

= Themes in Maya Angelou 's autobiographies =

The themes encompassing African @-@ American writer Maya Angelou 's seven autobiographies include racism , identity , family , and travel . Angelou (1928 ? 2014) is best known for her first autobiography , the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) . The rest of the books in her series are *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) , *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* (1976) , *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) , *All God 's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) , *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) , and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) .

Beginning with *Caged Bird* and ending with her final autobiography , Angelou used the metaphor of a bird , which represented Angelou 's confinement resulting from racism and depression , struggling to escape its cage , as described in the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem " *Sympathy* " . Angelou 's autobiographies can be placed in the African @-@ American literature tradition of political protest . Their unity underscored one of Angelou 's central themes : the injustice of racism and how to eat it . According to scholar Pierre A. Walker , all of Angelou 's books described " a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression " . In the course of her autobiographies , her views about Black @-@ white relationships changed and she learned to accept different points of view . Angelou 's theme of identity was established from the beginning of her autobiographies , with the opening lines in *Caged Bird* , and like other female writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s , she used the autobiography to reimagine ways of writing about women 's lives and identities in a male @-@ dominated society . Her original goal was to write about the lives of Black women in America , but it evolved in her later volumes to document the ups and downs of her life .

The theme of family and family relationships ? from the character @-@ defining experience of Angelou 's parents ' abandonment in *Caged Bird* to her relationships with her son , husbands , friends , and lovers ? are important in all of her books . As in American autobiography generally and in African @-@ American autobiography specifically , which has its roots in the slave narrative , travel is another important theme in Angelou 's autobiographies . Scholar Yolanda M. Manora called the travel motif in Angelou 's autobiographies , beginning in *Caged Bird* , " a central metaphor for a psychic mobility " . Angelou 's autobiographies take place all over the world , from Arkansas to Africa and back to the US , and span almost forty years , beginning from the start of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King , Jr .

= = Overview = =

The themes encompassing Angelou 's seven autobiographies include racism , identity , family , and travel . She is best known for her first autobiography , the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) , which was nominated for a National Book Award . Angelou did not write *Caged Bird* with the intention of writing a series of autobiographies ; critics have " judged the subsequent autobiographies in light of the first " . Her series also includes *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) , *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* (1976) , *The Heart of a Woman* , (1981) , *All God 's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) , *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) , and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013) . Angelou 's autobiographies have a distinct style , and " stretch over time and place " , from Arkansas to Africa and back to the US . They take place from the beginnings of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King , Jr .

According to scholar Mary Jane Lupton , Angelou 's autobiographies have been characterized as autobiographical fiction , but Lupton disagrees , stating that they conform to the genre 's standard structure : they are written by a single author , they are chronological , and they contain elements of character , technique , and theme . Angelou 's use of themes , especially that of racism , connects all seven autobiographies . One of her goals , beginning with *Caged Bird* , was to incorporate " organic unity " into them , and the events she described were episodic , crafted like a series of short stories , and were placed to emphasize the themes of her books .

= = Racism = =

Angelou used the metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage described in the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem " Sympathy " throughout all of her autobiographies ; she used the metaphor in the titles of both I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and her sixth autobiography A Song Flung Up to Heaven . Like elements within a prison narrative , the caged bird represented Angelou 's confinement resulting from racism and oppression . This metaphor also invoked the " supposed contradiction of the bird singing in the midst of its struggle " . Reviewer Hilton Als observed that Angelou 's witness of the evil in her society , as directed towards Black women , shaped Angelou 's young life and informed her views into adulthood . Despite this , scholar Lynn Z. Bloom asserted that Angelou 's autobiographies and lectures , which he called " ranging in tone from warmly humorous to bitterly satiric " , have gained a respectful and enthusiastic response from the general public and critics .

I know why the caged bird sings , ah me ,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore ,
When he beats his bars and would be free ;
It is not a carol of joy or glee ,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart 's deep core ,
But a plea , that upward to Heaven he flings ?
I know why the caged bird sings .

1st stanza of Paul Lawrence Dunbar 's poem " Sympathy " .

