

Maya angelou and i know why the caged bird sings



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In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou uses the settings and people of her childhood to illustrate the development of her moral and social outlook on life. During this time in her life, she is moved from place to place and from family to family. It is this exposure to different ways of life that help Maya decide what kind of person she is going to be.

Religion is a major facet of Maya's development in Stamps. Reverend Thomas, the presiding elder over the district that Momma's church is in, comes to visit Stamps every three months. When he comes to town Momma always puts him up for the night and feeds him. Even though the family does not care for him much, Momma is still obliged to do this. It is her Christian duty, so Momma never questions fulfilling this obligation.

Momma is the most direct source of Maya's spiritual upbringing. She is the keeper of divine law for the Henderson family. Whenever she witnesses a spiritual infraction, her punishment is swift and thorough. These punishments are not dealt out of spite, but out of concern for Maya's eternal soul.

Momma's lessons are meant to keep Maya on the narrow road to the afterlife, the only true way for the black man to overcome his oppression.

Momma teaches with her actions, as well as her punishments. When Momma refuses to show any kind of reaction to the powhitetrash girls she teaches Maya an important lesson about strength, through her stoic refusal to be upset by these girls. Maya knows that " Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won." (Angelou 33.)

During her time in Stamps, Maya learns of the harsh reality of racial inequality, and from an early age, through most of the book, Maya follows

the examples and lessons taught to her there. Stamps consists of two separate parts of town, the black and white communities. These two communities developed through the rigid segregation that is found all throughout the South, not just in Arkansas. " In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really absolutely know what whites looked like" (25). Through this segregation Maya learns many of the racial standards that exist and must be followed in the South, during the depression.

Uncle Willie teaches Maya the perils of breaking social customs. Unlike Momma, he only punishes the children when they break a social taboo. The best example of this is when Uncle Willie whips them for laughing in church. This infraction was severe enough that Uncle Willie felt he should do the punishing. Uncle Willie teaches his lessons in other ways, sometimes without even knowing it. He was crippled as a child, but he has never let that hurt his pride. When teachers from Little Rock stop in at the store, he stands without his cane and talks to them. This shows Maya that even the worst adversity can be overcome, if only for an afternoon.

After Maya moves to St. Louis with her mother and Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman molests and rapes her. When he molests her she does not know what was happening and she thought he was being kind to her. Later, Mr. Freeman rapes her, and he tells her never to tell or he will kill Bailey. When Maya has to testify at trial, she relates that she " couldn't say yes and tell them how he had loved me once for a few minutes and how he had held me close" (85). Maya feels that she has been bad and this leads her to make a moral decision, to lie on the stand or to dishonor her

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family. Maya decides that her family's honor comes before honesty. This also leads to her decision to stop talking, instead of having to continue lying about the rape. Her unwillingness to talk eventually leads to her being shipped back to Arkansas.

After Maya returns to Stamps, Mrs. Flowers teaches her lessons of a more personal nature. Her lessons do not involve religion or society, but they are just as important to Maya's growth. Mrs. Flowers is the first adult to treat Maya as more than just a child. She teaches Maya to overcome her trauma and speak again, through making Maya recite poetry. This helps cultivate Maya's love for the written word and inspires a new love for the spoken word. It also teaches Maya that being black doesn't mean that she cannot be educated and that she " must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy." (99).

The lessons Maya is taught by the interactions of the black and white communities skew her views of race. When she first enters Whitefolksville, it's as if whites are a different species to her, like they are aliens and not another race. This idea is enforced when she goes to work for Mrs. Cullinan. Mrs. Cullinan has many extravagant things that Maya would never be able to own. Among these are things Maya never even knew existed, like a fork specifically for salad. " Soup spoons, gravy boat, butter knives, salad forks, and carving platter were additions to my vocabulary and in fact almost represented a new language" (106). Her employment leads to her first minor victory over white society. When Mrs. Cullinan refuses to use Maya's real name, and instead insists on calling her Mary, Maya breaks some of her good

china. That action gets her fired, but also makes Mrs. Cullinan call her by her real name.

While Maya lives with her mother in San Francisco, she decides to get a job as a trolley car conductor. There had never been a black woman conductor, of a trolley car, in San Francisco. When she goes to apply, the secretary puts her off and reluctantly tells Maya the personnel manager's name. It was not Maya's motivation to win a victory for black people, but at that moment Maya decides " I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD." (268). This event shows that Maya has decided to no longer be held back by her color. She has stood up and will not be put back down by any one.

Maya uses her new feelings of independence to fulfill her need to know about sex. When Maya becomes pregnant, she faces the greatest challenge to her moral code. She says, " the little pleasure I was able to take from the fact that if I could have a baby I obviously wasn't a lesbian was crowded into my mind's tiniest corner by the massive pushing in of fear, guilt and self-revulsion" (284). Momma's lessons about religion and Uncle Willie's lessons about proper conduct have been in vain; Maya is now a single pregnant black girl. Maya must overcome this guilt at being a single mother and show the strength to hide the pregnancy. The pregnancy must be hidden from her mother so that Maya can finish school and her mother will not make her drop out. After her son is born she must also develop the courage to raise him and realize that she is not going to hurt him. She learns through his birth that there is a price to pay for independence and sometimes it is a high price to pay.

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The stories Maya tells in this book show how that all her life experiences helped to shape her moral compass, and from them the reader gains an understanding of why Maya Angelou is who she is. To explain the strength, spiritualism, independence, and pride that she has gained from the people she has known Maya shows that Momma gave her God, Uncle Willie gave her the skills to live as a black person, and her mother gave her the freedom to assert her independence. Everyone who reads this book should come away with an idea of what helped give Maya the drive to become such an accomplished person.