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I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by

Maya Angelou



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The action begins in Stamps, Arkansas, in a black ghetto where the Maya lives with her grandmother and paralyzed uncle. Later, the setting shifts to St. Louis, San Francisco, and Southern.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Marguerite "Maya" Johnson – a gangly "too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth." She is the author of the book, who serves as its narrator. The novel is.....

Bailey Johnson (Junior) – Maya's older brother and the center of her life. He is loyal,.....

Momma (Annie) Henderson – Maya's paternal grandmother, who owns the black general store in Stamps. Maya and Bailey come to live with her when their parents get a divorce. Momma is.....

Daddy Bailey – Maya and Bailey's father. He is a vain, selfish, and conceited man, who does.....

Vivian "Bibbie" Baxter (also, Mother Dear) – Maya and Bailey's mother. She is beautiful, smart,

Minor Characters

Uncle Willie – Maya and Bailey's uncle. He lives with Momma Henderson and has been..... Many more characters are listed in the complete summary.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of the novel is Maya. As a young child, she is sent to live with her grandmother because her parents are getting a divorce. Since she does not hear from her mother or father for a long time, she thinks they are dead. When they reappear in her life, she does not.....

Antagonist - As a coming-of-age story, Maya's antagonist is the difficulty of growing up, which is complicated by being abandoned by her parents, by being a black female in wartime.....

Climax - The climax of the story occurs when Maya runs away from home and learns that she is control of her own life. Fortunately, she makes the wise decision to return to her mother in San Francisco rather than continuing her communal existence amongst the runaways in the junkyard. She also wisely returns to high school and finishes, even though Vivian encourages her to quit and even though.....

Outcome - The story ends as a comedy. Despite all the things going against her, Maya matures, graduates from high school, has a healthy son, and delights in motherhood, which

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Maya and Bailey are sent to live with their paternal grandmother, Momma Henderson, and their Uncle Willie in Stamps, Arkansas. Momma is a storekeeper with a fervent and fundamental fear of God, and Uncle Willie is a paralyzed disciplinarian. As black people, they live under the threat of racism from the Klan and from ignorant "powhitetrash."

Maya and Bailey are shocked to learn that their parents are alive, for they had thought themselves orphaned. When their father comes to visit them in Stamps, he takes Maya and Bailey back with him to St. Louis. There he gives them to their mother, whom the children judge to be beautiful, and leaves. Their.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The main theme of the novel is the pain of learning about life, coming-of-age, and accepting oneself. It is the story of one girl's fight for survival in a cruel world. To make the growing process more.....

Minor Themes

The novel also deals with themes of racism, sexism, and man's cruelty to his fellow.....

MOOD

The mood of the text is both tense and nostalgic. As she looks at her past, the narrator is sometimes frightened, sometimes amused, and sometimes sad. She peppers her narration with adult commentary on the tragedy of being a confused child.

Within the book, there is an entire range of emotions -- from anger and rage to.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Marguerite Ann Johnson (Maya) is a fascinating, talented and diversified woman. She was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the second child of Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter Johnson and the younger sister of Bailey, Jr. When her parents divorced in 1931, she was sent to Stamps Arkansas to live with her paternal grandmother, whom she called Momma. A successful businesswoman and a religious fundamentalist, Momma was a strict disciplinarian who taught Maya and Bailey values and respect. Throughout her life, Momma served as a positive influence on Maya.

Maya was a good student who loved to read. She graduated with honors in 1940 from Lafayette County Training School in Arkansas. She then left Stamps and joined her mother in California, where she graduated from Mission High School in 1945. Her son, Clyde Bailey Johnson, was born shortly after graduation.

Maya lived a colorful life and supported her son and herself by dancing in nightclubs, cooking, and doing odd jobs. When she was twenty-two, she met and married a Greek-American sailor, Tosh Angelos, and settled in Los Angeles. The mixed marriage faced many challenges and only a few.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

American born black writer Maya Angelou is not only an accomplished writer, director producer, autobiographer, singer, songwriter, lyricist, poet, historian, activist and filmmaker, but also a multilingual feminist. She has under her command English, French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, as well as her own African-Ghanaian dialect, Fanti. She is the author of best-selling works, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together In My Name* and *Heart of A Woman*. She has also written five collections of poetry: *Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die*, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, *And Still I Rise*, *I Shall Not be Moved* and *Shaker Why Don't You Sing?* She has written the original screenplay and musical score for the film *Georgia, Georgia*, as well.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Foreword/Preface

Summary

Maya (Marguerite), the child narrator, is in the children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, where she must recite a poem for Easter Sunday. She is dressed in a lavender taffeta dress, which has been "cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway." She cannot remember the rehearsed poem, which causes the entire children's section to "wiggle and giggle over her well-known

forgetfulness."

While the lavender dress was being made for her, Maya had indulged in fantasies about being a white girl with long blond hair and light blue eyes; but on Easter morning when it is time to wear the dress, all her dreams disappear, and she is self-described as a "too-big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil."

Maya slips out of the church to go to the toilet but is tripped. She wets herself. Amazingly, she laughs at the situation.

Notes

The foreword serves as an introduction. Marguerite (Maya) Angelou, the central character and narrator of the book, is presented. The central theme is also introduced, for throughout the book, Maya will recall her childhood trials and tribulations and reflect on how they have helped her to develop.

Maya views herself as ugly simply because she is black. She tries to hide her black legs by greasing them with Vaseline and dusting red clay on them. She also fantasizes about herself. She sometimes imagines being a white girl with long blond hair and blue eyes. To Maya, this image was "everybody's dream of what was right with the world."

