**Introduction**

When Random House released Caged Bird Sings in 1970, the book was highly praised by book reviewers as one of best pieces of literature that year.  The book was nominated for a National Book Award and received many accolades from other black and white writers.  Sidonie Ann Smith’s 1973 scholarly review of Caged Bird Sings in the magazine Southern Humanities Review captures the tone of what many reviewers and readers had already said about the book: “Angelou's genius as a writer is her ability to recapture the texture of the way of life in the texture of its idioms, its idiosyncratic vocabulary and especially in its process of image-making” (375).  The book resonated with Smith and many other critics because of its open and frank discussion of rape, racism, and the struggles of a young black woman coming to terms with her own self-identity in society.

When the book hit the stands in 1970, it had been seven years since Martin Luther King, Jr., had given his famous “I Have a Dream” speech before a crowd of 250,000 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and less than a decade had passed since the country had lost a strong civil rights supporter, President John F. Kennedy, to gunfire at a Dallas parade. The Voting Rights Act, which prohibited states from using literary tests and other methods to keep blacks from voting, had passed in 1965—the same year black activist Malcolm X was assassinated.  The black community was still mourning the loss of its other charismatic leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., who was shot in April 1968 on the balcony of a Memphis hotel.

As African-Americans were fighting for civil rights, racial injustice, and equality, the feminist movement was gaining momentum.  Women were pushing for equal rights, more independence, equal pay, and the right to be heard. Women’s activist Betty Friedan helped the women’s movement with her 1963 bestseller, The Feminine Mystique, which sparked a national debate on the role of women as housewives.  It was a historic moment when twenty National Organization of Women leaders disrupted hearings of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments in 1970 to demand that the Equal Rights Amendment be heard by the full Congress.

            In 1970 the American public was still coming to terms with the civil rights movement and the feminist movement. Angelou’s book brought racism to the forefront and helped the American public understand the character and quality of black life during the 1920s and 1930s.

There were other books during this period that gave readers a similar taste of what it was like growing up in the South, books such as Anne Moody’s Coming of Age in Mississippi and Malcolm X’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X, but Angelou’s book did not have the same amount of rage or biting racism the other books had. Like Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning To Kill a Mockingbird, published in 1960, Angelou’s book appealed to the white reader because it did not have an angry voice and did not hold the same grudges about slavery that the other books carried.

            Though Caged Bird Sings does not hold any grudges about slavery, it still reveals the harsh realities of segregated life in the South that, in turn, prompted a critical fascination with the book on several levels, she chose to write in a subtle tone about segregation and not in an angry tone as other African-American authors have done.  One level of observation deals with the character narration concerning the personal life of the author during the 1920s and 1930s.  One can read the story in several ways—one way being as a historical, socio-economic narrative in which the narrator presents African-American life in rural Arkansas in contrast with city life in St. Louis and San Francisco.

            Since its publication, critics have praised the book for its poignant portrayal of the economic hardship and social injustices of racism in America during the Depression.

**I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and the autobiography**

I know ‘Why the Caged Bird Sings’ is written in the autobiographical tradition. Like most autobiographies it is written, is in first person and is chronological. A number of critics have classified Angelou's five volumes as autobiographical fiction and not as autobiographies, for the apparent reason that Angelou amplifies the autobiographical tone by using dialogue--by having another character or characters speak to each other. The writing techniques Angelou uses in her autobiographies are the same as the devices used in writing fiction: vividly conceived characters and careful development of theme, setting, plot, and language. She follows in the tradition of many African American writers such as Richard Wright who have written serial autobiographies. Her autobiography spans 5 volumes and chronicles several events in her life.

Critics have opined that autobiographies have to be a presentation of truth, in characterization, in relationship to the world and in point of view. Angelou has presented her life, keeping in mind people’s interest and the fictional framework of her autobiography. But she has faithfully recorded the times that she lived in with the fear of the Ku Klux Klan and lynching, which form the backdrop of her novel. She has furthered the genre of autobiography as she comments on the events that happened in her life from an African American female perspective. This perspective was silenced and suppressed for centuries as only men were heard or published. She records the triple bind of race, sex and class that she encounters in her life. Angelou's autobiographies, documented with historical personages and events, verify the changing attitudes towards race and gender from 1928 to 1965. As a woman, Angelou tells truths about all women's lives. For black women the neglect of their histories and their literary works has been devastating, although a change occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when many other black women exploded into bookstores and lecture halls, telling their stories. Angelou addresses her own issues--about rape, marriage, talent, community, responsibility to her son--from the perspective of an African American woman. In so doing she introduces material not very often developed by autobiographers, black or white.

