

Booknotes for I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Title: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Literary Period / Country: Contemporary, 1930's America

Author: Maya Angelou

Authorial Background:

Maya Angelou was born at Long Beach, California. When she was three, she and her brother Bailey moved to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with her grandmother, Annie Henderson. Maya's father, who had abandoned her and her brother, returned when she was seven and together they moved to St. Louis, Missouri to live with their mother. It was in the city a year later when she was exposed to rape and violence, and moved back to Stamps. She developed an interest in reading, poetry, and melodrama during her teenage years, and after working as a fifteen-year-old Black female conductor, she had her first baby at seventeen. Because of her lifelong interests in the literary arts, Maya Angelou has written several autobiographies: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, and Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas. She has also written three poetry collections, Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die, Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well and the famous And Still I Rise. She has participated in numerous theatrical productions, and wrote the original screenplay for the movie Georgia. In the sixties, she was requested by Martin Luther King to be the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; in 1975, the Ladies Home Journal "Woman of the Year Award" was presented to her. She has received honorary degrees from four universities including Wake Forest University, and is a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Film Institute.

Setting:

Late 1920's to the early 1940's. There are three major settings. Maya's home is in Stamps, Arkansas, a small community with a split population of Blacks and Whites. At a time when hate crimes and hard labor were prevalent, Maya, her brother, and her grandparents ran a general food store to earn a living. In Stamps, life was strict and demanding. The second setting, in St. Louis, introduced a brighter, more fanciful life. Socially, there was more activity and enjoyment in St. Louis than in Stamps. A final setting is San Francisco, California, where Maya moved to during the second World War.

Theme:

There are several themes involved. One is the eventual triumph of the oppressed. As hinted by the story's title, no matter how much Maya and her family suffered under labor, hate, and scorn, Annie Henderson still kept her faith in God, and Maya overcame her misfortunes to become a caring young woman. Another major theme is that people are prone to forget their hardships and will take life for granted. Although Maya's family in Stamps can barely make a living, the Baxters, blessed with a home and authority in St. Louis, drive around, go to parties, and take it easy. Maya's parents easily forget the recent history of their race.

Characters:

Marguerite Johnson / Maya Angelou: She is the main character and the narrator of the autobiography. A stringy, ashy, unattractive Black girl with an undesirable, muddy skin tone,

she is underdeveloped physically and acquires a deep voice late in her teens. She is motivated by her need to understand why her family must suffer to make an inferior living, and her need to make sense of all the confusion she has experienced. Through an unsteady childhood and influential schooling, Maya later becomes the first Negro woman to work as a conductorette, earns her independence, and begins to raise her own child.

Bailey Johnson: He is Maya's brother, one year older than her, with handsome light brown skin. He is Maya's most trusted person, and his parents favor him more than Maya. Because he feels he must live up to his father's expectations, Bailey is motivated to prove he is a man, even though he may still be underaged. At the end, he leaves his family and becomes a merchant marine.

Annie Henderson / Momma: She is a grandmother, a heavy-set Black woman with a strong will and Christian values. She is resilient against the pressure and degradation of White society, and keeps herself composed while praying to God for a better life. Her only motivation is to raise her grandchildren well so she can live to see them grow up. "I try, with the help of the Lord, Sister Flowers, to finish the inside just like I does the outside," she says (80). Finally, she has to leave Maya in southern California to take care of Uncle Willie back in Stamps.

Uncle Willie: Maya's crippled grandfather. He was dropped in very early childhood, resulting in considerable paralysis of parts of his left body. Because the left side of his face always drooped and he was lame, Maya was sometimes hesitant to look at him. He knew that others made judgments on him based on his disability, and was motivated to preserve his dignity. However, the only time he ever disguised his disability was when a white man entered his store, and he wanted to prove that he was still a man.

Vivian Baxter / Mother: The mother of Maya and Bailey. She was glamorous, with an almost white complexion, and slender. She had a charming personality, and supported Maya whenever she needed advice. Although she hadn't taken care of Maya when she was younger, she wanted her daughter to grow up to be an independent, respectable woman. That was her motivation, and she supported Maya as she found a good job and had her first child.

Bailey Johnson, Sr.: The father of Maya and Bailey. He was handsome and courteous, charming, but cynical. He used highly eloquent grammar mostly to make a lasting impression of himself on people's minds. He favored his son over Maya, and was a powerful influence in Bailey's life. Bailey Sr. was tired of trying to pursue grandeur in a society that couldn't nurture him, and so he briefly went to Mexico, where he gained a sense of superiority to the Mexicans. He became less of a role model for his son, getting drunk and finding women other than his wife. After Maya leaves her father's house, Bailey Sr. Disappears from the story.

