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Scorched Prison Bars

When a young child grows up under a repressive regime and are treated as second class citizens, it warps their self-view and their self-worth. To break out of mental shackles of internalized prejudice, one must face and acknowledge the external prejudices as well. For example, Maya Angelou’s novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, acts as autobiography in that it addresses Maya young self struggling during the 1930‘s, Jim Crow era Arkansas, her trauma as a rape victim, and her fight for self worth as a young black woman. Angelou’s life was an **external conflict** to gain higher education and show pride in her womanhood. Unfortunately, Maya’s low self-esteem and survivor guilt began early as a toddler, with parental abandonment and colorist body shame instilled in her by southern life.

Maya Angelou’s novel focused on a very young Maya, **the protagonist,** and her struggles to love herself as a young black girl. As young toddlers in the 1920s, Maya and her older brother, Bailey, were sent off by their divorcing parents from Long Beach, California, to a little segregated town called **Stamps, Arkansas**. While there, the two children lived and worked for the grandmother (Mama) and their crippled Uncle Willis at Mama’s family owned supply store. Mama’s supply store had run-ins with Ku Klux Klan while Maya was a child, but Mama’s store was also a major source of loans during the the Great Depression for white and black people alike. Meanwhile, Maya grew to hate herself by age 8 for being abandoned by her parents, and blames it on her not being being ‘white enough’ like her biological mother or her older brother, Bailey. Then their estranged father came out of the wood-works and promised to whisk them away with him to California, where he was a mid-level office clerk. This ended up being a lie, as he actually dropped them of with their equally estranged, unnamed, Mother in St. Louis, Missouri. While in St. Louis, Maya and Bailey spent the year surrounded by their Mother’s power hungry, ruthless criminal family. The family involve themselves in police politics, gambling, and prostitution rings. Bailey loved being with his mother, but Maya was as as indifferent with her as their father. Their mother’s current boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, was a imposing man who groomed and raped the 8 year old Maya twice, the second time violently. While Maya was hospitalized from the physical trauma, Freeman was sentenced to jail. However, Maya’s family had enough influence in the police to have Freeman beaten and killed before he could serve his time. Maya felt guilt ‘causing’ this man’s death, began to blame herself for Bailey falling out with their mother, and became functionally mute. Their mother’s family grew frustrated with Maya’s ‘lack of family gratefulness’ for their actions, and sent the siblings back to their grandmother in Arkansas.

Maya spent the next three years growing up in Stamps struggling with feelings of guilt, dirtiness, and sin. It took more than a year for her to speak with others again, but eventually she made friends with a classmate, Louise, and an older woman, Mrs. Flowers. She graduated from the 8th grade tied for highest honors, only to have an unannounced, white politician speak at their graduation with belittling promises of more funding for their athletics. Racism seemed to be growing more intense in Arkansas, as a dentist in debt to Mama refused to help Maya with a cavity and more unseen lynching were happening. The **rising racial violence** culminated when Bailey was on an errand for Mama through the white part of town. He was forced to move a washed up, dead black man by white police officers, and returned home trembling at how *inhuman* white people treated blacks. Bailey tried and failed to runaway from home to what he dreamed was a better place like California. Seeing the coming storm, Mama and Uncle Willie sold off some of their supply stock, and during the **denouement**, properly shipped the siblings to live in California with their father.

As a result of so much social and parental neglect, Maya and Bailey, **the protagonists**, felt that they did not deserve love. Early on in the novel, Maya always thought that she could not possibly be her brother’s sister,for being so negro and therefore ugly. Thus, a reader can predict that she will try to runaway from home. For instance, everyone in Stamps complemented Bailey for his handsomeness and resemblance to their mother (passably white), but Maya never gets compliments for her looks. Maya’s impostor syndrome runs so deep, that she fears she was a pity adoption, as "She was [Bailey’s] Mother Dear ... were more alike than she and I, or even he and I. They both had physical beauty and personality, so I figured it figured" (Angelou 30). Maya did eventually feel that she earned her brother’s love by proving her intellectual might and growing a mutual love of books alongside Bailey, so she never ran away. Her brother, however, did try to run from Stamps. Bailey was also a victim of the savagery of segregation, as he had to first hand witness the dehumanization of black men. Later on in the novel, Bailey came back traumatized from the white part of town. A reader can predict early on that Bailey will likely grow to resent white people because he witnessed a lynching or other racist brutality. Bailey was often Mama’s errand boy to the white part of town by the time he was 12, and because of this he grew dangerously comfortable around them. One day after running errands for Mama, Bailey returned in shock, and Maya feared the worst, for "Why is he saying the baby prayer? We had been saying the ‘Our Father, which art in heaven’ for years" (Angelou 57). It turned out that Bailey witnessed a cruel desecration of a black man’s body and genitals, and so he did run away on the freight train for two weeks, hoping to escape the south. He couldn’t understand nor accept the south’s level of hatred for him, a 12 year old boy. Angelou illustrated that the plight of these two children illustrates the **hopelessness and dread** that the oppressive southern regime used to keep blacks and women in their supposed place.

