

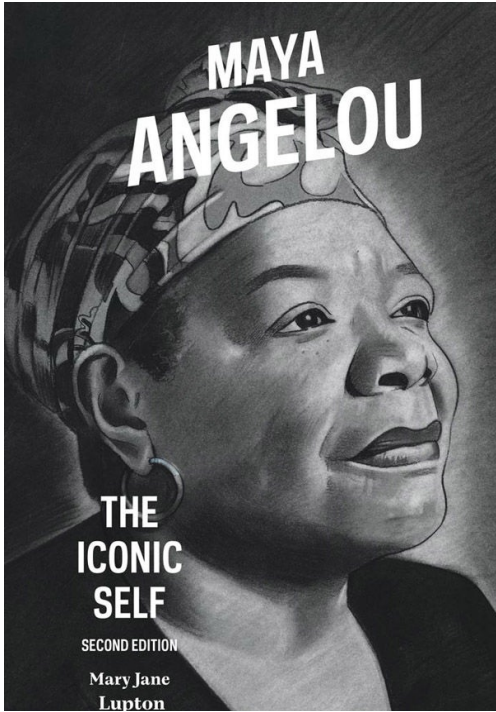


**MAYA  
ANGELOU**

**THE  
ICONIC  
SELF**

SECOND EDITION

Mary Jane  
Lupton





Maya Angelou



An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC  
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado

Maya Angelou

The Iconic Self

MARY JANE LUPTON

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Without the support of the late Dolly A. McPherson, professor of English at Wake

Forest University, the first edition of this book, *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, might not have been realized. I first met Professor McPherson at a conference of the Mid-Atlantic Writers' Association held in Baltimore in 1990.

Her book, *Order Out of Chaos*, published in that same year, was the first book-length study of Angelou's autobiographical works. McPherson, a long-time

personal friend of Angelou's, had supported my work since that conference and

had offered assistance on numerous occasions. Through her, Maya Angelou

became aware of my interest in her autobiographies. Through her, I was finally

successful in arranging an interview.

I am deeply grateful to Maya Angelou for her writings, her vitality, and her kindness. I thank her for being so gracious to me and my husband, Kenneth H.

Baldwin, on the afternoon and night of June 16 and the morning of June 17, 1997.

My husband, then chair of the English department at the University of Maryland,

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support: counting words and citations at several stages in the manuscript, shopping for groceries, dealing with computer repairs, checking the Internet, driving me to Winston-Salem. I am grateful

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with me during my first exhilarating but brief meeting with Maya Angelou in

1995, following her lecture at Towson State University. Aimee, sensing my hesitation at the prearranged interview, literally pushed me into Angelou's waiting limousine.

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*Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, initially published in 1998, was part of that series, which has since been discontinued.

I retired from Morgan State University in 2001. *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self*

was written in the resort town of Cape May, New Jersey, a beautiful location but

far from the support of an academic community. I have made numerous changes

in this expanded revision, from a few overlooked errors in spelling, punctuation,

and dates to major additions to the text in order to include Maya Angelou's literary and cultural contributions since 1998. *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self* retains the structure of the original: two introductory chapters followed by individual chapters on each of the autobiographies. Each of the individual discussions ends with an alternative reading. The new edition is more attentive to her



poetry. There is an added chapter about the sixth autobiography as well as a

greatly expanded bibliography. *The Iconic Self* also takes into account the enormous public response to her death.

Fortunately, I was able to rely on the skills, talents, and encouragement of my

scholarly family as I wrote this second edition. My daughter Ellen Lupton is

director of the MFA program in Graphic Design at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore and Curator of Contemporary Design at the Cooper-Hewitt

National Design Museum in New York. Ellen worked closely with me on June 11,

2015, as we viewed the Maya Angelou Archives at the Manuscripts, Archives and

Rare Books Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. She

has also offered invaluable technical assistance.

My daughter Julia Reinhard Lupton, associate dean of research, School of Humanities, the University of California, Irvine, worked diligently with me on downloading, file-saving, electronic editing, and other technical problems that I

had not encountered while writing the first edition. She served as the liaison between me and my editor at Greenwood/CLIO, Kimberly Kennedy-White.

Through their combined help I was able to acquire a Word document of the first

edition from which I could make the necessary additions and revisions.

Throughout this writing my husband, Kenneth H. Baldwin, has listened to my

interpretations, done extensive proofreading, searched the Internet, offered pertinent criticism, suggested revisions, and entertained me with his amazing wit.

When he retired from his position as chair of the English department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in 2006, I jokingly provided him with

a scholarship to attend real estate school. He soon became qualified as an instructor and began teaching courses, primarily to brokers. Eventually he founded the Cape Atlantic School of Real Estate in Seaville, New Jersey, where

his students affectionately call him “Doc.”

I thank Steven Fullwood, assistant curator of the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, for

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2015. During our visit his staff worked tirelessly in providing box after box of papers, drafts, and documents relevant to Maya Angelou's life and writing.

I thank Dolan Hubbard, my former chair at Morgan State University, and

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for a commemorative issue on Maya Angelou, now in press.  
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subsequently invited me to read a paper on Angelou's poetry at  
the CLA

conference in Dallas in April 2015.

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advisory board. The board acted quickly and favorably, granting me a very reasonable amount of time to complete

the project.

I thank Victoria Allen, the widow of Julian Allen, for granting permission to

use her husband's illustration of Maya Angelou for the cover of this book. I thank my brother and sister-in-law, Jack and Carol Ann Hohman, for having gifted me

with Maya Angelou's cookbook *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* on Christmas Eve, 2004. I thank Caroline Maun for the Angelou wind chimes and Charlotte Todd for the Maya Angelou greeting card. I thank my friends from Baltimore, and most particularly Jo-

Ann Pilardi, for sending me information on Maya Angelou and for encouraging me in this project.

Finally, I thank my friends in Cape May (especially Penny and Dale Hardin and Joan Thomas) and my friends at Macedonia Baptist Church (especially Lois

Smith, Florence Carter, Jackie and Larry Hogan, Peggy Ose, and Pastor Kathy Smallwood Johnson) for their support and tolerance.