Reviewer Daisy Aldan of World Literature Today criticized Angelou for harboring " a fanatic hostility expressed toward all white people " , but writer Lyman B. Hagen disagreed , stating that like Angelou 's friend and mentor Langston Hughes , Angelou explained and illuminated the condition of African Americans , but without alienating her readers . Angelou promoted the importance of hard work , a common theme in slave narratives , throughout all her autobiographies , in order to break the African @-@ American stereotype of laziness . Her description of the strong and cohesive Black community of Stamps demonstrated how African Americans have subverted repressive institutions to withstand racism . Angelou evolved from wishing that she could become white in Caged Bird to later shedding her self @-@ loathing and embracing a strong racial identity .

Critic Pierre A. Walker placed Angelou 's autobiographies in the African @-@ American literature tradition of political protest written in the years following the American Civil Rights Movement . He emphasized that the unity of Angelou 's autobiographies underscored one of her central themes : the injustice of racism and how to fight it . Angelou 's biographies , beginning with Caged Bird , consisted of " a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression " . This sequence led Angelou , as the protagonist , from " helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle resistance , and finally to outright and active protest " throughout all seven of her autobiographies . Angelou changed her views in the course of her autobiographies about Black @-@ white relationships and learned to accept different points of view . It was changes in how she regarded race , and her views of white people , that provided Angelou with freedom . According to Hagen , one of Angelou 's themes was that humans tend to be more alike than different .

" Human beings are more alike than unlike " .

Maya Angelou , 1994 (Scholar Mary Jane Lupton has called this one of Angelou 's most well @-@ known sayings .)

In Angelou 's third autobiography Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas , in which she married a white man , she came into intimate contact with whites for the first time ? whites very different from the racist people she encountered in her childhood . She discovered that her stereotypes of whites were developed to protect herself from their cruelty and indifference . As critic Dolly A. McPherson indicated , " Conditioned by earlier experiences , Angelou distrusts everyone , especially whites . Nevertheless , she is repeatedly surprised by the kindness and goodwill of many whites she meets , and , thus , her suspicions begin to soften into understanding . " Selwyn Cudjoe wrote that in Singin ' and Swingin ' , Angelou effectively demonstrated " the inviolability of the African American personhood " , as well as her own closely guarded defense of it . In order for her to have any positive relationships with whites and people of other races , however , McPherson insisted that Angelou " must examine and discard her stereotypical views about Whites " . Scholar Lyman B.

Hagen agreed and pointed out that Angelou had to re-examine her lingering prejudices when faced with the broader world full of whites, but it was a complex process because most of Angelou's experiences with whites were positive during this time. Angelou moved between the white and Black worlds, both defining herself as a member of her community and encountering whites in "a much fuller, more sensuous manner". Angelou's experiences with the Porgy and Bess tour, as described in *Singin' and Swingin'*, expanded her understanding of other races and race relations as she met people of different nationalities during her travels. All these experiences were instrumental in Angelou's maturity and growth, and served as a basis for her later acceptance and tolerance of other races.

Angelou's fourth autobiography *The Heart of a Woman* opened with Angelou and her son Guy living in an experimental commune with whites, in an attempt to participate in the new openness between Blacks and whites. She was not completely comfortable with the arrangement, however; as Lupton pointed out, Angelou never named her roommates. For the most part, Angelou was able to freely interact with whites in this book, but she occasionally encountered prejudice similar to earlier episodes, like when she required the assistance of white friends to rent a home in a segregated neighborhood. Lupton stated that compared to her other books, Angelou had come "a long way" from her interactions with whites and people of other races. Hagen called the descriptions of whites and the hopes for eventual equality in this book "optimistic". Angelou continued, however, her indictment of white power structure and her protests against racial injustice that had been a theme throughout all her books. Instead of offering solutions, however, she simply reported on, reacted to, and dramatized events.

Angelou became more "politicized" in *The Heart of a Woman*, and developed a new sense of Black identity. McPherson argued that even Angelou's decision to leave show business was political, and regarded this book as "a social and cultural history of Black Americans" during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Angelou saw herself as a historian of both the Civil Rights movement and the Black literary movement of the time. She became more attracted to the causes of Black militants, both in the U.S. and in Africa, to the point of entering into a relationship with South African freedom fighter Vusumzi Make, and became more committed to activism. She became an active political protestor during this period, but she did not think of herself in that way. Instead, the focus was on herself, and she used the autobiographical form to demonstrate how the Civil Rights movement influenced one person involved in it. According to Hagen, her contributions to civil rights as a fundraiser and SCLC organizer were successful and effective.