The American South during the 1930‘s fought against progressive social change via normalized brutal violence against those who were not supposed to have a voice. Angelou **tone** showcased that **religion** was rare positive outlet for poor southern black communities, as they were promised cosmic retribution. Angelou’s novel permeated the **despair** the black community felt every waking moment. For example, while going to a mega gathering of different Christian denomination in town, Maya felt, to her surprise, the community’s raw resentment. Maya at a jaded 10 years old resonated with the thinly veiled jabs at the white community given by a pastor, as "The mean whitefolks was going to get their comeuppance.... They had been refreshed with the hope of revenge and the promise of justice" (Angelou 63). Angelou sympathized with the idea of a just god who would make things right, but seemed skeptical, even caustically pessimistic, at the idea of such a god existing and merely abandoning his black children. However, Angelou suddenly justified her mild apostasy being in part due to her hopelessness, her lack of salvation, when she was raped. Maya was still raised by and respected her deeply Christian grandmother (Mama), and thus felt survivor’s guilt and **sinfulness** and wondered if **god hated her** so at to allow her to be raped in St. Louis. Before the incident in St. Louis, Maya only hated herself for being black, but afterward she also began to feel dirty for ‘becoming a woman,’ as hospital staff cruelly put it. When Mr. Freeman, the Mother’s boyfriend, brutally assaulted the 8 year old Maya, he threatened "'If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey.' ... I couldn't understand why he wanted to kill my brother. Neither of us had done anything to him. And then. Then there was the pain" (Angelou 38). Even after her mother’s gangster family exacted extrajudicial vengeance, Maya still blamed herself for Freeman’s death, fearing that she brought this on herself, that she might have been ‘asking for it’ at such a young age. Maya’s internalized sexism was a major roadblock to forgiving and loving herself for merely being a victim, but thankfully family and friends helped her save herself through books.

Although Maya did eventually grow to love herself again after St. Louis, if I had been Maya, I would have held some of that antipathy away from myself and to my irresponsible maternal family. For instance, if I had been Maya’s Mother, I would have been **more responsible** and sent them back to Stamps, Arkansas, as my life in **St. Louis was too dangerous** to have my children around. It became clear during the **exposition** that the Mother’s life was constantly involving dangerous, criminal elements. The siblings’ Mother directly and consistently put her children in danger, moving them around the dwelling of several shady characters, as "Occasionally Mother, whom we seldom saw in the house, had us meet her at Louie's. It was a long dark tavern at the end of the bridge near our school, and was owned by two Syrian brothers" (Angelou 32). Clearly, Mother cared more about her family’s power and reputation running brothels than the safety of her children, but even so Maya, herself, needed to be less critical of her inaction as a mere child. As easy as it is to say with an adult’s hindsight, young Maya should have accepted her role as a victim of a crime, and not an instigator of sexual misconduct or murder. If I were Maya, I would have accepted that I was helpless, and not responsible, for both the actions of Freedman and my maternal uncles. Even years later, Maya feared that people in Stamps might discover, and blame her, for the ugliness of her trauma or her family’s brutal actions. When trying to hide the reason for their being sent back to Arkansas, Maya tragically feared that "I didn’t want Uncle Willie, whom I loved in my fashion, to think of me as being sinful and dirty" (Angelou 45). Angelou clearly portrays her difficulty in overcoming survivor's guilt, but both of these characters suffered because of misplaced responsibilities. However, Maya was the one who unfairly carried the brunt of that moral burden.

