

Skewed perceptions
in maya angelou's
novel "i know why the
caged bird sings"
essa...



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Maya Angelou's novel presents the events of her life as a young African-American woman. Although these events are factual, her description and interpretation of certain characters-even herself- may not be entirely accurate portrayals of people her characters represent.

Therefore, Angelou often depicts herself and other people either more critically or more leniently than an outside source might. Arguably, the author presents skewed perceptions because all the aspects of the people displayed in the novel are in accordance with her perceptions rather than the reality or other people's point of view.

Examples of this skewed perception are observed in the author's presentation of Maya and Mr. Freeman. Certain scenes with Maya's grandmother, Momma, are also slanted according to situation. Being so close to the topic, Angelou becomes an unreliable narrator, not because she lies, but because she can only tell the truth as she sees it. In this manner of narration, point of view portrays characters in skewed ways- harsh, lenient, and inconsistent.

Angelou's narrative readily takes on the critical self-evaluation of children. For instance, she is quick to point out her faults. Angelou takes particular care to recognize her gangly early years. She describes herself as always being too tall, too thin, with hair that manages to be more unreasonable than most (Angelou 2). Early on, Maya imagines herself waking " out of my black ugly dream" (2) and shaking off all signs of her heritage, effectively turning into the classic American standard of beauty: blond hair, blue eyes (2).

This harsh assessment is a testament to growing up in the America during the first half of the nineteenth century; Angelou might be predisposed at a young age to resent her and to admire the lighter aspects of beauty, because in minimizing the humanity of her race, society makes it seem ugly to a young girl. Later, when she is struggling with her place as a woman, not as an African-American, she admires the curves and the breasts of friend who sleeps over with her (she even interprets her envy as lesbianism at one point) (237).

Her brother, Bailey, has “ velvet black skin” and “ black curls” instead of “ steel wool” (17). She has a “ blindingly handsome” (45) father and a mother who looks like, but is prettier than, a movie star of their era (99). Besides feel inadequately beautiful in the presence of her family, it is true that part of her self-image comes from others in her town.

Another narrator may see her as budding, the girl who fell in love with Shakespeare (11), who was thoughtful to a fault, and had something to say to the world, not just something to show the world. Later, in another instance of decidedly brutal judgment, Maya encountered Mr. Freeman and went so far as to question her character (71); she wrongly reverses the role of victim to a man who does not deserve it.

With strong feelings of guilt and shame, Angelou's narration is surprisingly gentle on the figure of Mr. Freeman. Mr. Freeman was introduced to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by a seven-year-old with no pre-conceptions of him. She called him a “ big brown bear” (59) and remarked on his devotion

to her mother: " He simply waited for Mother and put his whole self into the waiting" (59). Presented as such, he seemed like a good man-dull but nice.

She revealed that, " He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go" (61). Even when Mr. Freeman faced jail time, and everyone around her knew what he did was wrong, Maya felt guilty for having promoted the act by feeling loved in his arms (61). When he died, Maya felt that she killed him; she recalls, " He was gone, and a man was dead because I lied" (72).

Another character, Momma, left varying impressions throughout the novel, depending on the time and the person who was present. Even though a white judge mistakenly flattered her, the " powhitetrash children" called Momma by her first name, Annie (22).

Maya admonished them in her narrative by asking, " Who owned the land they lived on? Who forgot more than they would ever learn?" In a quiet way, Maya realized her grandmother achieved a victory- she was happy. It did not matter that a few poor white kids tried to disrespect her. Talking to the woman who introduced Maya to new novels and modes of expression, Momma's colloquialism became blatant, blaring and shameful. She used " is" instead of " are" to refer to a plural set of people, and Maya is mortally embarrassed.

In front of the " powhitetrash", Momma seems stoic and impervious; next to Mrs. Flowers, Momma was a woman looking for approval. Finally, when the injustices of their community escalated, Momma reverted to her colossal status as one of the strongest women in Maya's world. Dr. Lincoln refused to treat Maya; he even insulted the granddaughter and grandmother when they <https://assignbuster.com/skewed-perceptions-in-maya-angelous-novel-i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-essay/>

go to see him by replying that he would rather treat a dog than an African American (160).

From Maya's point of view, Momma grew to be ten feet tall with eight-foot arms, and she forces Dr. Lincoln to leave town (162). Momma served Maya's impulse to combat the doctor's racism; she imagined Momma storming in the doctor's office and revealing her true powers to the man (162).

From an in-depth analysis of the autobiography, it is evident that the author's point of view does not necessarily reflect the reality because she describes her society and her problems based on her own perceptions. Therefore, it is quite accurate to argue that Maya Angelou presents skewed perceptions because all the aspects of the people displayed in the novel are in accordance with her perceptions rather than the reality or other people's point of view.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*. New York: Random House, Inc. 1970. Print.