Angelou’s work like most autobiographies is a mixture of several literary traditions. Her work echoes the prison, slave and travel narratives. Prison autobiography is a record of the lives of African American activists as they fought for racial equality. These texts document their lives in the prison and their voices are seen as protest literature that spearheaded the movement towards equality. Angelou's autobiographies share elements of the prison narrative, but on a symbolic rather than an actual level. The central image of the caged bird, presented throughout the five volumes, represents her imprisonment within the racist structure of Stamps, Arkansas, with the Ku Klux Klan and its unequal educational opportunities. After she is released from Stamps, the racial discrimination continues, but with less intensity. She becomes aware of other forms of imprisonment--through drugs, marriage and the economic system.

**Caged Bird and the Slave Narrative**

African American autobiography has its historical roots in still another genre, the slave narrative. Through this method of speaking and writing, slaves recalled the harrowing journey from Africa to America and the atrocities of plantation life. The slave narrative is structured in the form of a journey, from Africa to America or to some other location in the African diaspora - a term used to describe the scattering of black people during the slave trade. Traditionally, the slave narrative traced the journey of a slave or former slave of African descent in his/her quest for freedom. Freedom for many narrators meant more than release from the imprisoning system of slavery; it also meant the opportunity to write or print their stories and at the same time denounce the institution that had bound them.

Of the written narratives, many celebrated the achievement of literacy--of being able to read and write--as a major theme. Literacy was equated in the slave's mind with liberation, whereas illiteracy was a form of bondage enforced by slave owners and overseers.

Angelou's narrative combines two distinct characteristics of the slave narrative: It demonstrates both the narrative of movement -journey, and also the narrative of confinement – imprisonment, a theme common to all imprisoned slave narrators, but having a special significance for women, who were more concerned with the problems of sexual exploitation, rape, loss of dignity, and forsaken children than were male slaves because under the slave system the nuclear family structure was discouraged or forbidden or disrupted when a slave was sold.

Like the nineteenth-century female slave narrator, Maya Angelou charts her journey toward autonomy. Abandoned by her parents, raped by her mother's boyfriend, separated from her grandmother, the young Maya is imprisoned and unable to claim her own identity. Her journey toward self-discovery takes her from ignorance to knowledge, from silence to speech, from racial oppression to a liberated life, as she travels from Stamps, Arkansas, to Accra, Ghana, and back to America (in her later autobiographies). Her story thus echoes the course of the slave narrative, with its movement from Africa to America, its account of the cruelties of slavery, and its ultimate hope for emancipation.

In Caged Bird, the journey is a triangular one, almost like having a set of three thumbtacks-- a map of the United States to represent California and Arkansas and Missouri. If the tacks are moved as the character Maya moves in the book, a reader can get a solid sense of how structure operates within an autobiographical text.

Each of Angelou's autobiographies relies on movement as equivalent to travel; the movement from journey to journey establishes the narrative line. In recording her momentous journey Angelou, without being directly repetitive, constantly recreates and rewinds the structure, replaying it at different speeds and at different volumes. The idea of movement is extensive in the autobiographies, beginning with the denial of movement on the first page of Caged Bird--"I didn't come to stay.”

In writing I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou chooses the train ride from California to Arkansas to represent the beginning of her autobiographical journey. Eugenia Collier notes that Angelou s use of the journey is on one level an escape from an impossible circumstance, while "on another level, each is a further step in Maya’ s journey toward awareness" (1986, 22). Of other journeys within the triad, the trip to St. Louis in her father's car is the most terrible for in St. Louis she is raped by her mother's boyfriend. Years later, in a journey to Mexico, this same father is present as the travel patterns again assume a sinister tone. Maya, who has never been behind the wheel of a car, maneuvers her father's car fifty miles down the mountainside because he is too drunk to drive. After she is stabbed by her father's girlfriend, she moves to a vacant lot and stays with a number of multiethnic teenagers who are also running away from unacceptable living situations. In that particular section of the book, the sense of movement--driving, stabbing, running, running away, bumping, yelling--becomes overwhelming.