According to Lupton, "Angelou's exploration of her African and African-American identities" was an important theme in her fifth autobiography *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. The alliances and relationships with those she met in Ghana contributed to Angelou's identity and growth. Her experiences as an expatriate helped her come to terms with her personal and historical past, and by the end of the book she was ready to return to America with a deeper understanding of both the African and American parts of her character. McPherson called Angelou's parallels and connections between Africa and America her "double-consciousness", which contribute to her understanding of herself.

In *Traveling Shoes*, Angelou was able to recognize similarities between African and African-American culture; as Lupton put it, the "blue songs, shouts, and gospels" she has grown up with in America "echo the rhythms of West Africa". Marcia Ann Gillespie and her colleagues, writing in *A Glorious Celebration*, the book published in 2008 for Angelou's 80th birthday, agreed, stating that Angelou recognized the connections between African and American Black cultures, including the children's games, the folklore, the spoken and non-verbal languages, the food, sensibilities, and behavior. She connected the behavior of many African mother figures, especially their generosity, with her grandmother's actions. In one of the most significant sections of *Traveling Shoes*, Angelou recounted an encounter with a West African woman who recognized her, on the basis of her appearance, as a member of the Bambara group of West Africa. These and other experiences in Ghana demonstrated Angelou's maturity, as a mother able to let go of her adult son, as a woman no longer dependent upon a man, and as an American able to "perceive the roots of her identity" and how they affected her personality.

Also in *Traveling Shoes*, Angelou came to terms with her difficult past, both as a descendent of Africans taken forcibly to America as slaves and as an African American who had experienced racism. As she told an interviewer, she brought her son to Ghana to protect him from the negative effects of racism because she did not think he had the tools to withstand them. For the first time in Angelou's life, she did not "feel threatened by racial hate" in Ghana. The theme of racism was still an important theme in *Traveling Shoes*, but she has matured in the way she dealt with it. As Hagen stated, Angelou was "not yet ready to toss off the stings of prejudice, but tolerance and even a certain understanding can be glimpsed". This was demonstrated in Angelou's treatment of the "genocidal involvement of Africans in slave @-@ trading", something that has often been overlooked or misrepresented by other Black writers. Angelou was taught an important lesson about combating racism by Malcolm X, who compared it to a mountain in which everyone's efforts were needed to overcome it.

Angelou learned about herself and about racism throughout *Traveling Shoes*, even during her brief tour of Venice and Berlin for the revival of *The Blacks*, the play by Jean Genet that Angelou had originally performed in 1961. She revived her passion for African @-@ American culture while associating with other African Americans for the first time since moving to Ghana. She compared her experiences of American racism with Germany's history of racial prejudice and military aggression. The verbal violence of the folk tales shared during her luncheon with her German hosts and Israeli friend was as significant to Angelou as physical violence, to the point that she became ill. Angelou's first @-@ hand experience with fascism, as well as the racist sensibilities of the German family she visited, "help [ed] shape and broaden her constantly changing vision" regarding racial prejudice.

= = Identity = =

The theme of identity was established from the beginning of Angelou's series of autobiographies, with the opening lines in *Caged Bird*, which "foretell Angelou's autobiographical project: to write the story of the developing black female subject by sharing the tale of one Southern Black girl's becoming". Angelou and other female writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s used the autobiography to reimagine ways of writing about women's lives and identities in a male @-@ dominated society. Feminist scholar Maria Lauret has made a connection between Angelou's autobiographies, which Lauret called "fictions of subjectivity" and "feminist first @-@ person narratives", with fictional first @-@ person narratives (such as *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French and *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing) written during the same period. Both genres employed the narrator as protagonist and used "the illusion of presence in their mode of signification". Scholar Yolanda M. Manora agreed, stating that Angelou broke stereotypes of African @-@ American women by describing these images and stereotypes, and then disproving them, which set the stage for Angelou's identity development in her later autobiographies.

When I try to describe myself to God I say, "Lord, remember me? Black? Female? Six @-@ foot tall? The writer?" And I almost always get God's attention.

Maya Angelou, 2008.

