

# Literary analysis of i know why the caged bird sings

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Thomas Lim December 9, 2010 English 2 Professor Padilla Themes of Racism and Segregation in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings By Maya Angelou The purpose of this paper is to introduce, discuss, and analyze the novel I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou. Specifically it will discuss the themes of racism and segregation, and how these strong themes are woven throughout this moving autobiography.

Maya Angelou recounts the story of her early life, including the racism and segregation she experiences throughout her formative years. With wit, sincerity, and remarkable talent, Angelou portrays racism as a product of ignorance and prejudice. However, she finds the strength to rise above this crippling condition. Angelou opens her biography with the dreams of a child, wishing she could be white in a white world. She writes, " Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy godmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, whit nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil" (Angelou 4-5).

Throughout her youth, she faces a world of prejudice and racism. Instead of embracing her heritage, she wants to be white, because the whites are the people with power and money. The whites were also the people that controlled the blacks and Angelou finds out, often the hard way, as her life continues. One literary critic notes, " Angelou's account of her childhood and adolescence chronicles her frequent encounters with racism, sexism, and classism at the same time that she describes the people, events, and personal qualities that helped her to survive the devastating effects of her environment" (Megna-Wallace 2). While this book chronicles a lifetime of <https://assignbuster.com/literary-analysis-of-i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings/>

racism and prejudice, Angelou's eloquent use of the language almost softens the blow by making it lyrical and beautiful to read, but the underlying rage and distress at the differences between blacks and whites is never far from the surface in this autobiography. Sent by her parents to live with her paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, Angelou and her brother witness firsthand the difficulties blacks have earning a living in the agricultural South, and his begins a slow-burning rage against racism and prejudice that will last her entire life.

She writes, " In cotton-picking time the late afternoons revealed the harshness of Black Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by nature's blessing of grogginess, forgetfulness and the soft lamplight" (Angelou 10). She shows that life was unbelievably difficult for those poor black people who had nothing to look forward to but work, debt, and despair, while it teaches her lessons about her own life, existence, and outlook. Another clue to this existence is the time when the sheriff warns Uncle Willie of an impending Ku Klux Klan raid. Willie hides in a vegetable bin, even though he is disabled and nearly incapable of molesting anyone. The blacks accept this treatment because they have to in order to survive. Nevertheless, even at her young age, Angelou resents the " benevolent" white man who warns her family but allows the behavior to continue.

Her bitterness at this and many other events colors her life and indicates just how deeply prejudice ran in the South, along with how it affected so many people's lives. She alludes to this when she writes, " All of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town and

answered there” (Angelou 19). It is clear that Angelou’s childhood has had a major affect on her life, her outlook, and her own views about race and prejudice. Angelou encounters an entirely different world when she and her brother move to St. Louis to live with her mother and her family. Here, she encounters black people like her mother and grandmother, who actually have some power in the community, and who live an entirely different life than the rural life in Arkansas.

They have jobs, make relatively decent money, and do not live in abject poverty. However, they are also violent, engage in illegal activities, and ultimately her mother’s boyfriend molests and then rapes Angelou. She is then threatened and told not to tell an adult if she wants to save her brother’s life. This leads to a long period of time where she refuses to speak to anyone. She writes of this time, “ There was an army of adults, whose motives and movements I just couldn’t understand and who made no effort to understand mine” (Angelou 72).

This may be one of the loneliest periods in Angelou’s life, but in some ways, it made her stronger and more able to survive in the white’s world, even though it was a terrible ordeal. After she stops speaking, Angelou and her brother are sent back to Stamps. Here, she begins to see the solace that many blacks feel in their resignation and acceptance of prejudice and racism. She writes, “ They showed me a contentment based on the belief that nothing more was coming to them, although a great deal more was due. Their decision to be satisfied with life’s inequities was a lesson for me” (Angelou 86). Angelou learned this lesson, but never quite became satisfied

with life's inequities; thankfully, she retained some of her rage regarding inequalities between white and black, which give great depth and emotion to her writing and her life.

The importance of education and knowledge is at the root of Angelou's flight from the South, and she realizes it. Critic Harold Bloom writes, " Marguerite is showered with affectionate attention and gifts, and not only from her family and immediate circle of friends" (Bloom 77). Befriended by Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Angelou learns to appreciate even more learning, literature, and manners, and understands that these are the keys to leaving the poverty of the rural South behind. She says of Flowers, " She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be" (Angelou 91). Flowers taught her to appreciate many things, including the value of an education, and when she graduates from high school, it is a time of celebration for the entire community.