For Angelou, who writes a personal version of the Emancipation Proclamation, her demoralizing childhood experiences with racial bigotry and sexual assault are largely overcome as she continues her efforts to be somebody-- a writer, a dancer, a nonslave. Angelou connects herself to the slave narrative by consciously linking herself to an African-centered tradition. Her triumph owes much to her rediscovery of her African heritage (seen in later volumes) and her ability to redefine herself as mother and woman.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN**

The transformation of a character is an important element in the African-American female bildungsroman, the autobiography genre, and the bildungsroman. As literary critics like Susan Gilbert have noted, Caged Bird Sings has also been categorized as a coming-of-age story, or bildungsroman.  This terminology is German, and means a “novel of transformation,” the growth of a character from childhood to maturity.   We can chart the female bildungsroman genre back to the eighteenth century when books that promoted moral instruction and survival tactics in the context of a patriarchal society, were once read among the educated, middle-class, society women. The break in this traditional reading came when the feminist movement, which was progressing during the 1950s and 1960s, set forth an outlook of how women wanted to define their roles within society. With this emergence, women no longer wanted to be second-class citizens; to be independent, to grow spiritually, and to have their own identity.  It was at this time that the female bildungsromangained stature.  Women found a voice through feminism and began to change the traditional male literary conventions by creating two narrative styles. The African-American female bildungsroman has four distinct characteristics similar to the female bildungsroman, but it is unique in that it includes the element of race.  In order to understand why Caged Bird Sings fits so well in the category of the African-American female bildungsroman, we must define get an understanding of what makes up this focused sub-genre.

First, there is the awakening, when the character becomes increasingly aware that she is not the blue-eyed blonde so coveted by society and begins to question her African-American heritage. This leads to the character questioning her value as a human being and the social status of her race.  Second, the main character gains self-awareness through her relationships with a network of African-American women, who guide and support her in becoming self-reliant in a patriarchal society.  This network provides the character with moral guidance in the face of racial and gender adversity. Third, the character explores her feminine values and begins redefining her identity as she transitions into adulthood.  Finally, as the character reaches a point of maturity and independence, she concludes her journey of self-discovery.  The character reaches this pinnacle with the help of the women who have guided her.

By taking these specific characteristics of the African-American female bildungsroman and analyzing the character of Marguerite Johnson in terms, one can see that Angelou traced the “linear structure of the male bildungsroman” and created an “awakening” of the character.  Marguerite Johnson did not make this journey alone; however, Angelou also awakens the community of women that help guide Marguerite Johnson along on her journey by making them predominant characters within the text (Feng 11-12).  By giving voices to this community of women, Maya Angelou sacrifices the male characters by making them weaker than their counterparts and by not giving them an overall influence on Marguerite Johnson’s journey into maturity.

In Caged Bird Sings, Marguerite also has a series of awakenings about what it means to be a black female in a segregated and racist patriarchal society.  But Marguerite did not make her transition into womanhood alone.  Again, a network of women, a key element of the African-American female bildungsroman guided her.  But Angelou’s story centers not only on the struggles associated with Marguerite’s development as a woman but on her development as an African-American woman.  Marguerite must learn to cope with her second-class status as an African-American as well as her inferior status as a woman.

In creating Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou does two specific things: she concludes her coming-of-age story with the birth of her son, and she leaves the door open on this book to continue her life’s journey, a decision that results in five additional books. These five books, considered part of a serial autobiography, show how the character continues to mature into a woman, a mother, and finally an artist.  This specific characteristic of the African-American female bildungsroman is a very important but controversial aspect of the path that a character must take in order to reach a point of maturity.  For Marguerite Johnson, the journey was very clear. She chooses to have sex out of wedlock in order to explore her femininity and relieve fears that she may be a lesbian.  She decides to have a baby, although that decision may not have been acceptable in her closed society.  And finally, she brings a difficult relationship with her mother to a more loving and mature level in order to build a stronger bond.  All of these coming-of-age aspects give the character a vantage point to look at life in a different way, even though critics such as Tischler do not believe it leads to a good Christian lifestyle.  While other critics such as McPherson and Buss feel that the realization of self-discovery that Marguerite goes through is a normal transcendence into femininity, motherhood, and womanhood.  But in order for Marguerite to move ahead with her transformation she must keep a sense of independence and spirituality—an important aspect as the character tries to find out who she is as an African-American female.