While both the Mother and Maya had warped senses of personal responsibility, they were in polar opposite directions, as the adult ‘mother’ failed as a parent, and Maya erroneously believed she failed as a child. The sibling’s ‘mother’ was completely **not a mother** to her children, not only because she she did not raise them, but also because she did not protect them from her recklessness. ‘Mother Dearest,’ as the fawning Bailey called her, may have been physically beautiful, but morally she was corrupt and deplorable for sweeping the rapist she invited into her home under a rug. As soon as Maya showed no sign of overcoming PTSD from the incident, ‘Mother’ wanted no part in the healing or recovery of her daughter. Even worse, the sibling’s mother ignored all of the red flags that Freeman was a dangerous, uncompassionate man, as "Mr. Freeman moved gracefully, like a big brown bear, and seldom spoke to us ... He never read the paper or patted his foot to radio. He waited. That was all" (Angelou 35). While Mother dodged her responsibilities and normalized her association with dangerous men, Maya was internalizing far too much of this and began isolating herself. Maya had misguided, **misogynistic** feelings against herself and her sex in general. Maya blamed herself for not resisting against a powerful, intimidating man because she had been taught that girls are the keepers of their own purity. Maya viewed herself as ‘ used goods,’ justifying that she, at such an age, somehow seduced Freeman and that the rape was "One lie surely [that] wouldn't be worth a man's life ... Obviously I had forfeited my place in heaven forever, and I was as gutless as the doll I had ripped to pieces ages ago" (Angelou 42). Maya does eventually overcome her victim blaming, but only once she opens up again and made friends via reading literature with Louise, a classmate, and Mrs. Flowers. She had to relearn what being a young girl was, after her innocence was taken. While Maya’s uphill struggle to free herself from the **internal conflict** was arduous, but she did not succumb to blinding fear that her oppressors might be right.

Angelou’s novel was woven with the inherent fear that the racist and sexist exclamations of the cruel world were true. Angelou’s **central theme** in this autobiography was to showcase the **personal and intellectual strength of a black woman** against the accusations of being inferior. When young Maya was graduating from 8th grade after 3 years of being back in Stamps, she tied for valedictorian. She was proving to the world the value of her intellect and right to personhood. Maya rejoiced at all of her studying, of her growth from being a self-isolating mute, that "Whitefolks would attend the ceremony, and two or three would speak of God and home, and the Southern way of life ... IN the Store I was the person of the moment. The birthday girl" (Angelou 84). Even this milestone was trampled on by a white politician in power, but Angelou’s plight was just a symptom of an intentional and malicious attack on disenfranchised black people in the south. One researcher in the subject of this systemic control is Hoelscher, a professor of Geography and Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, who studied the impact of Jim Crow laws following the Post-Construction of the South. He showed that the ‘ghettofication’ and dividing lines of the town of Stamps, Arkansas were as intentional as they were malicious. Everywhere throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* white, well to do areas are described as so different, paved, and proper so as to be alien to young Maya. The physically and cultural segregation of Stamps was to intentionally create animosity between the white and black communities, as "The second pattern was ... in these postbellum railroad and lumber centers, black housing typically concentrated in one or more racially separated areas far away from the 'respectable' white neighborhoods" (Hoelscher 671). Maya had to see Bailey struggle, and barely survive, a terrifying ordeal in the landscape of whiteness where he still failed the ‘one drop rule,’ but they both eventually understood the wrongness, but present reality, of this caste system. The entirety of segregation showcased a conflict of **woman vs society**, as Maya had to survive, but not accept, the rules of engagement. She survived the Southern regime, tattered but stronger for it.

Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ends on a somber note that societal wrongs should be fought, but can be lived with and not allowed to destroy one’s character. Angelou’s earliest years were horribly molded by her parental abandonment, her abuse and fall into trauma induced isolation, the parallel struggles of her brother Bailey as a black, male adolescent. Even so, she survived and escaped this barred prison. As a Ingrid Pollard, an editor of the *Feminist Review*, summarized, "Maya Angelou demonstrates how the harsh **struggles and happiness** of her life which might have defeated a less courageous person, have in fact provided an opportunity for her to bloom” (Pollard 115). By the end of the novel, Angelou went on her journey to the west, with a burning love and pride in her heart, and a desire to be there through thick and thin for her brother and herself.

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