial identity.

Being one of the few black people in the region, the girl had to overcome numerous social and emotional restrictions of her spiritual and intellectual growth: needing love and emotional support, she is nevertheless not understood, not respected and discriminated; the girl says, " There was an army of adults, whose motives and movements I just couldn't understand and who made no effort to understand mine" (Angelou 62).

Maya's emotional discomfort was aggravated by understanding that her parents had divorced and abandoned her and her older brother having sent them to Annie Henderson, their grandmother.

The pain of rejection is hard to overcome - a three year old girl was unable to get rid of the feeling of guilt for parental divorce. At the same time, Maya was suffering from her own diffidence thinking that she was not beautiful and would never become as pretty and charming as the other girls of her age. During this time, Maya's low self-esteem progressed and turned into a serious problem.

The attitude of the children of the same age put its imprint: they teased and injured her - their attitude was also a result of the tendencies that existed in the contemporary society. Looking in the mirror, Maya saw an ugly girl and imagined she is a charming white young lady turned 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" (3).

However, deeply within, the girl possessed incredible strength and desire for spiritual growth. Moreover, a reader may be amazed about how kind and forgiving the heart of the small girl is: being teased by the children around her, Maya does not become hard-hearted and does not dream about revenge, "...They were going to run up to me and say, "...Forgive us, please...", and I would answer generously, " No, you couldn't have known.

Of course I forgive you" (Angelou 2). It is possible to say that Maya's inherent spiritual strength helped her apprehend the life-giving impulse that came

from the outside: Maya just needs understanding, compassion and support, <https://assignbuster.com/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-by-maya-angelou-three-stages-of-spiritual-revival-essay/>

and soon she fortunately finds in the person of Miss Flowers whom she communicated simultaneously with living in Stamps, Arkansas.

This period in Maya's life was considered to be really important for the girl. It is possible to state that the communication with Miss Flowers gave Maya an opportunity to enter the next stage of the formation of her spiritually strong personality. This woman showed Maya that there was nothing wrong with her race, that it was possible to be black and enjoy the life.

Miss Flowers demonstrated that she could enjoy what she was doing. Having given Maya a piece of advice to read aloud was a good idea. Reading in this way helped Maya to regain her voice which she had lost as a post-trauma effect of being sexually abused by Mr. Freeman. Reading helped the girl stop thinking about that terrible event, return to the reality and continue living. Thus, reading aloud brought the "caged bird's" voice back literally and in a figurative sense.

Another important step towards Maya's spiritual renaissance was attendance of the Church revival where the preacher's sermons gave her an opportunity to comprehend the situation in the society and interpret the challenges she faced from the new perspective. Listening to the sermons against white hypocrisy was a good chance for Maya to understand that the problem of racial discrimination bothered many people, that her attitude toward whites was shared among other black people in the society.

Particularly, she had an opportunity to change her opinion about white people whom she considered to be better than herself, learn about their

negative traits and see that many of their "virtues" are illusive: she was <https://assignbuster.com/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-by-maya-angelou-three-stages-of-spiritual-revival-essay/>

able to understand that being white did not mean being a good person, it just meant that one could have more rights. The sermons gave a girl spiritual strength and inspiration demonstrating that she was not alone and that there were people who understood her feelings.

This period of Maya's life brought her understanding of racial discrimination as injustice in the world. She realized that high self-esteem is possible even for a black girl. It is important to understand that the "crucial point" in Maya's life described in the novel is also not isolated from the social tendencies of those years: "the ice" has been "broken", and the African American community found its voices, the strong and spirited people who would be able to change the status quo.

These voices turn out to be powerful enough to awaken those who were "encaged" and equated life with suffering and misery. At the end of the novel, we see the Maya as a "bird" that has broken out of her cage and is enjoying her freedom.

Having passed two stages on the way to selfhood and maturation, which were recognizing a problem and getting support from the outside, Maya was ready to face the third stage, which is becoming independent and self-confident, and step into a new life free of her juvenile problems. However, she needed to be pushed to become strong and independent, and the life with her father gave her the necessary push.

Having come to her father, Maya expected to live a happy life in a loving family, but his attitude was absolutely opposite to the girl's expectations.

Cruel indifference was the only emotion the father "bestowed" Maya with, <https://assignbuster.com/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-by-maya-angelou-three-stages-of-spiritual-revival-essay/>

and the attitude of the father's new wife was the same. Tension and hatred were two feelings that Maya met in her new family.

A fight with Dolores, the father's wife, was the event which had broken the camel's back, and Maya left home. Living with homeless children in junkyard, she had to do her best to survive and to cope with the new challenges she faced. However, Maya understood that she was much stronger than she thought; her character became tough, and her spirit was strong.

If seeing Maya in the street at that period, it was impossible to recognize the small girl she was several years ago when her parents divorced. Maya was inspired with the desired freedom she at last got, and the "bird" who escaped was not afraid of demonstrating her voice any more: as a result, Maya became the first black streetcar conductor at the age of fifteen, made an independent decision about giving birth to her child.

"Under the tent of blanket... the baby slept touching my side" (Angelou 246), the reader sees the words of not a girl afraid of the world around her, but of a young responsible woman who has overgrown her fears, knows the sense of her life and is ready to take the next step.

"But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing" (Angelou 2011), looking at Maya's life and the stages of the formation of her personality, a reader can understand the meaning of her poem *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. These words are the main explanation for why Maya had become who she was: within her soul, she did not lose her ability to "sing".

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She could either accept the situation and give up, or struggle for her independence and selfhood. She chose the second option: Maya managed to turn into a strong personality by means of coming through three stages of maturation, which are recognizing the problem, accepting the spiritual support from the outside, and formation of spiritually strong personality.

It is important to not underestimate Maya's environment that significantly influenced the course of her life and her perception of herself: the society surrounding the girl encaged her, but later in the person of Miss Flowers and the preacher, it helped her break the vicious circle and find the way out. Their attitude and beliefs, as well as Maya's desire to become herself, helped her turn into a powerful woman and tell the whole world her story.

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