**Thematic Issues in Caged Bird**

The literary theme depends for its effect on the use of repetition. In Maya Angelou’s autobiographical series many different themes appear and reappear. The major themes in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings are motherhood, imprisonment, and rape.

Probably the most consistent thematic issue found in Angelou's autobiographies is motherhood. During much of Maya s childhood her own mother is absent, and her conflicting feelings for Vivian Baxter are transferred to others, especially to Annie Henderson.

Although Maya does not become a mother until the end of the autobiography, for most of the book she is concerned with the parenting qualities of Momma Henderson; her brother Bailey; her father, Bailey Sr.; her mother, Vivian Baxter; and other characters who either nurture her or deny her the mothering she craves: people who help her read; who clothe her; who show her the secrets of urban life. While Maya s primary identification in Caged Bird is that of a daughter or granddaughter, these roles become secondary at the end of the book, when she becomes a black mother.

The theme of motherhood is one of the central ideas in contemporary literature by black women: There is the mother who murders her infant in Toni Morrison Beloved or the mother who strives for decent housing in Lorraine Hansberry A Raisin in the Sun ( 1959). According to Daryl C. Dance, the black mother is " a figure of courage, strength, and endurance," a "Madonna" who has brought her race out of bondage and given them life ( 1979, 131). Mary Burgher writes that black women autobiographers have redeemed black motherhood from the myths of breeder and matriarch--always having babies, always being domineering--by revealing themselves as women who are both mothers and visionaries. Angelou and other autobiographers are "consistently expanding motherhood into a creative and personally fulfilling role" ( 1979, 115).

A second major theme in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is imprisonment. Maya constantly feels caged, unable to get away from the homemade dresses she must wear to church, unable to escape the reality of her blackness. She is imprisoned by her job for Mrs. Cullinan and by her limited opportunities in a segregated school system. There are several painful scenes where she and Bailey, trapped in the church service, are conquered by hysterical laughter. At times Maya urinates at her pew as if in defiance of the restrictions imposed on her young body. She is trapped, too, by the bigotry of Stamps, whose town fathers demand that she and all African Americans live in only one section of town and attend only those schools in their part town. Imprisoned inside her body, Maya believes that a "cruel fairy stepmother" has wickedly transformed her from a blonde child to a dark one.

The theme of imprisonment is expressed in the title I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, which Angelou takes from Paul Lawrence Dunbar 1896 poem, "Sympathy," a poem about a caged bird who beats his wings against the bars. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes eloquently about Angelou's image of the cage: "Unbreakable bars closed black communities in upon themselves, denying both the communities and the individuals who composed them access to the surrounding white world.... The cages constrained but did not stifle them" ( 1990, 221-22). The caged bird, a symbol for the chained slave, frequently reappears in Angelou's writings, especially in The Heart of a Woman.

Most critics who write about the title tend to underplay the verb sings, clothe her; who show her the secrets of urban life. While Maya’s primary identification in Caged Bird is that of a daughter or granddaughter, these roles become secondary at the end of the book, when she becomes a black mother.

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Most critics who write about the title tend to underplay the verb sings, the last word and the one that creates an upward mood. But sings suggests the survival of African Americans through the spiritual, a form examined in Chapter 2. As it is the nature of the caged bird to sing for its supper, so it is said to be the black person's nature to make music while in bondage--to lift every voice and sing; to sing in praise of the Lord. In Dunbar's poem, for instance, the bruised bird sings a prayer to God that he might be released.

Although Angelou develops the singing aspects of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings in her second and third volumes, she only hints at the possibilities of joyful song in the first book. For like a songless bird, Maya gives up all singing, all sound, during the five years that follow her rape. For five years she is mute, locked in a speechless body, as she has willed it. She is liberated from her caged silence only after Mrs. Flowers helps her release her voice. Listening to Mrs. Flowers read aloud, Maya describes the woman's voice as singing: "Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing" ( [84](http://www.questia.com/read/9779033%22%20%5Ct%20%22_top) ).

A cage, as Georgia Douglas Johnson warns us, restrains not only the black body but also the female black body; a black woman is doubly threatened because of her race and her gender. The third theme, rape, is a concept so forceful that it overwhelms the autobiography, even though it is presented fairly briefly in the text. The theme involves Maya's two sexual experiences with Mr. Freeman. Both scenes are couched in metaphors, allowing her to describe her pain without having to directly speak/write about what she feels. Unable to comprehend the reality of her situation, she invents comparisons that sound like dirty jokes because they really are dirty jokes, played by a frustrated father substitute on an innocent girl.