Angelou writes, " Mrs. Sneed, the minister's wife, made me an undershirt to wear for graduation, and nearly every customer gave me a nickel or maybe even a dime with the instruction ' Keep on moving to higher ground,' or some such encouragement" (Angelou 169). The other blacks understand this too, but sadly, due to racism and prejudice, many blacks could not gain a decent education during this time, and in turn were doomed to low paying jobs that would not take them anywhere. Angelou notices this in St. Louis, where the educational gap is even more pronounced than in Stamps.

Many black children could not even read or write, even though they attended school. Scattered throughout the book are so many small acts by whites that seem innocuous, but in reality only add to Angelou's rage. These actions are shown to be unimportant to the whites. It also shows just how little they think of the blacks. One woman refuses to call her black servants by their given names, "renaming" them with her own names that are shorter and easier to pronounce. Unable to deal with Marguerite, she calls Angelou "Mary," and Angelou gets even by breaking some of the woman's favorite china.

Even as a child, Angelou knew who she was and who she wanted to be in the world; that world did not include racism and prejudice. Angelou's work is a work filled with racism, prejudice, and ignorance, but it is also an enduring work of survival and hope. Another critic writes, "Angelou survived [...] through strong support from the black church and particularly her family members who were always there to 'sustain and nurture' her (Woodard). Angelou's family clearly had just as large an affect on her as her experiences as a child. Much of her family was caring, loving, just, and strict at the same time.

Much of her strength and determination came from her family, who had the same values and taught them to her. They taught her to worship God, work hard, get an education, and hold her head up in the face of adversity. She then put all these lessons to good use in her adult life. Perhaps the best clue to this book's racial content is the fact that so many people wanted to ban this book from libraries and educational systems due to its "sexual content"

(Dority 36). Authors and journalists often mention the book when they write about “ Banned Book Week” in America (Holmes 1).

In fact, the book is on the American Library’s “ Top 100” list of the most challenged books in American libraries between 1990 and 2000 (Editors). Thus, writing in an honest and open way about her sexual abuse has outraged many whites and conservatives, and they have called for banning the book. The book also contains unmarried sex and an unwed pregnancy, which are all realities of life in the black and white worlds. The attempt of banning this book cannot be seen as anything but another example of prejudice and racism. This time against a woman who is attempting to share her life and warn other young girls at the same time. Probably one of the most eye-opening parts of the book is when Angelou acknowledges that for decades, blacks in the South complied to whites simply to survive, and they taught these tactics to each succeeding generation in an attempt to simply get along.

She writes, “ Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn’t cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one’s life” (Angelou 46). She graphically illustrates life in the South in the 1930s and 40s how it really grew into two very different and non-equal worlds between blacks and whites. Blacks existed in their world and whites existed in theirs; the whites allowed very little mixing in between. We do not think of life that way today, and yet, it is clear there is still very much prejudice and racism in our country. Many of

the barriers have been broken down, but many more still exist, even if they are unspoken or unacknowledged.

The whites have still the advantage in this country, even though blacks have made great strides. Books like this continue to illustrate how difficult life has been for blacks in America, and how strong they have been to face adversity and demand their equal rights and freedoms. A reviewer puts it even more eloquently. He writes, " The question of race was everywhere. While I knew or suspected that Whites in the rural South may have had a difficult time viewing Blacks as human beings, it had never occurred to me that Black people might fear that White people were not really the same species as themselves" (Anonymous).

That is an interesting point, and one that indicates the immense divide between whites and blacks in the South, and how it colored all aspects of Angelou's early life. In conclusion, Angelou's autobiography is moving, emotional, funny, and tragic all at the same time. Throughout this look back at her early life, she shows how racism and prejudice colored the world of her youth, and how she managed to rise above them and become one of the world's premiere authors. This book also shows that even though she has managed to become famous and well known, racism and prejudice still exist today, and they have the ability to color a person's life, take away their dignity and self-respect, and make them question their value and place in society. Ultimately, this book shows that racism and prejudice are truly evil and must be eradicated for society to become truly equal, fair, and just.



Angelou's uncle Willy sums up the vast difference between the races late in the book. He says, " They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared" (Angelou 192). It is difficult not to cringe when reading this book, while being conscious of all the inequalities blacks have had to face in their struggle to be free and equal.

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I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. New York: Random House, 1969. This is the primary source for this paper, and it is a book. This source must be reliable, as it is the primary source document for this subject matter, but it is also the primary autobiography of Maya Angelou, and thus, it serves as the most important work of this paper. The source is also reliable because it is clear, even though Angelou may add some fictional details to this work, that she clearly remembers her youth and growth as a time of change, development, and learning, with racial prejudice and repression as a part of her youth.