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[The Life and Works of C](#)

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*Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self* examines the six autobiographical volumes of noted African American writer Maya Angelou. Although all of these volumes are

distinct in style and narration, they are unified through a number of repeated themes and through the developing character of the narrator. In their scope they

stretch over time and place, from Arkansas to Africa to California to New York

City, from confused child to accomplished adult. With so expansive a project, Angelou is required to de-emphasize the standard autobiographical concern for the individual and to focus on her interaction with others: with the jazz singer

Billie Holiday; with the actor Godfrey Cambridge; with the African American community in Ghana; with the writer James Baldwin; with the world leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Maya Angelou, in having created these six autobiographies, has assured herself

a prominent place in American literature. She has expanded the scope of the typical one-volume book about the self, creating a slightly fictionalized saga that covers the years 1931 to 1968— from the years of the Great Depression to the days

following the death of Martin Luther King. She guides the reader through almost

40 years of American and African American history, revealed through the point

of view of a strong and affectionate black woman. By opening up the edges of her

narrative, Maya Angelou, like no one before her, transcends the autobiographical

tradition, enriching it with contemporary experience and female sensibility.

Information about Angelou's abundant life has been recorded in numerous

interviews, journals, yearbooks, prefaces, and appendices. At times there are errors or inconsistencies among these sources—the date of her first marriage, the

names of awards received, the titles of plays directed, and other details. These inconsistencies arise possibly because Angelou, in her interviews, speaks

eloquently but informally about her past, with no time chart in front of her, and

possibly because her interviewers are so taken by her presence that they lose sight of the smaller details. The bulk of the facts presented in this chapter derive from the sources listed in the bibliography, under the category Biographical Sources. The remaining material is taken either from Angelou's published writings or from my interview with her in June 1997.

### The Icon Interview

When I agreed to write *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, I knew the project would benefit from a personal interview, itself an autobiographical form. I was privileged to have met Angelou

before, very briefly, in a rather dramatic limousine encounter after a lecture she gave at Towson State University in Baltimore in 1995. A return invitation, where we might really talk, seemed improbable. Nonetheless, I began writing to her press agent. After several false starts, and with the invaluable intervention of my friend Dolly A. McPherson of

Wake Forest University, I was eventually granted an overnight interview that began at 4 p.m. on June 16, 1997, and ended the next morning.

My husband, Kenneth Baldwin, drove us to Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

We arrived at Maya Angelou's gated property and were greeted by Rose Johnson,

who I later learned was the daughter of Maya's brother Bailey. Ms. Johnson escorted us to an enormous living room and asked us to wait.

Across the room, a forty-or fifty-foot expanse, I saw a portrait of Maya Angelou as a young woman, done on a vibrant quilt, with the center panel surrounded on all sides by what appeared to be lettering. This focal piece of art

was almost as tall as the space it occupied, I would guess around twelve feet.

Coming closer, I read the inscription: Maya's Quilt of Life, 1989/Faith Ringgold.

Faith Ringgold (1930–) is an African American artist and performer, well known

for her woman-oriented sculptures such as the “Family of Women” series, done

in the 1970s. Her astounding Quilt of Life was commissioned by Maya Angelou’s

close friend, television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey (1954–) on the occasion of

Angelou’s sixtieth birthday.

The multitude of words framing the portrait were taken from “Phenomenal



Woman,” probably Angelou’s most admired poem, and from “Willie,” a poem

about the crippled uncle immortalized in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In addition there were excerpts from two of her autobiographies, *The Heart of a Woman* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Soon after we sat down, Angelou entered the room in a rush of floor-length electric blue, with a matching blue turban decorated with gold spangles. She graciously invited Ken to stay for the interview session, which he did—but

without participating. Although the investigation of form and structure in the autobiographies was at the heart of the interview, there were numerous personal

moments involving husbands, cigarettes, houses, health food, aging, and family.

At times she broke into song. I did not perceive Maya Angelou to be a stranger.

Having read her autobiographies made me feel as if she were a high school classmate or a friend from church.

It became clear, as the interview progressed, that Dr. Angelou was worried, distracted. Ominously in the background as we talked was the tragic, inexplicable

burning of Betty Shabazz, prominent civil rights worker and the widow of Malcolm X, whose apartment was set on fire by her troubled grandson. On the

day of the interview Maya Angelou made arrangements to fly to New York City,

where she, Coretta Scott King, and other friends were planning to visit Betty Shabazz in the hospital. Sadly, Shabazz died seven days later, on Monday, June

23, 1997.

*Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self* has been immeasurably enhanced by the interview of June 16, 1997. The figures of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

described in the fourth, fifth, and sixth volumes of the autobiography became personalized, intensified. Angelou's approach to her unique serial genre was clarified. Thanks to her

direct and thoughtful responses, the text of our recorded interview serves as a major source for this work, indicated parenthetically by

“Icon.” An icon is a sacred image or representation, something of special value within a culture. In 1998 the “Icon” interview was published separately, in a shortened and modified form, in *2twice*, a journal for the arts, under the title

“Autobiography Maya Angelou.”

I refer to my interview as “Icon” because of an amusing event that occurred when Angelou was acting in the film *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995).

Members of the cast—Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, Jean Simmons, Kate

Nelligan, Lois Smith, Alfre Woodard, Winona Ryder, and Maya Angelou—were

all sitting around when the two young actresses, Winona Ryder and Alfre Woodard, said that their friends had asked them, “What does it feel like to work

with icons?”

“We laughed so hard. So I named them the iconettes,” Angelou said to me, barely able to suppress her laughter.

For me, it was sacred to have talked with an icon and to have luxuriated in her

voice, if only for a day.

Life

Dr. Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri,

on April 4, 1928, and died in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on May 24, 2014, at

the age of eighty-six. Like many of the great African American writers who predeceased her—Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin—Angelou

never earned a college degree. Instead, her advanced education was achieved through what she described as the “direct instruction” of African American cultural forms: “If you’ve grown up in an environment where the lore is passed

on by insinuation, direct instruction, music, dance, and all other forms of instruction, then that is still the thing out of which you have to move” (“Icon”

1997).

It is part of her genius that she was virtually self-educated, although she did do some work in writing groups where self-criticism was an essential form of the learning process. Because of her accomplishments in writing, theater, and the arts, and

because of her known strengths as a commencement speaker, academic

institutions have granted her honorary doctorates. In 1975, Smith College and Mills College conferred on Angelou her first two honorary degrees; reportedly more than fifty were conferred during her career, including one in 1997 from Wake Forest University, where she held a lifetime appointment as First Reynolds

Professor from 1981 to her death. Many of her admirers still call her by her honorary title, Dr. Angelou, a distinction with which she had seemed happy.