Maya compares his "thing" to a "brown ear of corn" ( [61](http://www.questia.com/read/9779010%22%20%5Ct%20%22_top) ). It feels pulpy like the "inside of a freshly killed chicken" ( [61](http://www.questia.com/read/9779010%22%20%5Ct%20%22_top) ). In both instances she compares what she is unsure of, the penis, to objects familiar to her rural upbringing--to corn and to chicken--as if trying to make the strangeness go away and the experience along with it.

The most famous example of this kind of comparison is the camel/ needle metaphor. Angelou writes: "The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't" ( [65](http://www.questia.com/read/9779014%22%20%5Ct%20%22_top) ). Mary Vermillion (1992), in her reading of the metaphor, associates the passage with the Biblical parable that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Angelou's "needle" is also a metaphor for how rape must feel to a vulnerable child. If Maya's vagina (her body) is like a needle's eye and Mr. Freeman's penis is like a camel, then there is a repulsive physical implication behind the metaphor. Angelou has found the appropriate image to convey the horror of a child's flesh being ripped by an enlarged, thrusting penis. The child (needle) gives because the rapist (camel) cannot.

**Spirituals and the black church**

Another prominent influence on Angelou’s work is the Negro spiritual, a musical form that originated during the "Great Revival" meetings of the early nineteenth century. This music grew from Protestant camp meetings that were attended by both whites and blacks. The Negro spiritual frequently contains the dual motifs of travel and race--of traveling to freedom and escaping the racial bondage of slavery.

Many scholars who have studied the African American Church agree that it is the institution that has had the greatest impact on the African American community. Many slaves were first introduced to Christianity on the southern plantations. The church was a source of comfort and inspiration to them as they endured the horrifying conditions of slavery. The institution continues to provide solace to African Americans in the face of racism, violence, and poverty and has been a unifying force in the community.

Certainly the church was a major force in Maya Angelou's life in the rural community of Stamps. It is no accident that the opening scene of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings takes place in church. Indeed, Maya and her family seem to have devoted a great deal of time to church and church-related activities. Maya's grandmother is fiercely religious, and her religious convictions are a sustaining force in her life. As a Mother of the Church, "an honorific title usually reserved for the wife of the founder or for the oldest and most respected members" ( Lincoln and Mamiya, 275), Momma's religious authority is recognized. She begins each day on her knees in prayer and carefully instructs her grandchildren in the ways of the church, requiring strict observance of Biblical commandments. When Maya innocently begins a sentence with "by the way," she is punished for taking the Lord's name in vain, because Jesus is "the Way." The incident is illustrative of Momma's profound, even extreme, religious devotion and her determination to inculcate her religious ideals in her grandchildren.

In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings Angelou appears to be more critical of the church's failure to concern itself with the here and now. Her lengthy description of a revival meeting emphasizes the otherworldly orientation of the preacher, who takes as the text of his sermon "The least of these," and the contented reaction of the congregation, who believe that "all the Negroes had to do generally, and those at the revival especially, was bear up under this life of toil and cares, because a blessed home awaited them in the faroff bye and bye" (108-9). Angelou's account suggests that she considers the preacher's message that African Americans should endure and resign themselves to their lot in life to be an inadequate response to their plight.

**Emotionalism and the black church**

An example of emotionalism in the African American church can be seen in the groans, shouts, and shrieks of the congregation in the regular church service described in the preceding document. Angelou's amusing description of a service at her church suggests that individual members of the congregation can also be catalysts for extreme behavior. She describes Sister Monroe, who, on a particular Sunday, "gets the spirit" and pursues the minister up onto the altar, screaming and grabbing at his clothing (32). Other members of the congregation are similarly inspired, and the incident concludes with the minister, deacon, and chairman of the usher board on the floor following cries, punches, and other physical contact. This incident is a prelude to a second incident on a different Sunday when Sister Monroe assaults a visiting preacher, knocking out his false teeth. Sister Monroe's emotionalism was not unusual in African American churches.

