

Critical Response: Childhood Trauma

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The Portrayal and Perception of Childhood Trauma in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and *Maus*

In our exploration of trauma as depicted in literature, we delved into two poignant works: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. These books offer a profound examination of both personal and collective anguish. This essay compares the traumas experienced by the focal characters of each work, examines how the authors handle these traumas within their narratives, and reflects on the public objections to the depictions of such delicate subject matter.

Both Angelou and Spiegelman devote significant portions of their narratives to exploring the traumatic experiences of their characters, doing so with deliberate literary and artistic choices that not only underscore the depth of the trauma but also enable a nuanced understanding of its impact. Meanwhile, the controversies surrounding these works often overlook the essence of their portrayal of trauma, a reflection of broader societal discomforts.

In *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou encapsulates the trauma of racism and abuse with a poignant depth that honors the character's experiences. She writes, "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" (Angelou 272). The narrative space afforded to the protagonist's inner world allows readers to grasp the magnitude of her trauma. Similarly, Spiegelman's *Maus*, through its

graphic novel format, visually maps the psychological scars of the Holocaust, with Vladek's harrowing recounting of survival becoming an unforgettable visual journey.

The expansion of trauma in these narratives seems intentional, aiming to mirror the characters' realities. For instance, Angelou's detailed portrayal of Marguerite's rape and its aftermath is not just a recount of events but a deliberate expansion of the narrative to embody the character's struggle to voice and overcome her trauma. In contrast, Spiegelman's choice to anthropomorphize his characters as mice and cats is a narrative technique that, paradoxically, brings a stark human reality to the forefront, suggesting that the author is delving into the complex interplay of memory, trauma, and identity.

However, the comparison necessitates a closer examination of the characters' processing of their trauma. Angelou's Marguerite finds solace and empowerment in the act of mutism and later in spoken word, indicating an evolution in her trauma processing, which is intricately woven into the narrative. Spiegelman's Vladek, on the other hand, manifests his trauma through obsessive behaviors and survivalist mentality, a portrayal that remains consistent and unrelenting throughout the narrative. Both authors, therefore, not only acknowledge the trauma but also the ongoing process of living with it, which is as significant as the trauma itself.

The objections to *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* often center around its explicit content, particularly its depiction of rape and racism. According to Dawn B. Sova in *Literature Suppressed on Social Grounds*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been "challenged repeatedly because it is said to 'preach bitterness and hatred against whites,' because it contains language that some find offensive, and because of its explicit depiction of molestation and teenage pregnancy" (Sova 147). Similarly, *Maus* faced challenges due to its unflinching portrayal of the Holocaust. In both cases, the objections seem less concerned with the characters'

experiences of trauma and more with the broader implications of exposing such raw realities. Angelou and Spiegelman's works force us to confront uncomfortable truths, and the objections can be seen as a societal reflex to shy away from such confrontation.

The resistance to these books often comes from a hesitance to fully confront the difficult truths they present. Angelou's forthright writing and Spiegelman's graphic visuals can be unsettling, likely because they challenge familiar, more comfortable views of history and personal hardship. Some of the criticism they face might be less about the books' actual content and more about a preference for less provocative storytelling. Critiquing these books for their content and appropriateness may be, in essence, an effort to avoid acknowledging the true depth and discomfort of the traumas they depict.

In conclusion, Angelou and Spiegelman use their literary and artistic genius to grant the trauma of their characters the narrative space it deserves, offering readers a profound insight into the characters' experiences. While often rooted in concerns about content and appropriateness, the objections to these works inadvertently underscore the prevailing discomfort with addressing and acknowledging trauma. As these narratives demonstrate, it is only through facing such discomfort that we can begin to understand and empathize with the pervasive effects of trauma.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Random House, 1969.

Sova, Dawn B. *Literature Suppressed on Social Grounds*. Rev. ed, Facts On File, 2006.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus : a Survivor's Tale*. New York : Pantheon Books, 1986-1991.