Soon after her death a sarcastic historian, Mark Oppenheimer, who calls



himself a “good cocktail-party bullshit artist,” set off a controversy when, in an article printed in *The New Republic*, he challenged the “Dr. Angelou” title. While managing to disparage Angelou for her doctoral twitters and tweets,

Oppenheimer just happened to mention his Yale degree and his “earned” PhD in

religion. *The Rand Paul Forum* immediately cited Oppenheimer’s views, agreeing with them, while (Dr.) Brittney Cooper, writing in *Salon*, retaliated with an angry, compelling piece: “Yes, Maya Angelou was a doctor: A lesson for the ignorant” (2014, n.p.). Cooper made the telling points that blacks, especially black women, have been historically limited in their pursuit of higher education and that Angelou, through her many major works, has proven herself a master in her

field.

As I was researching this thorny topic I came across a 2011 article in the *Boston Globe* by Tracy Jan entitled “Degree of Difficulty: Really Almost Nil.” The article, which presents an overview of earned versus honorary doctorates, features an interview with Maya Angelou, who told Ms. Jans that “a person has a

right to be called anything she or he wants to be called.... I’ve earned it.” Angelou continued, “I’m a worker.... Some people who have gotten their PhDs have sat back down on their—I’m stumbling on the anatomy—and given nothing” (n.p.)

Throughout the autobiographical series Maya Angelou refers to herself by a number of names but never by “Dr. Angelou”; a title that she may have adopted

as a result of being named Reynolds Professor at Wake Forest University in 1981

or perhaps following her performance for the inauguration of President Bill Clinton on January 20, 1993. She referred to herself by that title several times in her 2004 cookbook *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (188, 201, 202). Maya's mother liked to call her Ritie or Baby. Her thoughtless employer, Mrs. Cullinan, called her Mary. But it was her brother Bailey who gave her the name that lasted, Maya, for "My" and "my sister" (Davis in Elliot 1989, 75).

As for her stage name, she kept Rita Johnson until her marriage to Tosh Angelos in 1952. Sometime after the three-year marriage ended in divorce she opted for a more theatrical name at the strong suggestion of her managers at the

San Francisco nightclub, the Purple Onion (Shuker 1990, 70–71).  
Her new name

captured the feel of her Calypso performances. That name, *Maya Angelou*, will be used consistently in this book to preserve continuity. I use the term “Dr.” in referring to Angelou only a few times, most conspicuously as the first word of

the first major chapter.

Maya’s mother, Vivian Baxter, was a nurse and card dealer; her father, Bailey

Johnson Sr., was a doorman and also a dietician or meal adviser for the navy.

They had a difficult marriage that ended in divorce and in their subsequent inability to deal with their young children. When Maya was three and her brother Bailey four, their father deposited the children on a train from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, home of Bailey Sr.'s mother, Annie Henderson, owner and operator of a general store.

Annie met the train to take charge of two forlorn children wearing instructions

on their wrists that announced their names, their point of departure, and their

destination. It was in the early 1930s, during the Great Depression, an economic disaster that had its roots in the

American financial system but was soon felt worldwide. Still, Annie Henderson had been able to survive because her general store sold such basic commodities as beans and flour and because she made wise and honest investments.

Angelou recounts this desolate journey and arrival in the early pages of the book that has since brought her fame, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Published in 1970 when Angelou was forty-two, it covers her life from the age of

three to the age of sixteen. *Caged Bird* is the first of six autobiographies depicting the life of this amazing African American woman of letters. The other five 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), and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002).

The Woman in the Books

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1931–1944)

In *Caged Bird* (1970), Angelou reconstructs her childhood, beginning as a three-year-old child living with her older brother under the protective hand of their paternal grandmother, Annie

Henderson. The first volume vividly recalls life in Stamps, Arkansas, with its Christian traditions and its segregated society.

When Maya was eight, her father took her and Bailey from Stamps to St. Louis

to visit their mother, Vivian Baxter. It was there, in 1936, in a poorly supervised household, that Maya was seduced and raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr.

Freeman. After a brief trial Freeman was beaten to death, presumably by Maya's

three uncles. Horrified that her words had caused anyone's death, Maya



withdrew into a silence that the Baxters were incapable of handling. She and Bailey were returned to Annie Henderson and the community of Stamps, where

for five years Maya remained mute. She was finally released from the burden of

speechlessness in 1940, through her study of literature and guidance by a woman

from Stamps named Mrs. Flowers.

After graduating from the eighth grade, Maya, along with her brother Bailey,

moved back to California, where she gave an early sign of her enormous potential to succeed by becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. She knew even then, from her experiences in Stamps and St. Louis, that she was black and female, someone with the cards stacked against her. “If

you’re black you’re black. Whatever you do comes out of that. It’s like being a

woman. No matter what age or even sexual preference, if you’re a woman you’re

a woman” (“Icon” 1997).

Serious problems arose for Maya in her mid-teens during a disastrous summer

vacation in Southern California and Mexico with her father, Bailey Sr., and his

girlfriend, Dolores Stockland. Maya and Dolores had a violent relationship that

ended when Dolores stabbed Maya in the arm. Maya recovered, wandered

around Southern California awhile, and lived in a junkyard. She then returned to

Vivian Baxter, who began to establish a maternal closeness with her daughter. In

1944, when she was sixteen, Maya became pregnant after inviting a

neighborhood boy to have sex with her. She gave birth to a son.

### Gather Together in My Name (1944–1949)

The second volume, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), begins in the mid-1940s, near the end of World War II, with its negative effects on black lives. It concludes several years later, after Angelou has won her own personal war against drugs, prostitution, and dependency. Angelou's negative traits in this volume are intensified by a visit to Stamps, where she and Momma (Annie) Henderson confronted their differing attitudes toward race. These attitudes proved to be irreconcilable.

Much of *Gather Together* treats the issue of mothering. When Angelou became a mother, she was still a child, understandably lacking in wisdom and

sophistication, without job training or advanced schooling of any sort.

Nevertheless, she was able to survive through trial and error, while defining herself in terms of being a black woman.

*Gather Together* charts her various work experiences as she moved from job to job, trying to provide for her son and survive in a hostile economic situation. She was a Creole cook, a dancer, a dishwasher, and a barmaid. Frequently these jobs

were entangled with her feelings for men who tried to take advantage of her naïveté.

Angelou's confession that she had been a prostitute, that she had hidden stolen

goods, and that she had almost lost her son was difficult to put into words. On

the brighter side, however, in the confusion and turmoil that surrounded her, Maya had been learning how to perform professionally for live audiences. Her nightclub performances with R. L. Poole proved her to be a natural dancer; in 1952, at the age of twenty-four, she reportedly won a scholarship to study under

Pearl Primus, the Trinidadian choreographer whose 1943 dance creation, “Strange

Fruit,” was internationally acclaimed. In one of her musings she tells about her

dancing partnership with Alvin Ailey (1933–1989), the African American

performer and choreographer. Ailey brilliantly combined elements of modern dance, ballet, and West African tribal dancing. Angelou and Ailey dressed in skimpy homemade costumes and hired themselves out to the Elks and the

Masons as the team of Al and Rita ( *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

1993, 95–98). She provides no time frame for their collaboration.