Mr. Freeman: He was Vivian Baxter's boyfriend. In several fits of insanity he molested Maya and finally raped her before he was promptly murdered by Vivian's fellow mobsters. He was influential to Maya because he represented how people can become distraught from oppression and begin to take advantage of their friends.

Author's Unique Style:

Because the book is an autobiography, Maya Angelou uses first-person observer as her point of view. Diction and syntax are used to separate two groups of people or Maya from the rest of Black society. "At school. . . we might respond with "That's not unusual." But in the street, meeting the same situation, we easily said, "It be's like that sometimes." Words like "whitefolksville" and "powhitetrash children" are examples of diction representative of Maya's beliefs that time (22). There are also many moments of direct discourse where she shares her

opinions of her experiences. “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. . . I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of the other. . . As a species, we were an abomination. All of us” (152). There is another meaningful example of direct discourse, discussing the fight between Joe Louis and a white man.

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. (113)

There is also the use of metaphors, mostly brief but some extended, comparing the actions of white society with familiar ideas: “Charity don’t go around saying ‘I give you food and I give you clothes and by rights you ought to thank me. . . It don’t say, ‘Because I pays you what you due, you got to call me master’” (106-107).

Quotes:

1. They bobbed their heads and shook their slack behinds and turned, one at a time: “ ‘Bye, Annie. . . Momma never turned her head or unfolded her arms, but she stopped singing and said, “ ‘Bye, Miz Helen, ‘bye, Miz Ruth, ‘bye, Miz Eloise. I burst. . . How could Momma call them Miz’” (26)? This quote is important because it reveals Annie’s character and shows the extent of indignity she is forced to suffer.
2. “Glory, glory, hallelujah, when I lay my burden down” (27). This presents Annie’s extraordinary faith in God, and her dissatisfaction with her life.
3. I smiled at [Mrs. Cullinan]. . . “She’s a sweet little thing, though.” “Well, that may be, but the name’s too long. I’d never bother myself. I’d call her Mary if I was you” (90). Here, Maya is disgraced and the honor of being called her right name is taken from her. The quote also shows Mrs. Cullinan’s lack of understanding and apathy toward Maya and her other Black maids.
4. “As I understand it, charity vaunteth not itself. . . Charity don’t go around saying ‘I give you food and I give you clothes and by rights you ought to thank me. . . Charity don’t say, ‘Because I give you a job, you got to bend your knee to me. . . It don’t say, ‘Because I pays you what you due, you got to call me master.’ It don’t ask me to humble myself and belittle myself. That ain’t what Charity is” (106-107). This is an extended metaphor describing the white man’s actions in terms of charity in the preacher’s sermon.
5. “Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all the whitefolks in their beds and that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and that Harriet Tubman had been killed by that blow on her head and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the Santa Maria. . . We should all be dead. . . a pyramid of flesh with the whitefolks on the bottom, as the broad base, then the Indians with their silly tomahawks and teepees and wigwams and treaties, the Negroes with their mops and recipes and cotton sacks and spirituals sticking out of their mouths. The Dutch children should all stumble in their wooden shoes and break their necks. The French should choke to death on the Louisiana Purchase (1803) while silkworms ate all the Chinese with their stupid pigtailed” (152-153). This quote demonstrates the insensate fury that Maya felt toward everyone. Utterly hating her life, she expresses a dissatisfaction not only towards white society, but to all races, indicating that race was not her worry; her worry was the attitude people had for one another.

Glossary:

1. Direct discourse: rhetorical technique in which the author interrupts narration to speak directly to the reader. “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises” (151).
2. Metaphor: technique in which two unlike things are compared without using like, as, than, seems, or appears; one thing is spoken of in terms of the other. “Charity don’t go around saying ‘I give you food and I give you clothes and by rights you ought to thank me. . . I don’t say, ‘Because I pays you what you due, you got to call me master’” (106-107).
3. Diction: word choice selected to create a certain tone. The “rickety-rackety” chairs produce an image of sound (107).
4. Dialect: language that is slightly altered and is characteristic of a certain geographical or social region, such as “Lemme have a hunk uh cheese and some sody crackers” (6).
5. Parallelism: the repetition of grammatical structure, as “At the river I stand--I stand, guide my feet--guide my feet, take my hand” (106).
6. Alliteration: the repetition of the first letter of words. “World War II started on a Sunday afternoon when I was on my way to the movies” is an example, repeating the W and S sounds (177).