Angelou, as a woman, demonstrated the formation of her own cultural identity throughout her narratives. Angelou presented herself as a role model for African @-@ American women by reconstructing the Black woman's image throughout her autobiographies, and has used her many roles, incarnations, and identities to connect the layers of oppression with her personal history. Angelou's themes of the individual's strength and ability to overcome appeared throughout Angelou's autobiographies as well. The women Angelou presented in her autobiographies, especially *Caged Bird*, influenced the woman Angelou became. According to Manora, three characters in *Caged Bird*, Angelou's mother Vivian, her grandmother Annie Henderson, and Mrs. Flowers (who helps Angelou find her voice again after her rape), collaborated to "form a triad which serves as the critical matrix in which the child is nurtured and sustained during her journey through Southern Black girlhood".

Angelou's original goal was to write about the lives of Black women in America, but her goal

evolved in her later volumes to document the ups and downs of her own life . Angelou 's autobiographies had the same structure : a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time and how she coped within the context of a larger white society , as well as the ways that her story played out within that context . Angelou , especially in her third autobiography , *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* , successfully demonstrated the integrity of the African @-@ American character as she experienced more positive interactions with whites . In Angelou 's second volume , *Gather Together in My Name* , Angelou was concerned with what it meant to be a Black female in the U.S. , but she focused upon herself at a certain point in history . Writer Selwyn Cudjoe said regarding her second autobiography : " It is almost as though the incidents in the text were simply ' gathered together ' under the name of Maya Angelou . "

= = Family = =

The theme of family and family relationships (which scholar Mary Jane Lupton called " kinship concerns ") , from the character @-@ defining experience of Angelou 's parents ' abandonment to her relationships with her son , husbands , friends , and lovers are important in all of her books . Angelou 's description of close familial relationships , such as her relationships with her parents and son (which Lupton called " the mother @-@ child pattern ") was the only unifying theme that connected all of her autobiographies . Angelou 's concept of family was affected by Maya and Bailey 's displacement at the beginning of *Caged Bird* . Motherhood was a theme that connected all of Angelou 's autobiographies , specifically her experiences as a single mother , a daughter , and a granddaughter . Lupton believed that Angelou 's plot construction and character development were influenced by this mother / child motif found in the work of Harlem Renaissance poet Jessie Fauset .

Scholar Yolanda M. Manora insisted that three women in *Caged Bird* ? the " hybridized mother " of Angelou 's grandmother , her mother , and her friend Mrs. Flowers ? taught her how to be a mother to her son Guy . Although Angelou 's grandmother died early in the series , in her third autobiography *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* , Angelou quoted her many times throughout the series . Angelou 's desire for security for Guy drove her to marry Tosh Angelos in *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* , and drove many of her decisions , job choices , and romantic relationships . Scholar Siphokazi Koyana stated that due to Angelou 's race and economic background , her " experience of motherhood is inseparably intertwined with work " . According to Koyana , " ... Black motherhood always encompassed work " . Angelou 's long list of occupations attested to the challenges , especially in her second autobiography *Gather Together in My Name* , she faced as a working teenager mother , which often led Angelou to questionable decisions . Koyana stated that it was not until Angelou was able to take advantage of opportunities , such as her role in *Porgy and Bess* , when she was able to fully support her and Guy , and the quality of her life and her contribution to society improved . It was impossible , however , for Angelou to become successful without her extended family to provide childcare for her ; i.e. , when she left Guy in the care of his grandmother in spite of the conflict and guilt she experienced as a result (something Koyana insisted was imposed on her by the larger society) , a pattern established in *Caged Bird* by her own mother when she left Angelou and her brother in the care of Angelou 's grandmother .

The woman who survives intact and happy must be at once tender and tough .

Maya Angelou , *Wouldn 't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* (1993)

Black women autobiographers like Angelou have debunked the stereotypes of African @-@ American mothers of " breeder and matriarch " and have presented them as having more creative and satisfying roles . According to scholar Sondra O 'Neale , Angelou 's autobiographies presented Black women differently from their literary portrayals up to that time . O 'Neale maintained that " no Black woman in the world of Angelou 's books are losers " , and that Angelou was the third generation of intelligent and resourceful women who overcame the obstacles of racism and oppression . Koyana recognized that Angelou depicted women , which Koyana called her " womanist theories " , in an era of cultural transition , and that her books described one Black woman 's attempts to create and maintain a healthy self @-@ esteem . Angelou 's experiences as a working

@-@ class single mother challenged traditional and Western viewpoints of women and family life , including the nuclear family structure . Angelou described societal forces that eventually expanded to the white family , and that Angelou 's strategies of economic survival and experiences of family structure enabled Black families to survive economically .

