

"i know why the
caged bird sings" by
maya angelou report
(assessment)



The process of transformation for a protagonist is a core element in the autobiography genre of literature. The book " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is an example of a coming-to-age story of literary icon Maya Angelou. Consequently, the novel outlines the experiences of the main character from the time she is a child until she becomes a woman in her own right. In most coming-of-age stories, the plot is often the story of " a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order" (Leahy, 2004, p. 450).

In the case of Maya Angelou's " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", the social-cultural factors that impede the main character's development are also the elements that contribute to her coming of age. In the coming-of-age genre, there are vital stages in the course of the protagonist's development including the beginning/s of a journey, encountering a loss or a disappointment in a setting that is far away from home, and finally, the character encounters maturity after overcoming a set of internal and external struggles.

Another important aspect of character development is the struggle between his/her desires and needs in opposition to judgmental points of view that result from socio-cultural factors. In the grand scheme of things, the socio-cultural factors become the obstacles that Maya Angelou has to navigate through for her to gain accommodation in her society. The main character's journey ends when she finds the confidence to conduct a self-assessment within a new setting. In " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", the protagonist has managed to offer reconstructions of her personal history as she comes to age as a literary icon.

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In the course of her life, the protagonist has to triumph over various impediments such as rejection, poverty, racial discrimination, defilement, and rigid social principles. Her love of literature proves to be the starting point of her journey while her brother Bailey becomes the only stable aspect of her life. This essay tracks Maya's character development and the socio-cultural factors that shape this development in this coming-of-age biography.

The journey and the transformation of a character have to start somewhere. In " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", the development of the protagonist and the novel's plot starts with Maya's realization that the color of her skin sets her apart from her peers. When Maya is residing with her grandmother in rural Southern America, the trigger to her journey of self-discovery is the racism and indignation that is triggered by the color of her skin.

Consequently, " from the first moment Maya realizes that the color of her skin makes her different, to the self-satisfaction she feels giving birth to her son, the reader is led through her journey of growth and transformation" (Lupton, 1998, p. 34).

The narrator highlights this realization when she says, " because I was white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl" (Angelou, 1997, p. 4). These opening passages of the story mark the beginning of the protagonist's journey of transformation. First, the protagonist engages in a deep analysis of her African American heritage because even as a pre-teen she is already aware that her race is a source of both external and internal adversity. Later on in the book, Maya reveals that her process of self-hate begins when she realizes that she is ugly as per her society's standards. In an interview that <https://assignbuster.com/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-by-maya-angelou-report-assessment/>

the literary icon did in 1973, Maya claims that her childhood was a period in which she had to overcome adversity and exorcise demons that had plunged her into internal shame (Angelou & Elliot, 1989).

When analyzing the character development in “ I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”, the protagonist’s awakening is obvious from the very first chapters of the book. Consequently, the protagonist begins going through the process in which she overcomes the burdens she has to shoulder including her self-consciousness when it comes to physical appearance. However, it is important to note that these insecurities are more pronounced when Maya is out of her social confines.

For instance, the protagonist feels safer when she is around her brother Bailey because he often defends her when she is ridiculed. Interestingly, Bailey is the yardstick with which Maya uses to gauge her physical appearance. The narrator expresses this scenario by noting that, “ when I was described by our playmates as being shit color, he was lauded for his velvet-black skin...his hair fell in black curls, and my head was covered with black steel wool” (Angelou, 1997, p. 6). The character’s self-awakening is complicated by the fact that her mother and father are all good looking as per the standards of her days. The questions that go through Maya’s head are difficult about her origins and her inherent situation.

In any coming-of-age story, the main character often encounters obstacles just as things start to improve (Birch, 2001). At the height of her self-realization and her subsequent journey to self-discovery, Maya faces a series of challenges. First, the main character’s feelings of alienation are

compounded by her reunion with her father, who proceeds to disappear from her life almost immediately. Thereafter, Maya lives with her 'newly' found mother Vivian whose the only impact on the young girl's life is contributing towards the feelings of awkwardness.

For instance, from the time she meets her mother Maya is convinces that Vivian considers her and Bailey to be inconvenienced. The protagonist reveals that " I knew immediately why she had sent me away...she was too beautiful to have children...I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called ' Mother'" (Angelou, 1997, p. 15). Also, the fact that Maya feels that her mother's beauty stands in stark contrast with her mediocre looks makes the protagonist's stay in California to be a very uncomfortable exercise.

Another great challenge that Maya encounters in her journey of self-discovery in this coming-of-age story is her rape ordeal at the hands of her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. This unfortunate incident happens when Maya's mother irresponsibly leaves her behind when she goes out at night to gamble. When the rape happens, the main character has always begun appreciating and recognizing Freeman as a father figure. This ordeal becomes more complicated for the main character when her tormentor is killed mysteriously in connection to the rape. Consequently, the main character feels partly responsible for Freeman's death in addition to the sense of shame that she already carries as a rape victim.

Another important part of the protagonist's journey is the point where her desires and predispositions stand in stark contrast with her socio-cultural

settings. This continuous clash of desires and needs leads to personal growth for the protagonist (Wang & Yu, 2006).

For Maya, this happens when she suffers rape as a young girl and she declines to talk to anyone except her brother. As a selective mute, Vivian finds Maya too difficult to deal with and she sends her back to her grandmother in Stamps. Maya's return to the land of racism does not do any justice to her inner conflict. In the course of this conflict and subsequent personal growth, Maya discovers objects of refuge such as the books she is introduced to by Bertha Flowers (Angelou & Elliot, 1989). The protagonist's needs and desires are once again thrown into turmoil when she is sent back to California where she has to contend with unstable living conditions in her mother and father's abodes. This culminates in the protagonist becoming pregnant at the age of fourteen.

The final part of the journey in the development of a protagonist as he/she comes of age happens when "the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society... ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 294). In "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", the protagonist coming to age happens when she settles in San Francisco and becomes the first African American streetcar conductor. Furthermore, Maya realizes that people's opinions never bother her in any way. The culmination of the protagonist's character development is the birth of her son, which gives her a sense of belonging in a world that appears to conspire against her. Through the love that she shows her newborn son, Maya Angelou can able to finally love herself.

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The protagonist in “ I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” is compelling and offers a thrilling coming-of-age experience in this autobiography. She goes through growth in a pre-defined social hierarchy that puts her down as an African American woman. In the course of her journey, Maya encounters various challenges and personal losses. Eventually, the main character undergoes the process of maturity until she discovers her position in society.

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