As Angelou became more in demand for her singing and dancing talents, she became more emotionally distraught in knowing that her career was in conflict

with her desire to be an excellent mother. This situation, very familiar to mothers with careers, becomes the major theme of her third volume.

Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas (1949–1957)

*Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, published in 1976, covers an unhappy stage in Maya's development. Her



dancing career improved,

but with it came the anguish and isolation that resulted from being away from

her son. She was also separated forever from Momma Henderson, whose death is

movingly commemorated in *Singin' and Swingin'*.

Maya, now Mrs. Tosh Angelos, was married and divorced in one short,

unhappy interval. Again on her own, she committed herself to the European and

African tour of *Porgy and Bess*, which lasted almost two years, from 1954 to 1955.

She was twenty-eight years old, with a young son whom she had left with her

mother, Vivian Baxter, repeating the history of her own early childhood, when she and Bailey were sent off to Momma Henderson.

Although sending one's child to stay with his or her grandmother is not an uncommon solution for career women with children, the decision had unpleasant

effects for Maya and Guy. According to Dolly McPherson, Angelou's guilt and her intense love for Guy "overshadow her

other experiences” in this troubling third volume (89). At the end, in an attempt to reconcile with her unhappy son,

Angelou took him with her for an engagement in Hawaii, pledging to be with him in the future.

The Heart of a Woman (1957–1963)

*The Heart of a Woman* (1981) is the volume that signals Angelou’s maturity.

She became more certain in her mothering, now that Guy was an adolescent—

although there was one near disaster with a street gang when she was performing

in Chicago. Still, she had promised herself to give up major tours and found fulfillment in her New York/Brooklyn environment—as an actress, a writer, and a

political organizer.

Angelou's career as an actress reached a high point in 1960, when she was

offered the role of the White Queen in Jean Genet's play, *The Blacks*, a dark satire about the reversal of racial power. During the same period she was at her most

politically active. Moved by a sermon delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. at a Harlem church, she and actor Godfrey Cambridge, a cast member in *The Blacks*, organized a fund-raiser called

“Cabaret for Freedom.” As a result of her tremendous support for Dr. King, she was appointed northern coordinator of the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an office she held only briefly, from

1959 to 1960.

In 1961, she met a freedom fighter from South Africa, Vusumzi Make. She fell

in love with his charm, intelligence, and good looks. Although she was engaged

to another man, she swept it all aside and went with Vus to London for a wedding ceremony that was never made legal. A few

months later, she and her  
son joined him in Egypt.

Unhappy in the house and bored attending afternoon parties for  
the wives of

African revolutionaries, Angelou acted against Vus's wishes and  
took a job as associate editor of the *Arab Observer*, from 1961 to  
1962. Her job was not the only source of antagonism between  
them. Other problems included Vus's failure to manage money  
and his affairs with other women. The couple separated in 1962,

and Angelou and her son Guy moved from the east of Africa to  
the west, planning to go to Liberia. But after Guy was almost killed  
in a car accident, she

was forced to situate them in Ghana, at least until he recovered.

### All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1963–1965)

The fifth volume, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, continues its coverage of Angelou's African journey, although it was not published until 1986,

two decades after she had returned to the United States. After Guy's car accident, stunned and despairing, Angelou settled in Accra, the capital of the West African

nation of Ghana. When Guy miraculously recovered, he was able not only to attend classes at the University of Ghana but also to move toward independence

from his mother. Angelou spent the early 1960s in Accra, leaving only to join a

theatrical group for a tour of two European cities, Berlin and Venice.

Throughout her stay in Accra, Angelou encountered a large number of people

who affected her life and her character. A few of the most influential were fellow expatriate Julian Mayfield; the renowned scholar W.E.B. Du Bois; and black

Muslim leader Malcolm X. As Angelou's commitment to people and ideas increased, she pursued the political work so crucial to her development. With her



expatriate friends she organized a solidarity demonstration in 1965 in support of

Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington and, with the same group,

arranged Malcolm X's itinerary when he visited Ghana the same year. She did freelance writing for the *Ghanaian Times* and worked, with the dentist Robert Lee, as a liaison between the Ghanaian government and its African American residents.

Another matter of a political and racial nature was her quest for her African

roots. She took a journey beyond the outskirts of Ghana to discover her ancestors

and to find people like the Bambara, who had not abandoned their ancient customs. Angelou has received praise for her search for her origins: “Her search

for roots, her involvement with the politics of her people in the United States and Africa, give her work a depth that is absent in many other such works” (Cudjoe

1990, 304).

Caught between her African ancestry and her African American nationhood,

Angelou eventually decided to return to America. In 1965, in a grand celebration

at the Accra airport, Angelou left for the United States, as well-wishers and Ghanaian friends witnessed her departure. She said farewell to her son, leaving

him in Africa to complete his university degree. Although Angelou's tone in these final pages projects a sense of separation, it also suggests that her return to America will result in work of political and artistic value.

### A Song Flung Up to Heaven (1965–1968)

The sixth autobiography (2002) is the last of the series and also the briefest. It begins in 1965 with Maya on a Pan Am jet flying from Ghana. The volume covers

the assassinations of Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) and of Martin Luther

King Jr. It includes Angelou's impressions of the riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965 and her reactions to the 1968 uprisings in Harlem following the

death of Martin Luther King Jr.

Most of the action in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* involves personal relationships—with her mother, her brother, and her son; with her friends James

Baldwin, Rosa Guy, and Dolly McPherson; with an unnamed lover called simply

“The African”; and with her personal development as a poet and a dramatist. By

the end of the sixth volume she has made a full commitment to writing. The last line of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* becomes the first line of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: “What you looking at me for. I didn’t come to stay.”

In 2004 the Modern Library gathered together the six serial autobiographies into an anthology entitled *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*. The text, available in Kindle and hardcover editions, is an excellent resource for scholars because of its continuous pagination. It is less accessible to the ordinary reader, however, because of its cumbersome weight and size (over 1.6 pounds and

almost 1,200 pages). In *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self* all parenthetical references are to the familiar individual volumes and not the Modern Library collection. All

six volumes are still available from Random House in paperback.