**Music**

Religious music sustains Maya's family inside and outside the church. When Momma is taunted by the powhitetrash children (see Chapter 2), she quietly sings several hymns, drawing strength from the music in much the same way that slaves were comforted by spirituals.

Historically, music has been an important feature of the religious expression of African Americans. The spirituals originated with the slaves and that, like the sermons, the focus was otherworldly:

Far from his native land and customs, despised by those among whom he lived, experiencing the pang of the separation of loved ones on the auction block, knowing the hard task master, feeling the lash, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions, of rich man and poor man, of proud and meek, of master and slave. The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity -- patience -- forbearance -- love -- faith -- and hope -- through a necessarily modified form of African music. The Negro took complete refuge in Christianity, and the Spirituals were literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor. (20)

Angelou notes the common themes present in the songs sung at the revival and the blues heard on the way home: "A stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between the songs sung a few minutes before and those being danced to in the gay house by the railroad tracks. All asked the same questions. How long, oh God? How long?" (111).

**The African American Family and Other Role Models**

**THE GRANDMOTHER, MOTHER, AND MATRIARCHY**

The importance of family and of other influential people in Maya Angelou's journey toward self-acceptance and independence cannot be overstated. From her neighbor Mrs. Flowers's healing intervention after Maya is raped to her brother Bailey's unconditional love, Maya is fortunate to have the love and support of those around her. Angelou notes the significant role played by extended family and friends in her upbringing. Pointing out that she was raised by her grandmother and her Uncle Willie up to the age of thirteen, she adds: "But the people around us also helped raise us. They watched us when we were out of the house. They knew that Mamma was getting up in age and Uncle Willie could not get around easily, so they watched us and reported our actions to Mamma and Uncle Willie" (Angelou, Interview with RandallTsuruta, 4-5).

Perhaps no one had greater influence on Maya's early development than Momma, Angelou's grandmother, with whom Maya and Bailey were sent to live after their parents' divorce. Although Annie Henderson is not openly affectionate with her grandchildren, it is clear that Maya feels deeply loved by her grandmother.

The way Annie Henderson takes responsibility for her extended family is consistent with the importance of grandmothers in the African American family. During slavery the Negro grandmother occupied in many instances an important place in the plantation economy and was highly esteemed by both the slaves and the masters. . . . She was the repository of the accumulated lore and superstition of the slaves and was on hand at the birth of black children as well as white. She took under her care the orphaned and abandoned children. . . . When emancipation came, it was often the old grandmother who kept the generations together. (114-16)

In most Negro households, grandparents, nieces, nephews, adopted children, and others who are not related even by adoption, commonly form part of the family group; and members of the real family are as commonly absent. . . . It is by now a well-established generalization that the typical Negro family throughout the South is matriarchal and elastic, in striking contrast to the more rigid and patriarchal family organization of occidental white culture. (143)

But despite the positive aspects of finding a home with extended family members, it should be noted that both Maya and Bailey suffer from their parents' absence. They blame themselves for their parents' divorce and separation from them. When they are reunited with their mother during a yearlong stay in St. Louis, Maya is ever-conscious of the fact that she cannot depend on her and fears that she could be sent back to Stamps at any time. In a 1983 interview, Angelou commented that Vivian Baxter "was a poor mother for a child" ( *Interview with Paterson*, 422). Nevertheless, in another interview, Angelou indicated that although she only lived with her mother intermittently and for short periods until she was thirteen, her mother has been a powerful role model for her: "I'm often asked how I got over that without holding a grudge. I see her as one of the greatest human beings I've ever met" ( *Interview with Oliver*, 114).

Vivian Baxter's influence is most clearly seen during the period Maya is living with her in California. When Maya decides to become the first black streetcar conductorette, her mother initially warns her that African Americans are not hired for this work. But once she sees Maya's determination to challenge this discriminatory situation, she gives her unflagging support. n *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* Angelou credits both her mother's and her grandmother's example for her refusal to go on welfare while struggling to raise her son Guy as a single mother:

My pride had been starched by a family who assumed unlimited authority in its own affairs. A grandmother, who raised me, my brother and her own two sons, owned a general merchandise store. She had begun her business in the early 1900's in Stamps, Arkansas, by selling meat pies to saw men in a lumber mill, then racing across town in time to feed workers in a cotton-gin mill four miles away. . . . My beautiful mother, who ran businesses and men with autocratic power, taught me to row my own boat, and paddle my own canoe, hoist my own sail. She warned, in fact, "If you want something done, do it yourself." (10-11)

There is no doubt that Vivian Baxter practices what she preaches. In California she initially provides the economic support for her children. When Maya and Bailey want to know what she does for a living, she describes her work in the saloons and gambling dens with characteristic honesty. Later, Vivian Baxter marries Daddy Clidell, and the family's financial situation is further secured by Clidell's real estate holdings and the series of roomers who share their fourteen-room house in San Francisco. (By the end of the second volume of Angelou's autobiography, Vivian and Daddy Clidell are divorced [ *Gather Together in My Name*, 170].)