= = Travel = =

Travel is a common theme in American autobiography as a whole ; as McPherson stated , it is something of a national myth to Americans as a people . This was also the case for African @-@ American autobiography , which was rooted in and developed out of the slave narrative . Like those narratives that focused on the writers ' search for freedom from bondage , modern African @-@ American autobiographers like Angelou sought to develop " an authentic self " and the freedom to find it in their community . Scholar Yolanda M. Manora called the travel motif in Angelou 's autobiographies " fluidity " . This fluidity began in *Caged Bird* and was a metaphor for her psychological movements and growth caused by her displacement and trauma throughout the book , something Manora stated Angelou had to escape in order to transcend it . As Hagen stated , Angelou structured *Caged Bird* into three parts : arrival , sojourn , and departure , with both geographic and psychological aspects .

As McPherson stated , " The journey to a distant goal , the return home , and the quest which involves the voyage out , achievement , and return are typical patterns in Black autobiography . " For Angelou , this quest took her from her childhood and adolescence , as described in her first two books , into the adult world . The setting in Angelou 's first two autobiographies was limited to three places (Arkansas , Missouri , and California) , but the " setting breaks open " in *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* to include Europe as she traveled with her Porgy and Bess company . McPherson saw Angelou 's third autobiography as " a sunny tour of Angelou 's twenties " , from early years marked by disappointments and humiliation , into the broader world ? to the white world and to the international community . This period described " years of joy " , as well as the start of Angelou 's great success and fulfillment as an entertainer . Lupton stated that Angelou 's travel narrative in *Singin ' and Swingin ' and Gettin ' Merry Like Christmas* , which took up approximately 40 percent of the book , gave the book its organized structure . Angelou 's observations about race , gender , and class made the book more than a simple travel narrative . As a Black American , her travels around the world put her in contact with many nationalities and classes , expanded her experiences beyond her familiar circle of community and family , and complicated her understandings of race relations .

Angelou continued to expand the settings of her autobiographies in her subsequent volumes . *The Heart of a Woman* had three primary settings ? the San Francisco Bay Area , New York , and Egypt ? and two secondary ones ? London and Accra . Lupton stated that like all of Angelou 's books , the structure of *The Heart of a Woman* was based upon a journey . Angelou emphasized the theme of movement by opening the book with a spiritual (" The ole ark 's a moverin ' ") , stating , " That ancient spiritual could have been the theme song of the United States in 1957 " . This spiritual , which contained a reference to Noah 's ark , presented Angelou as a type of Noah and demonstrated her spirituality . Angelou also mentioned Alan Ginsberg and *On the Road* , the 1951 novel by Jack Kerouac , thus connecting her own journey and uncertainty about the future with the journeys of literary figures . Even though the reason Angelou traveled to Africa is an eventual failed relationship , she made a connection with the continent , both in this book and in the one that follows it , *All God 's Children Need Traveling Shoes* . As Lupton stated , " Africa is the site of her growth " . Angelou 's time in Africa made her more aware of her African roots . Lupton insisted , however , that although Angelou journeys to many places in the book , the most important journey she described is " a voyage into the self " .

The travel motif is a recurring theme in *Traveling Shoes* , as evidenced in the book 's title , but Angelou 's primary motivation in living in Africa , as she told interviewer George Plimpton , was " trying to get home " . Angelou not only related her own journey of an African @-@ American woman searching for a home , but the journeys of other Black expatriates at the time , whom McPherson compared to the descriptions of white expatriates in Europe in the 1920s by Ernest Hemingway and

Henry James . Angelou 's issues were resolved at the end of *Traveling Shoes* when she decided to return to America . She called her departure a " second leave @-@ taking " , and compared it to the last time she left her son with his grandmother in *Singin ' and Swingin '* when he was a child , and to the forced departure from Africa by her ancestors . As Lupton states , " Angelou 's journey from Africa back to America is in certain ways a restatement of the historical phase known as mid @-@ passage , when slaves were brutally transported in ships from West Africa to the so @-@ called New World " . Even though Angelou 's final autobiography *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* took place in her home country , the travel motif continued . Reviewer Patricia Elam described *Song* as a " journey through an authentic and artistic life " .