### Close Contacts

Maya Angelou once told critic Valerie Webster that she never wanted to have

writing be the central topic in her autobiographies: “After that it would just be

writing about writing which is something I don’t want to do” (1989, 180).

Rarely, in fact, does Angelou write about writing. She works best in describing

her place within closely confined structures such as family, marriage, and motherhood. According to Dolly McPherson, the concept of family in Angelou's

autobiographies must take into account the manner in which she and her brother

had been displaced by their parents. Thus, the family group resembles a kinship

that goes beyond the nuclear family and even beyond the extended family: "trust

is the key to a display of kinship concerns” ( *Order Out of Chaos* 14). Within this kinship pattern, Angelou’s relationships with her brother, mother, and son are the most important.

Over the years, Maya has remained close to her brother Bailey, her protector

and confidant in *Caged Bird*. However, her trust in him was jeopardized by his having been in prison. She was reluctant to discuss his situation with me because

Bailey asked her not to. He told her, “Don’t use my name in books” (“Icon” 1997).

Yet, in a Lifetime Television interview with Angelou conducted by Bill Moyers in



1996, Bailey was passionate about his affection for his sister, repeatedly saying that he loved her. In *A Song Flung Up* their reunion is central. Bailey Johnson died in Winston-Salem in 1999; he was seventy-two ( *Essence* 2014, 109).

Evidently, there was a wonderful alliance between Bailey and Paul Du Feu, the

man Maya married in 1973. At the wedding Bailey embraced Paul and called him

a brother (Davis 1989, 74), although nine years later she confessed to Marney Rich, “We are not as close as we used to be” (1989, 129).

Vivian Baxter, Maya's and Bailey's mother, remained outside the family

structure in *Caged Bird*. She had willfully chosen to surrender her parental rights to the children by sending them to Arkansas. When Bailey Sr. took his children to

St. Louis, his former wife had little to offer her abused daughter. Maya's often-

absent mother made her feel abandoned and victimized. It was not until Maya moved to California at the age of sixteen that she and her mother formed an enduring bond that lasted through Maya's tour of Europe in 1954 and beyond.

Their changed relationship is recorded in *Gather Together*, a volume that ends with Maya's return to Vivian Baxter after she realizes how close to the edge she

has come, as a woman and as a mother. It is strongest in *A Song Flung Up*, although there are initial conflicts because Vivian does not sympathize with Maya's feelings about the assassination of Malcolm X.

Maya's enduring love for her mother is movingly presented in "Mother and Freedom," a prose piece from her 1997 book *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*. At the end of our formal interview, Angelou took Ken and me to another room where

an array of galley sheets lay on the table. In her deep and captivating voice she

began to read about her love for Vivian Baxter, the mother who had let Maya go:

“She stood before me, a dolled-up pretty yellow woman, seven inches shorter than my six-foot bony frame” ( *Stars* 47). The piece goes back and forth, from mother to daughter to mother, ending in a chilling account of her mother’s dying;

this once-vibrant woman “lies hooked by pale blue wires to an oxygen tank, fighting cancer for her life” ( *Stars* 48). It is clear that Vivian Baxter, who once existed outside of Maya’s “family,” had returned to her daughter to be freed.

Angelou’s touching memoir *Mom & Me & Mom*, written in 2013, ends poignantly with the passing of Vivian Baxter, who died in Winston-Salem, North Carolina,

in 1991 at the age of seventy-nine ( *Essence* 2014, 106).

It seems, though, that Maya's greatest love within her family has been for her

son, Guy Johnson. In the second and third volumes Maya generally calls her son

by the name of Clyde. At the end of *Singin' and Swingin'*, having recovered from his sense of abandonment, Clyde announces, "My name is Guy" (237). Guy insists

on this new name and trains his friends and family to accept it. As for his surname, he kept the name Johnson, his mother's maiden name. "He had always

had that name. It's a very big and important name for us, my family" ("Icon"

1997). For the sake of clarity, Maya's son will be called "Guy" throughout *The Iconic Self*.

Guy's presence permeates most of the books following *Caged Bird*. He was the source of her problems and the source of her joy. She is his father, his mother, his sister, his teacher, and his inspiration. He was the child she deserted when she was a professional dancer in Europe and the young man who disappointed her

terribly when he had an affair with a woman in Ghana older than she was. As

McPherson has observed, “Angelou becomes all the forms of family for her child

and thus provides him with the security she has craved” (1990, 15).

Guy was also, like his famous mother, a writer. On his page in the African American website [aalbc.com](http://aalbc.com), he notes that he had been writing since he was eighteen and had tried out his skills in a variety of disciplines: painting, sketching, photography, playing in a band. “The great thing about being the son

of Maya Angelou is that I had the good fortune to grow up around some of the

greatest black artists, dancers, singers, musicians, and actors of our time” (1).

Judging from a sonnet that he read at his mother’s funeral, he was also a poet.

Guy Johnson’s two novels, published by Random House, were favorably

reviewed and are available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). The first, *Standing at the Scratch Line* (1998), is a “fast-paced, intelligent, and extremely violent first novel,” which traces the actions of hero LeRoi Tremain after he murders two white lawmen at

the beginning of World War I. The second, *Echoes of a Distant Summer* (2002), concerns the relationship between Jackson St.



Clair Tremain and his estranged grandfather. The author has a following at the *Guy Johnson Forum*, where readers are anxiously waiting for more books.

In *A Song Flung Up* Angelou writes that Guy had been “Western Airline’s first black junior executive” (176). Guy’s status thus recalls his mother’s being the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. In our “Icon” interview Angelou mentioned that Guy is now married for the second time. She also implied, without being specific, that he is not in good health: “My son Guy feels that he is losing quite a bit of his mobility. He sits in a wheelchair. So I am designing a large bed-sit so he won’t have to come up the steps or down the steps to go to the bedroom” (“Icon” 1997).

Guy’s health was a painful issue throughout the autobiographies, from his skin

disease in *Singin' and Swingin'* to his broken limbs in *Traveling Shoes* to yet another car accident in *A Song Flung Up*. Angelou's respectful silence concerning Guy is understandable, for his well-being is a matter close to his mother's heart.

When asked about her love for her son, she said, "I'll always be a mother. That's

really it. If you are really a mother you can let go.... Because love liberates. That's what it does. It says, I love you. Wherever you go, I love you" ("Icon" 1997).