Despite her occasional economic dependence on male lovers or husbands (in St. Louis her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, provides the basic necessities), Vivian Baxter never appears to be controlled by the men in her life, nor will she allow her daughter to be. When she learns that Maya is pregnant, she asks if Maya loves the father and if he loves her. When the answer to both questions is no, she matter-of-factly accepts that her daughter will be an unwed mother. In the course of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya's mother, already divorced from Bailey Johnson, Sr., lives with Mr. Freeman (who is promptly arrested after raping Maya), and finally marries Daddy Clidell, whom Angelou suggests she was initially prepared to dismiss as just one more of her mother's lovers.

**ROLE MODELS**

Maya Angelou has cited numerous role models for her life and work, and for African Americans in general. In an interview with Claudia Tate, she asserted that whites and males are dominant in the world and that they must be countered with other role models, from family members to historical heroines:

We need to see our mothers, aunts, our sisters, and grandmothers. We need to see Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hammer, women of our heritage. We need to have these women preserved. We need them all: . . . Constance Motley, Etta Motten. . . . All of these women are important as role models. Depending on our profession, some may be even more important. Zora Neale Hurston means a great deal to me as a writer. (2)

When asked in the same interview about other writers who have influenced her work, Angelou mentioned several -- James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Rosa Guy, Ann Petry, Joan Didion -- but she acknowledged as particularly important "two men who probably formed my writing ambition more than any others. They were Paul La[u]rence Dunbar and William Shakespeare" (11).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou gives special recognition to the importance of black poets. After the disastrous speech by the white speaker at her graduation, Maya and her classmates are saved from self-hatred by the class valedictorian, who leads the audience in singing "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson.

In another episode with striking similarities to the highs and lows of her eighth-grade graduation, Angelou remembers the significance of the boxer Joe Louis for African Americans. She describes the crowding of men, women, and children into her grandmother's general store to listen to a radio broadcast of Louis's fight with Primo Carnera. From Angelou's description it appears that the outcome of the fight has a direct correlation to her people's destiny and self-worth. When Louis is declared the winner, she exults: "Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world" (115).

**Child Sexual Abuse**

When asked whether any of her works have been misunderstood, Maya Angelou replied: "A number of people have asked me why I wrote about the rape in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. They wanted to know why I had to tell that rape happens in the black community" ( Tate, 11). Indeed, this incident, which occurs in St. Louis when Maya is seven years old, is one of the most horrifying events of Angelou's childhood. But despite those who would criticize Angelou for revealing that child sexual abuse occurs in the African American community, studies have shown that child sexual abuse "is not limited by racial, ethnic, or economic boundariessexual abuse of children exists in all strata of society" ( U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, i).

Angelou's account is a sensitive and brutally honest description of the abuse by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, which in court against him. When asked whether Mr. Freeman had ever touched her before the rape, a guilt-ridden Maya lies and answers that he had not because she is afraid that she will be ostracized by her family if they find out that she had not disclosed his earlier fondling of her. Mr. Freeman is convicted and almost immediately found murdered. Maya, believing her lie makes her responsible for Mr. Freeman's death, decides that she must stop talking altogether so that others will not be harmed.

