

# Character analysis of annie henderson (momma) essay sample

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In Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the reader is introduced to a vast ensemble of complex characters. Each character has a tremendous impact on Maya Angelou's life. One character who not only has great weight in Maya's life, but is also one of the most beloved and admired characters is Annie Henderson, Maya's paternal grandmother. She is defined by an unshakable faith in God, her loyalty to her community, and a deep love for everything she touches. Annie Henderson, affectionately referred to as Momma, has the greatest influence over Maya Angelou, from childhood to adolescence. Momma lives in Stamps, Arkansas, where she is dearly loved and respected by its residents. She is the proprietor of the only general store, the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store, in the black community. Momma has a strong entrepreneurial spirit. She has owned this store for some twenty-five years, starting it as a mobile lunch center and eventually building it in the heart of the black community. She lives in the back of the store with her handicapped son, Uncle Willie. Maya and her older brother, Bailey Jr., go to live with Momma when they were three and four years old.

Momma accepts them into her home with open arms and raises them for the majority of their childhood. Momma instills in them a sense of right and wrong and raises the children according to stern Christian values. One thing that makes Momma an important character is her unshakeable faith in God. Every morning Momma rises from bed (without an alarm clock) at four o'clock and starts her day with a prayer, asking for God to bless her home and everyone in it. When Momma is confronted with racism, she looks to God for guidance. An example of this is when Momma and Maya were outside of

the store on a fine day and they happened to notice three poor white-trash children coming down the hill. Momma sends Maya into the store to shield her from what would most certainly turn into an ugly situation. Momma turned to stone and “ did an excellent job of sagging from her waist down, but from the waist up she seemed to be pulling from the top of the oak tree across the street” and she began to moan a hymn.

When the three children approached Momma, they began to mock and torment her. Momma stood defiantly on her porch, giving no sign of care, and continued moaning her hymn, while the children proceeded mocking her. Finally the children tired and casually said their good-byes, disrespecting Momma further by referring to her by her first name. Maya witnesses this scene from inside the store and in the beginning was very angry, but when the charade was over, she felt pride in her grandmother. She did not fully comprehend what happened, but she was certain that her grandmother won the battle. This episode is the ultimate test on her faith in God because no matter what happened, she never lost her faith and continued to love her enemies. Another example that makes Momma an important character is her loyalty to her community. When the Great Depression “ seeped into the black community slowly, like a thief with misgivings” Momma devised a plan that not only would help her business flourish in the mist of this trying time, but also help out all those greatly affected by it. She came up with the brilliant idea to allow her patrons to turn in their welfare provisions in exchange for the goods that they were accustomed to before the Depression.

She put out a sign in front of her store proclaiming that “ one-five pound can of powered milk is worth fifty cents in trade, one-five pound can of powered eggs is worth one dollar in trade, and ten-number two cans of mackerel is worth one dollar in trade.” Not only did she devise this plan but she also loaned money to many people, black and white. The residents of the black community and Momma equally benefited from this system of barter. The residents benefited by being allowed to obtain what they were accustomed to from Mommas store and Momma benefited by being able to keep her store open while most businesses were closing down. Another example that makes Momma an important character is her deep love for everything she touches. Despite the affection she feels for her grandchildren, she cares more about their well being than her own needs. An example of the deep love that Momma displays is when Maya needs to see a dentist because of a toothache. The only black dentist in town is twenty-five miles away, so Momma decides to take Maya to Mr. Lincoln, a white dentist she loaned money to during the Great Depression. Momma feels that Mr. Lincoln owes her a favor.

When they arrive to the office, Mr. Lincoln turns them away, stating that he does not treat black patients. Momma reminds him of the loan that saved his business and he reminds her that the loan has been repaid. He also adds that he would rather “ stick his hands in a dog’s mouth” than treat Maya’s affliction. This infuriates Momma and she leaves Maya outside on the back porch, while Momma lets herself into the office. While inside, Maya imagines her grandmother transforming into a “ superhero” and giving Mr. Lincoln a thrashing. In reality, Momma is inside the office telling Mr. Lincoln that he

has not paid the ten dollars in interest. Mr. Lincoln protests, saying she never asked for interest before, but he ultimately pays the ten dollars and issues a receipt to seal the deal. Momma uses this money to take Maya to a black dentist that will treat her.

Momma compromises her sense of ethics in order to obtain the means to get her granddaughter treatment for her toothache. She realizes that it was wrong for her to ask for interest on a loan retroactively but she felt it necessary to sacrifice her ethics for the good of her granddaughter. Although *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has many complex characters, none are as complex as Momma. She has a tremendous impact on Maya's life. Through living by example, she instills in Maya an unshakeable sense of faith, loyalty to one's community, and shows Maya how to have compassion for everything she touches. Although Momma is stern in her values she conveys the colossal extent of her love for Maya throughout the book.