One striking aspect of Angelou's character was her unabashed honesty in

describing her ability to love. In her interviews and books, from *Caged Bird*, where she deliberately approached a young man to prove her femininity, to *A*

*Song Flung Up*, where she and Dolly McPherson unwittingly share a handsome African lover, Angelou is open about her sexual relationships. She was married at

least three times—first in 1951 or 1952, to a Greek sailor; then, unofficially in 1961, to a South African militant; third, in 1973, to an English builder and writer.

Marriage, Angelou told Tricia Crane in 1987, is a serious personal commitment,

trivialized by our shallow, soap opera culture. “So I no longer say I’ve been married X amount of times because I know it will not be understood” (Crane in

Elliot 1989, 177).

Angelou discusses her first two marriages in *Singin’ and Swingin’* and *The Heart of a Woman*, respectively. The third marriage, to Paul Du Feu, took place in 1973, about seven years after Angelou had returned from Ghana. This

relationship occurred too late to have been treated within the framework of the

existing autobiographies, although she gives it considerable attention in the book of short essays, *Even the Stars Look*

*Lonesome* (1997).

Du Feu seems to have been the most satisfying and the most supportive man in

her life. A celebrity in his own right, he had formerly been married to Australian feminist Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*, published in 1970, the same year as *Caged Bird*. Greer, a controversial debater of women's issues, contested the views of television's prime intellectual William F. Buckley, of American novelist Norman Mailer, and of other stouthearted challengers.

Angelou claims that she had no prior knowledge of Du Feu's earlier marriage to

Greer (Crane 1989, 177).

Du Feu was the author of *Let's Hear It for the Long-Legged Women*, a tantalizing title that I have tried repeatedly to order through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

without success. He had also done a centerfold, almost nude, for the English edition of *Cosmopolitan*, in which his body was sprayed in gold. According to Stephanie Caruana, Du Feu was “the English equivalent of Burt Reynolds” (1989,

30).

When I asked about this amazing husband, Angelou painted him in a more professional light: “I was married to a builder, and he told me and told me that

building had nothing to do with strength, physical strength. Nor did it have anything to do with sexuality. Instead, it was a matter of being able to look past a wall to the other side” (“Icon” 1997). He had urged Angelou to tell the truth as a writer and not to let her writings be determined by what her readers would think

when, in her second autobiography, *Gather Together*, she revealed that she had been a prostitute. Paul’s advice was to be honest about it, to just “say it” (“Icon”

1997).

One of the loveliest segments of *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* is her reminiscence of their marriage. She writes of their life together: “We were a rather eccentric, loving, unusual couple determined to live life with flair and laughter” (1997, 5). But the

marriage gradually disintegrated. Looking back at the relationship, Angelou speculates that she and Paul were victims of the houses they bought. In the first house there were so many modern appliances that Paul,

an architect, had nothing to fix. In the other, with its view of the Golden Gate

Bridge, Maya felt jinxed. Whenever she tried to fry chicken or bake bread, her efforts failed, as if the house hated her. After their separation, Maya moved to North Carolina in order to avoid the pain of running into her or his

“replacement” ( *Stars* 1997, 8). In summarizing her relationship with Paul, she told Tricia Crane, “It was a great marriage, though we wore it out, we just used it up”



(1989, 178).

Angelou in no way abandoned her affections for men after she and Du Feu divorced in 1980. She told a reporter: “I really enjoy men,” then added, “I really enjoy women, too, but not sexually” (Crockett 1997, E1, 8). One of the short essays in *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* is “A Song to Sensuality,” in which she describes her love for color, sound, and taste: “I want the crunch of hazelnuts between my teeth and ice cream melting on my tongue” ( *Stars* 38). Angelou keeps her senses alive, open to sexual experiences but not dependent on them. As

her autobiographies and personal essays reveal, she did not permit any of her sexual relationships to dominate her being.

The Work Schedule

During the early days of her first marriage to Tosh Angelos, Maya wanted nothing more than to cook and keep house. Her floors were shiny; her meals

“well balanced”; and her life a tribute to *Good Housekeeping*, a popular magazine for housewives ( *Singin’ and Swingin’* 26). This attitude did not prevail, nor did the marriage. And when in the late 1960s she began seriously to write, she set up

a work schedule as rigorous as any housewife’s list of daily chores.

Angelou’s schedule is described in a number of interviews. Carol Sarler

reported that Angelou got up at five in the morning and drove to a hotel room,

where the staff had been instructed to remove any pictures from the walls.

“There’s me, the Bible, *Roget’s Thesaurus* and some good, dry sherry and I’m at work by 6:30” (Angelou, quoted by Sarler, 1989, 216–17). She wrote on legal pads

while lying on the bed. Later, at home, she would edit the material, reducing ten

or more pages down to four or so. One intriguing aspect of visiting the Maya Angelou Archives at the Schomburg Center is being able to see her actual handwriting on the legal pads and then

being able to compare it to her whittled-down, typed or inked revisions.

Given this routine, one might surmise that a good deal of Angelou's success during the years since Accra was based on her self-determination. Following a schedule enabled her to allocate sufficient time and energy for her many projects.

The writing ritual, one that she had used for years, indicates a firmness of purpose and a responsible use of time.

Nor should Angelou's writing routine be viewed as some dreadful ordeal that

must be over by lunchtime. It was rather a part of the process of living, a time to focus on the adventures of her life, give them

form, and make them into art: “Life is pure adventure, and the sooner we realize that, the quicker we will be able to

treat life as art” ( *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* 66).

## Education

In Stamps, Arkansas, with Mrs. Flowers and on her own, Maya developed a love for the works of Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, and James Weldon Johnson. At the same time, she was also reading black women

writers such as Frances Harper, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, and Jessie Fauset (“Icon” 1997). These writers served as role models and inspirations

on Angelou's path toward self-enlightenment.

A well-read individual even as a child, thoroughly committed to words and ideas as a young woman, Marguerite Annie Johnson was graduated with honors

in the eighth grade from the Lafayette County Training School in Stamps. Soon

after, in 1941, the thirteen-year-old Maya and her brother left the familiarity of their grandmother's store for their mother's boardinghouse in San Francisco, where Vivian Baxter lived with her new husband, a gambler named Daddy

Clidell. She attended George Washington High School where she was befriended

by Miss Kirwin, a teacher who, like Mrs. Flowers from *Stamps*, took a special interest in Maya's education. She also received a scholarship to study dance and

theater at the California Labor (Mission) School. She graduated from George Washington High School in 1945, at the end World War II, more than eight months into her pregnancy with Guy.

The autobiographies, especially *Caged Bird* and *Gather Together*, are very much concerned with what Maya knew and how she learned it. As the reader is

quick to discover, her most intense learning resulted from personal relationships: family, travel, and growing up as a black woman in white America.