On the whole, they were part of a confusing flood of feelings and sensations, usually dwarfed by an overwhelming sense of helplessness, guilt, anger, or fear. In fact, the pleasure often only intensified the guilt or the helplessness, since it added to the child's confusion and left the child feeling out of control of even his or her own emotions. (65-66) This progresses from fondling to forcible rape, and of her own confusion and pain as she tries to understand what is happening to her. The young Maya is frightened into submission by her abuser, as Mr. Freeman threatens to kill Bailey if Maya ever reveals the abuse. At the same time, however, Maya initially enjoys being held by Mr. Freeman. She writes, "From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me" (61). After Mr. Freeman's crime is discovered, Maya is forced to testify

Angelou has stated that one of the challenges she faced in writing about the rape was to avoid portraying Mr. Freeman in a completely negative way. "I wanted people to see that the man was not totally an ogre" ( Tate, 11). In an interview in 1987, Angelou commented on how she has been able to forgive Mr. Freeman: "It had to do. . . with 'seeing the man. I don't mean physically seeing him. But trying to understand how really sick and alone that man was. I don't mean that I condone at all. But to try to understand is always healing' " ( Angelou, Interview with Crane, 175). Despite her ability to forgive, Angelou noted in this interview that she still bears the emotional scars of the abuse.

**Daddy Clidell as a Trickster figure**

Daddy Clidell is the first person who serves as a true father figure for Maya. His character is drawn from the folklore of the African-American community. He is depicted as someone who uses the implicit racism of his victim and draws them in with his poor black boy image to successfully dupe them out of their money and thereby increases his wealth.

The trickster figure in African and African American cultures function as "masters of disguise and consummate survivors, skillfully outmaneuvering their foes with guile, wit, and charm.”

The image of the trickster figure comes from the Yoruba culture wherein a monkey serves as someone who mediates between the worlds of gods and people. In Yoruba the figure is a trickster-god, but in other community stories he takes the form of a monkey. Rafiqi in Lion King is a perfect example of a trickster figure in African mythology.

This figure finds its way in African American oral history. It is also echoed in Br'er Rabbit (also spelled Bre'r Rabbit or Brer Rabbit or Bruh Rabbit, with the title "Br'er" pronounced [/ˈbrɛər/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3AIPA_for_English)) is a central figure in the [Uncle Remus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Remus) stories of the [Southern United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_United_States). He is a [trickster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trickster) character who succeeds through his wits rather than through strength, tweaking authority figures and bending social [mores](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mores) as he sees fit.

Many have suggested that the American incarnation, Br'er Rabbit, represents the [enslaved](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery) African who uses his wits to overcome circumstances and to exact revenge on his adversaries, representing the white slave-owners. The word "Br'er" in his name (and in those of other characters in the stories) reflects the habit of addressing another man as "brother" in many African cultures. While modern Americans generally pronounce the second 'r' in Br'er, the original pronunciation was "Bruh" or "Buh." When Joel Chandler Harris spelled "Br'er" with an 'er' at the end of the word, he was indicating the Southern pronunciation of the final 'er' as in "brothuh" (brother), sistuh (sister), or faa'muh (farmer).

Brer Rabbit is the [archetypal](http://www.answers.com/topic/archetypal) hero-trickster character from African American oral literature. While Brer Rabbit got much exposure in Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings (1881), folklorists and literature scholars are well aware of the rich cycle of tales that circulate around this tricky and cunning figure. These tales thrived especially during the pre- and post-slave era up until the mid-1900s. Resembling the two major tricksters of [Africa](http://www.answers.com/topic/western-africa) (Anansi, the [Ashanti](http://www.answers.com/topic/ashanti) spider, and Ijapa, the [Yoruba](http://www.answers.com/topic/yor-b) turtle), “Buh” Rabbit has always seemed to be the most helpless and most afraid of all the animals in the kingdom. Brer Rabbit is constantly at odds with the likes of [Brer Bear](http://www.answers.com/topic/br-er-bear), Brer Wolf, and Sly Brer Fox. This trio, singularly or collectively, attempts to humiliate, outsmart, and sometimes even kill Brer Rabbit. In contrast, Brer Rabbit tries to nullify the plans of his stronger archenemies by using his superior intelligence and his quick thinking. He usually gets the better of the bigger and stronger animals.

Since the Brer Rabbit cycle of tales flourished during the time of slavery and almost always involved the weak in a never-ending contest with the strong, scholars view these tales as slave expressions of subversive sentiments against the institution of slavery. It was much too dangerous for slaves to reveal to slave owners the harsh realities and cruelties of slavery. But slaves could vent some of their frustrations and hostilities against their masters by participating in the performance of the Brer Rabbit tales.

Daddy Clidell as the trickster lures his victims and reaps the rewards for his cunning and bravery. This also gives him cult status and as Maya says, “The needs …feast.” (225)