

I know why the caged  
bird sings, the novel  
by maya angelou  
essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Maya Angelou's novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* documents the trials and harrowing ordeals that she experienced growing up black, female and ostensibly orphaned in the southern United States in the 1930s.

Though classified as an autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reads as a larger historical record of 20th century racial oppression in general. The novel harkens back to a time when the black community in the United States suffered brutal economic and social subjugation, not to mention unrestrained violence, with minimal access to basic education, justice or human rights.

The following essay analyzes Chapter 19 of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. A pivotal moment in the book, the action follows the World Heavyweight Boxing match between the Joe Louis and Max Schmeling in New York in 1936. This particular match became a loaded symbol for both blacks and whites of the period. Louis held the hopes and dreams of every African American in the United States.

Equally, Schmeling represented white supremacy; a decisive victory against Louis was necessary to prove the validity of the socio economic apartheid that African Americans endured under the Jim Crow segregation laws. Angelou's chapter gives the reader access to a moment in American history when both the black and white communities engaged in a symbolic competition to determine who deserved to be in charge, and also details the ironic aftermath of Louis' victory.

It is vital to understand that at the time, the laws themselves viewed through modern eyes would appear unconscionably racist. These laws found their

<https://assignbuster.com/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-the-novel-by-maya-angelou-essay/>

justification in the widespread belief of the period that African Americans constituted a lower expression of humanity. Joe Louis therefore became a symbol for all African Americans of the period. They instilled their hopes in him to prove their legitimacy as humans, and to expose the injustice of the political system that oppressed them on the basis of skin color.

Thus, a loss by Louis signified much more than the outcome of a simple sporting contest; it essentially exonerated the whites and justified their behavior. In Angelou's words, if the black boxer Louis lost the match to the white boxer Schmeling, "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" (Angelou 135).

Angelou even elevates the stakes of the match to the spiritual realm when Maya admits that if Louis surrendered, it was tantamount to holy wrath. Louis's loss would mean that "God himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end" (Angelou 135). Chapter 19 demonstrates the symbolic significance of a boxing match that embodied one of the first covert forms of black social activism and rebellion in the 20th century.

Chapter 19 portrays a community unified in a desired outcome: the metaphorical trouncing of the white masters. Each member of the community holds a vested interest, whether boxing fans or not. "The last inch of space was filled, yet people continued to wedge themselves along the walls of the Store...Small children and babies perched on every lap available and men leaned on shelves or on each other" (Angelou 133).

Angelou describes the mood inside the store as “ apprehensive” yet “ shot through with shafts of gaiety” as the people listen anxiously to the boxing match on the radio (Angelou 133). Members of the community enjoy some moments of braggadocio courtesy of Louis’s superlative athleticism: “ I ain’t worried ‘ bout this fight. Joe’s gonna whip that cracker like it’s open season,” followed quickly by “ he gone whip him till that white boy call him Momma” (Angelou 133).

Jabs in the ring echo jabs at the white masters from community members who comment on the weakening Schmeling: “ some bitter comedian on the porch said, “ That white man don’t mind hugging that niggah now, I betcha” (Angelou 134). Maya herself ponders the significance of the match to her race. “ As I pushed my way into the Store I wondered if the announcer gave any thought to the fact that he was addressing as “ ladies and gentlemen” all the Negroes around the world who sat sweating and praying” (Angelou 134).

Each member of the community present in the Store feels every punch that Schmeling lands. “ My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped.

A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful” (Angelou 135). Chapter 19 shows a community emotionally invested in the outcome of the boxing match and seeking pride and self worth through the achievements of one of their own.

Interestingly and ironically however, despite Louis's victory, no visible change occurs. Maya's terse description of Louis's victory remains tacit, subdued and bordering on the indifferent: "Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black mother's son.

He was the strongest man in the world" (Angelou 136). Joe Louis has won, yes, however the victory means that the community now fears for its safety more, anticipating the vengeance of the affronted whites. Maya closes the chapter with a sorry admission: "It wouldn't do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world" (Angelou 136).

Chapter 19 of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* provides a literary chronicle of a time in American history when both the black and white communities fought symbolically through World Championship Heavyweight boxing. Though the black boxer Joe Louis won the match, Angelou's chapter illustrates the essentially hollow nature of Louis' victory, as the black community will now suffer reprisals from the white community as a result.

Angelou, M. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969. Print.