## Further Achievements

When *A Song Flung Up* was published in 2002, Maya Angelou was seventy-four years of age. By then her life was rich in achievements of a personal, political, and artistic nature, enough to make one breathless. This section provides a representative list of Angelou's accomplishments in a number of art

forms—poetry; children's books; musings; writing for theater, television, and film; directing; acting; cookbooks; and oral presentation.

### *Poetry*

Many followers of Maya Angelou have identified her as poet first, an



autobiographer second. Angelou reportedly wrote her first poem when she was

fifteen (Hagen 1997, 19). She was still writing major poetry until 2013, one year

before her death. Speech, writing, and song were in her mind-interwoven

disciplines. In my 1997 “Icon” interview, her answers to the questions I asked about the art of autobiography were constantly disrupted by spontaneous

recitations or by switching the topic; often she illustrated her comments with song.

As a child, Angelou was affected by the ideas and rhythms of lyric poetry. In

*Caged Bird* she is quite specific in acknowledging her debt to William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, and James Weldon Johnson. In the interview of June 16, 1997, Angelou insisted that black women poets also affected her; she mentioned in particular Georgia Douglas Johnson, a poet who wrote with

emotion about gender and from whom she took the title of her fourth

autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*. Other black women poets the young Angelou admired were Frances Harper and Anne Spencer: “Frances Harper

meant a lot to me. Georgia Douglas Johnson. Anne Spencer. And Jessie Fauset”

(“Icon” 1997). In one of the reflections that appeared in *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (42) Angelou quoted from Frances Harper’s poem, “The Slave Auction.”

Anne Spencer (1882–1975) appealed to Angelou for her poignant ballad, “Lady, Lady” (1925), about a servant whose hands had been bleached white from

detergent, and for other ballads illustrating the oppression of black women. Jessie

Fauset (1884–1961) was a poet known for being the literary editor of *The Crisis*, founded by W.E.B. Du Bois, a renowned black

intellectual. Fauset was the most

prolific novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, which roughly covered the years 1919 to 1929, and one of its most educated spokespersons. It is possible that from Fauset Angelou obtained models for plot construction, character development, and the centrality of the mother/child motif.

When she was young, Angelou was intrigued by several white women poets.

She appreciated the romantic and lyrical qualities of Emily Dickinson (1830–

1886); echoes of Dickinson's familiar ballad form can be heard in some of Angelou's poems. She also enjoyed the passion of Edna

St. Vincent Millay (1892–

1950) and the caustic humor of Dorothy Parker (1893–1967):

“They are funny and

wry,” she remarked in appreciation of Millay and Parker. “I’m rarely wry. I think

I’m funny. I love to be funny” (“Icon” 1997).

When asked about the influence of African and Asian poets on her work she

clearly acknowledged Kwesi Brew, the Ghanaian poet to whom she refers in *All*

*God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* and in *A Song Flung Up*.  
“Oh yes,” she told me, “Kwesi influenced me and still does. But  
the early influences, I had no idea

African poets even existed early on.” She explained that African  
poets were not

published in the United States while she was growing up. One of  
the first African

poets who came to her attention was Senegalese statesman  
Leopold Senghor, and

that was not until she was an adult. She was more familiar with  
Chinese and Japanese poets than with African poets because  
they were available (“Icon” 1997).

Following her first volume with Random House in 1971, Angelou published at

least eight separate volumes and a number of separately published ceremonial poems. Her best-loved poems —“Phenomenal Woman,” “And Still I Rise,” and

“Willie”—were included in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House, 1994). In 2015 Random House released an updated volume of the

poetry, entitled *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry*. Poems discussed in this chapter are from the 2015 edition and are indicated parenthetically in the text by the initials CP. She also published many other poems, either separately or in special collections.

The dual nature of Angelou's talent is underscored by the fact that within several years of each other, her work earned two major nominations. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, received the National Book Award nomination

in 1970. One year later a collection of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water*

*'Fore I Diiiie*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. She could have achieved a distinguished writing career pursuing either one of these genres. Astonishingly,

she did both, so that in the prolific 1970s and 1980s a new book of poetry emerged shortly before or after a new autobiography.



According to Lyman B. Hagen, “Angelou’s poems are dramatic and lyrical. Her

style is open, direct, unambiguous, and conversational. The diction is plain but sometimes the metaphors are quite striking” (1997, 130). Of the various topics treated in her poetry, the most frequent seem to be love, black men, black women, drugs, religion, and slavery. Often these inter-related themes are held together by references to *song*, as in the 1983 collection *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing*.

Like the Protestant hymn and like the blues, Angelou’s poems often introduce

a major clause that is repeated throughout the remaining stanzas.  
Music historian

Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka) once defined the blues as a “verse form” having a specific social context that includes “love, sex, tragedy in interpersonal relationships, death, travel, loneliness, etc.” (1963, 50). Angelou uses blues themes throughout *The Complete Poetry*, for example, in “No Loser, No Weeper” (CP 12) and in “Now Long Ago” (CP 68).

In *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* Angelou began experimenting not only with African American musical patterns but also with the creation of a *persona* through whom she could express her emotions. The “I”

of “No Loser, No Weeper” is not Angelou but a jealous woman who addresses a

rival. Similarly, her famous “phenomenal woman” is not necessarily the poet but

a universal woman who exhibits feelings of strength and overwhelming pride.

“Phenomenal Woman” (CP 126–27) is one of Angelou’s best-loved poems. The

*persona* or narrative voice is a large, heel-clicking female of unspecified race, although most readers would assume her to be black. The poem consists of four

stanzas of more than a dozen lines each, with each stanza divided by the words “I

say,” followed by a recital of female attributes—flashing eyes, riding breasts, arching back, clicking heels, and so forth. Angelou had recited and recorded

“Phenomenal Woman” so often that critics assume that the poet is the subject, the

“I” of the poem. I would argue instead that although the subject has certain predominant African American features, “Phenomenal Woman” can be

convincingly performed by a dynamic woman of any race and of smaller stature.

“Still I Rise” (CP 159–60) has a similar hypnotic power. The boastful narrator

taunts a “You,” who appears to be white. The poem begins in ballad form; it then

changes tempo in the eighth and ninth stanzas, becoming a series of couplets punctuated by the words “I rise.” Metaphors reveal that the narrator is black (“I’m a black ocean”) and female (“I’ve got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs....”) The word *rise* appears ten times in the poem and is a constant rhyme word. The accumulation of rising sounds creates an upward movement, a worldly

resurrection. Both in her poetry and in her prose Angelou was captivated by the

notion of rising, an idea that is implied in the UP-word of her 2002

autobiography, *A Song Flung Up*. Her concept of rising seems to echo the Old and New Testaments, the *Baptist Hymnal*, the Negro spiritual, and other sources.