The church incident presented in the foreword highlights Maya's main concern as a child: she is made to feel like a second-class human being. She is in the children's section at church, where the others laugh at her and make her feel awkward. She is wearing a faded throwaway dress; although it has been made to fit her, it does nothing to hide her large size. When she leaves to go to the bathroom, someone trips her out of meanness; as a result, she wets herself. Amazingly, she is able to laugh at the incident; and the laugh is sweet release for the girl in the purple dress.

By the end of the foreword, a basic picture of Maya as a likable human being is emerging. She is a gentle, rolling girl whose life has a rhythm of its own. She is good-natured, even in her self-deprecation. She is a narrator worth listening to.

Chapter 1

Summary

At the age of three, Maya and her brother Bailey, who is four, are shipped off to live with their paternal grandmother, Momma Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas, for their parents are getting a divorce. Momma Henderson lives with Uncle Willie in the rear of the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store, an establishment which serves cotton pickers and sawmen. The store serves as the center of activity in the town.

Maya and Bailey are expected to work in the store. They must get up at dawn to wait on customers who stop on their way to work. Many of the customers will return to the store in the evening after their work is done. For Maya and Bailey, the store is their whole life. It is also their teacher, for they learn some valuable lessons from their encounters and interactions with different people.

Notes

Chapter 1 introduces Maya's early life, her brother Bailey, her grandmother Momma Henderson, and her Uncle Willie. Because their parents are getting divorced, Maya and Bailey are sent to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their grandmother. The move away from her parents and to a new place accounts for some of Maya's sense of not belonging. She also has little chance to interact with other children, for she is expected to work in the general store that her grandmother runs.

Maya's grandmother, Momma Henderson, is a resourceful woman. She has transformed her place of business from a lunch counter to a general merchandise store, which serves everyone in town. Many of her customers are laborers, such as cotton pickers, who work extremely hard for very little pay. When they come into the store in the early morning hours, they are smiling and hopeful; when they return in the evening, they appear the be defeated souls. Even as a child, Maya realizes their level of poverty and the injustice of their hard work. As a result, the adult Maya rages against the stereotype of happy, song-singing cotton pickers.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Marguerite "Maya" Johnson - Maya Angelou has reconstructed her personal history in this autobiographical tale whose protagonist is the child narrator, Maya. In reality, she becomes the collective consciousness of Angelou's past experiences.

As a character Maya has many obstacles to overcome, including her sense of abandonment when her parents send her away, her grandmother's rigid fundamentalism, the racism of Stamps, and poverty. In her childhood, her love of books and her devotion to her brother Bailey are the only sustaining things in her life.

Maya's sense of alienation is compounded when she is reunited with her father and then abandoned again. She is left with Vivian, her beautiful mother, who only makes Maya feel more awkward. Since.....

Momma Henderson "Momma" - Momma is a strong character, who lives by her fundamental religious beliefs. As a black woman in Stamps, she has incredible power. The owner of a successful business, she manages to have financial freedom. She even loans money to both white and black people during the Depression.

Momma has two sons. Uncle Willie, who has been paralyzed from a young age, lives with her

Bailey Johnson Junior - Bailey is Maya's older brother, guide, confidante, and mentor. Through most of the book, she idolizes him, calling Bailey her "Kingdom Come." Maya keeps no secrets from her brother, whom she trusts completely. In return for her trust, Bailey serves as Maya's.....

Daddy Bailey - Maya's ever absent father is a tall, handsome man, who speaks proper English. He is a dietician for the navy and has also worked as a doorman, but the airs he puts on.....

Vivian Baxter Johnson - Vivian is the beautiful, street-smart mother of Maya and Bailey. Her divorce from Daddy Bailey prompts her to send the children away to live with their paternal grandmother in.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiographical tale about Maya Angelou's formative years. The plot of the story unfolds through frank narrative, evocative language, flashbacks, and stream-of-consciousness. The book, which is divided into 36 chapters, is mostly chronological.

Although largely non-fiction, the book has a loose plot structure that is developed in the classical manner. The prologue and early chapters are largely introductory, giving the setting of the black culture, developing the main characters, and introducing the themes. Most of the book is comprised of rising action, as Maya struggles towards self understanding and independence. During these formative years, she is usually a

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

Major Themes - The main theme of the novel is **Maya's struggle to survive and grow up in a complicated and harsh world.** Maya is extremely young when she and her brother are sent from their

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parents' house to live with their grandmother and uncle in Stamps, Arkansas. Life in Stamps is not easy. Momma is a religious fundamentalist and harsh disciplinarian who does not know how to show her love to the children. There is also a great deal of prejudice against blacks in Stamps.

Maya's life becomes even more of a struggle when she goes to live with her mother in California. The beautiful Vivian makes Maya feel more awkward than ever; she also has no idea how to mother the.....

Minor Themes - One of the minor themes of the novel is **Maya's search for love**. Even as a child Maya's need for love is thwarted by selfish parents and an undemonstrative grandmother. Though Bailey loves.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

Language

Maya derives the title for her autobiographical tale from a poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. It is an appropriate title, for Maya effectively portrays images of restrained freedom through the book. In spite of her imprisonment to life, caused by being poor, black, and female, Maya still learns

VOCABULARY

- ad hoc – put together casually; improvised
- adios – Spanish word for goodbye
- arabesque – a graceful stance in ballet
- bonita – Spanish word for pretty.....

Literary/Historical References

- Akim Tamiroff – a Russian who acted in the United States
- Alley Oop – the name of the caveman for whom V.T. Hamlin named his popular cartoon strip, which

QUESTIONS

Explain the meaning of the title and why it is appropriate for the book.

- Describe Maya at the beginning of the book and contrast her to the young lady she becomes at the end of the book.
- Describe Momma and what influence she has on Maya's life.
- Maya and Bailey are near-orphans. Discuss this idea, using examples from the text to show how they are abandoned several times.....

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