

The meanest influence essay



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The Meanest Influence I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the autobiography of Maya Angelou's life. She tells the story of her life in Stamps, Arkansas as well as her life moving from place to place. She deals with many problems including prejudice in many forms.

Because of this prejudice, Maya must deal with the extremely influential actions of segregation, racism, and sexism. One of the largest factors that affected Maya's upbringing was segregation. Segregation is the separation of white people and African American people. Maya is forced to do everything separate from the white people when she was growing up in Stamps. She has to go to a different school and church, and even sit in a separate section in the movie theater. One of the most important statements that Maya says about segregation is when she says, " A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white " things"—white folks' cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women.

But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable" (49). This quotation clearly explains the way the segregation is so complete. She explains how her city really is white and black. On one side of her metaphorical " light shade" is the black area of town where everything is cheaper and not nearly as expensive because of the lack of opportunities that African American's have available to them. Maya sees glimpses of the much higher quality of life that the white people enjoy and she is in awe of it.

She does not understand how one set of people can have the entire splendor while her people must suffer. Another way Maya shows how the segregation in Stamps affected her is when she says, “ I remember never believing that whites were really real” (25). This statement describes the interaction that the two races have. As a small child, Maya only has a few glimpses of white people. These rare interactions make the white people seem like ghosts to her. She believes that they come and go as they please and that are not real human beings.

The fact that they have much nicer things also adds to this belief, because these extravagant things seem like things that will show up in heaven. The segregation of Stamps, Arkansas greatly affects relationships that Maya has with white people and the way that she views them. The main reason for the segregation between races is that white people believed that they were better than African Americans. This belief is called racism.

Racism shows up many times throughout the book and plays a large part in the way Maya is raised. Maya explains a very common understanding of people in Stamps when she exclaims, “ People in Stamps used to say that 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” (49). This statement explains how Negroes are treated in Stamps.

White people believe that Negroes are so much worse than the average white person, that they refuse to let negroes even eat an everyday delicacy like vanilla flavored but more importantly white colored ice cream. If an African American cannot even have the flavor of ice cream that he prefers,

he definitely will not be able to have the ability to become successful in a town like Stamps. Maya describes the way that Negroes have been treated for years during the championship boxing match of Joe Lewis. She explains the treatment when she says, “ This might be the end of the world.

If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than apes. True that we were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty and, unlucky and worst of all, that God Himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end” (135).

Maya explains that if Lewis lost this fight then the all of the accusations that have been laid over the years would then condemn the entire African American race. The fight could destroy the progress that Negroes have made in the fight for respect.

She explains how the fight is one of the biggest moments in the African American race’s history. Racism, that Maya encounters during her childhood, is common throughout The United States of America and it is one of the extreme forms of prejudice. Maya Angelou must encounter more than just racism while growing up, she has to encounter prejudice against her gender. Sexism is prevalent throughout Maya’s life. She explains how others view her gender when she says, “ The judge had really made a gaff calling a Negro woman Mrs. ” (48).

The judge says this during a trial when the defendant says that he hid in Mrs. Henderson’s store. Therefore, when he asked for Mrs. Henderson and saw it was a black woman he was embarrassed. Not only was he embarrassed that

he showed any form of respect to a black person, but he was even more embarrassed about showing respect to a black woman.

Most of the world already regards women as lesser human beings, but black woman are the lowest of them all. She explains this fact when she says, “The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence” (272). This statement explains the way the world looks at her. She has to deal with being a Negro and racism, but she also has to deal with sexism.

Despite all of these roadblocks, black women survive and might even become successful. Then she must continue to deal with the prejudice surrounding her. Growing up is hard for any child but Maya Angelou has to cope with segregation, racism, and even sexism. Despite all of the troubles that prejudice may have caused her, today Maya Angelou is a successful writer. She has made a name for herself and now she lives in a world that is much easier to live in, because of the downfall of segregation and the rising equality of women.