

I know why the caged
bird sings



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“ Those who improve with age embrace the power of personal growth and personal achievement and begin to replace youth with wisdom, innocence with understanding, and lack of purpose with self-actualization...” – Bo Bennett I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings is the first in a series of autobiographical works by Maya Angelou, an African American author and poet. Published in 1969 the novel captures and amplifies the socio-political zeitgeist in Black America.

It is a bildungsroman that follows a young African American girl with an inferiority complex on her psychological and characteristic development to become a more socially aware and proactive individual. An individual beginning to adopt or preparing to adopt the attitudes that Bo Bennett discusses in the above quotation. This essay will explore the extent to which Angelou achieves self-actualisation in the novel.

Without a sound understanding of what self-actualisation is, it is easy to assume that Angelou finishes as a healthy, assertive and thus ‘ self-actualised’ individual. However, according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation is achieved after fulfilling the preceding stages of development; physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, and esteem. This leads the reader to realise that Angelou does not entirely achieve self-actualisation by the end of the novel.

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...” – Page 291, Chapter 34 As a result of the tripartite crossfire Angelou is disillusioned

as a child and uncomfortable in her own skin. The young Maya believes herself to have blonde hair and blue eyes “ like one of the sweet little white girls who were everyone’s view of what was right with the world. ” ¹This starkly contrasts to her “ black ugly dream” ¹ which is in fact her reality. Black’ and ‘ ugly’ are interchangeable as well as synonymous to May. Society has dogmatised the existence of black to be ugly and wrong.

The reader can see that not only does Maya dissent with reality but she and society have a low esteem of herself. In the preface, Angelou writes “ I didn’t come to stay” ² this foreshadows the key themes of abandonment and displacement which are prevalent throughout the novel. She is shuttled around seven homes between the ages of three and sixteen and her increasingly fleeting sense of belonging is conveyed in chapter one “...wearing tags on our wrists which instructed - To Whom It May Concern. ³ This objectification and dehumanisation reiterates the idea that other members of society held Maya in low esteem and disregard. Their indifference towards her undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on her ability to progress. Such that when presented with yet another fresh start in San Francisco Maya cannot escape her anxieties and is preoccupied wondering whether “ Mr. Freeman’s name would be mentioned...” ⁴ rather than maintaining a fresh appreciation of her opportunity.

Whilst in San Francisco, Angelou remarks “ the air of collective displacement...tended to dissipate my own sense of not belonging. ⁵ The displacement that Maya experienced under Mr. Freeman is cemented so solidly in her that six years on it becomes an identifying cord between her and San Francisco. To what extent does Angelou achieve self-actualisation in

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I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings? Maya's lack of esteem and a sense of belonging hinder her from becoming confident and accepting her reality. This limits her ability to be a proactive realist who can recognise and solve her problems leaving a large gap between Maya's current stage in development and ultimately self-actualisation.

Howbeit it is arguable that Angelou does make significant progress towards self-actualisation in later chapters. In chapter 32 Maya's lack of prejudice (a trait of self-actualisation) allows her to identify closely with the society established in the junkyard. " I was never again to sense myself so solidly outside the pale of the human race. " 6 The junkyard community is noticeably multicultural and egalitarian opportunity by contrast with the wider American society. Her acceptance into such a mixed group proves an unusual experience, considering her isolated childhood.

The fact that Angelou can so strongly accord in such a society implies that Angelou in turn had come to the realisation that no one race or sex should be put on a pedestal above another. This new experience of diversity and tolerance whetted Angelou's appetite to challenge racism and pursue equality in chapter 34. Angelou was extremely tenacious in seeking a position on the streetcars of San Francisco in chapter 34. " I would like to claim an immediate fury which was followed by the noble determination to break the restricting tradition.

This resistance to racism proves Angelou's increased confidence in herself and what she can achieve. Her lack of subservience to prejudice is a concrete and quintessential example of how she becomes self-actualised. In

the final chapter Maya gives birth to a son. She has not matured enough to know the value of her son and thus her “ possession becomes mixed up with motherhood” 8 This son; the fruit of her dubiousness elicits further doubt in Angelou. She reckons her capabilities as a mother are limited and meagre. Throughout the novel Maya experiences peaks and troughs from 3 year old girl to 16 year old mother.

By the end of the novel her development is cyclical and she is back to where she began in terms of confidence and knowledge of self. I personally think she has not become fully self-actualised therefore. The novel ends at a point where the reader can no longer observe Maya’s development, but that does not necessarily mean it should be assumed that she stopped developing there, there is still a chance for her experiences throughout the novel to become an integral contributing factor to her further development. “ It doesn’t matter how slowly you go-so long as you do not stop. ”- Confucius