Unfortunately, Angelou's poetry is not always pristine. Too often she employs

large words unnecessarily, for example, in "California Prodigal" (CP 137–38), where words such as *phantasmatalities* and *fulminant* are inaccessible to the casual reader. This occasional use of pedantic language contrasts sharply with Angelou's more direct and intense lyrics, especially "The Traveler" (CP 153), an

eight-line ballad that addresses the theme of loneliness, and "When Great Trees

Fall” (CP 258–59), a moving poem about lost souls.

If Angelou had written only this collection of poems she would still have had a

dedicated following, especially among college audiences, where she would

entrance the crowd with her sharp wit and her vibrant poetry. By the time she

was in her sixties she had become a television personality, known for her earlier

role in Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1977), for her 1993 Grammy Award for Best-Spoken Word Album ( *Essence* 2014, 109), and for her

numerous appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show. In addition, her popular lectures on university campuses gave Dr. Angelou a visibility unusual among American poets. An aware public

immediately recognized her expressive face and her deep voice.

However, she received her greatest public recognition when, at the age of sixty-five, she read “On the Pulse of Morning” at the 1993 inauguration of William Clinton. Many critics think that Angelou’s ultimate greatness will be attributed to two achievements: her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged*

*Bird Sings*, and her poem “On the Pulse of Morning,” works in two different genres written more than two decades apart. It was not only the inauguration



poem itself; it was also the vitality of her performance, as she used skills gleaned from years of acting and speaking to arouse the nation.

Before Angelou, only one other American poet, Robert Frost, had read an inauguration poem, at the swearing in of John F. Kennedy in 1961. Angelou was

the first black, the first woman. When Maya Angelou read “On the Pulse of Morning,” she bathed in the magic then surrounding the new administration. The

poem, like the incoming president, offered the dream of hope—for Native

Americans, gays, the homeless, Eskimos, Jews, West Africans, and Muslims. It is

a long poem, over one hundred lines, televised on satellite and delivered electronically around the world. Clippings and reviews on file at the Schomburg

Center for Research in Black Culture—from Spain, New Zealand, the

Netherlands, England, and Vatican City—confirm the ode's positive reception throughout the modern world.

Angelou's theatrical rendering of "On the Pulse of Morning" is above all a return to African American oral tradition, when slaves

like Frederick Douglass stood on platforms in abolitionist meeting halls to register their concerns about

the slave system. The ode also echoes the rhetorical grace of the African American sermon, as practiced and modified by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm

X, Jesse Jackson, and Louis Farrakhan.

“On the Pulse of Morning” (CP 263–66) is a poem rich with contemporary references to toxic waste and pollution—the subjects of the 1992 United Nations

Conference on Environment and Development. References to mastodons and

dinosaurs suggest the prehistoric beasts of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film, *Jurassic Park*. In these and other instances Angelou writes with passion about contemporary concerns.

The inaugural ode is also influenced, as are the autobiographies, by numerous

African American poets through the oral tradition of spirituals like "Roll, Jordan, Roll" and the written poetry of Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and others—

influences that I have addressed in greater detail in my essay published in the commemorative issue of *College Language Association Journal*. In addition, "On the Pulse of Morning" contains echoes of modern African poets and folk artists

such as Kwesi Brew and Efua Sutherland, artists who helped Angelou make contact with African religious beliefs and contemporary African poetry. Finally,

“On the Pulse of Morning” is a semiautobiographical poem, one that emerges

from her conflicts as an American; her experiences as a traveler; her achievements in public speaking and acting; and her wisdom, gleaned from years

of self-exploration.

In the next sixteen years Angelou further demonstrated her strength as a poet/performer in front of mass audiences. Her achievements include “A Brave and Startling Truth” (June 1995),

written to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations; the “Million Man March Poem” (October 16,

1995), read before a huge crowd in Washington, D.C.; “Amazing Peace”

(December 1, 2005), a poem that celebrated the lighting of the National Christmas

Tree; “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me,” a mass-marketed poem in praise of her mother, Vivian Baxter (2006); a prose/poem in honor of Hilary Clinton published

in the *London Observer* on January 20, 2008; an elegy, “We Had Him,” written by Angelou but recited by the actress Queen Latifah at the funeral of singer Michael

Jackson in July 2009; and “His Day Is Done,” an elegy for the South African leader Nelson Mandela (December 10, 2013). These poems, many still available on

YouTube and other audio and visual sites, are assurances that Angelou’s fame, like Michael Jackson’s, will outlast their deaths. The 2015 Random House edition

of her poetry contains the long poems listed earlier, as well as a poem on Oprah

Winfrey’s fiftieth birthday: a poem written for the Children’s Defense Fund; a poem about her ancestors; a poem celebrating a boy’s Bar Mitzvah; a vigil to the

Creator; a prayer to “Father Mother God”; and a poem on the occasion of the 2008

Olympics. The elegy to Michael Jackson is not included.

Each of Angelou’s commemorative poems befits a poet laureate—one who is

singled out for a significant achievement, especially in the arts or sciences. In England, poet laureates William Wordsworth and Alfred Lord Tennyson were

appointed to write verse on grand occasions. In some American jurisdictions, in



the state of Maryland, for example, there is a state laureate, an office that African American poet Lucille Clifton (1936–2012) held for several years. Clifton was the

author of many compassionate poems, including “Miss Rosie,” a blues tribute to a

haggard “wet brown bag of a woman” who had once been the prize of Georgia.

Angelou cites “Miss Rosie” in *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997, 121–22), feeling that the poem explains how the poor and lonely are still able to stand up

and reach for a higher place in society.

The United States has had a national poet laureate since 1986, when Robert

Penn Warren was the first person to be bestowed with that honor. The position is attached to that of the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, with the poet laureate a spokesperson for the arts who is required to give at least one public reading a year. Angelou, so closely connected to the African American tradition

represented by Lucille Clifton and by former American laureate Rita Dove, was

always exploring her own desire to create meaningful art, what she calls “art for

the sake of the soul” ( *Stars* 119). Yet despite Angelou’s increasing productivity and her performances at national and international celebrations, and although she had many fans who thought she really *was* the country’s poet laureate, Maya Angelou was never appointed to that official position (Armenti 2014).

### *Musings*

In a 1986 essay, “My Grandson, Home at Last,” published in the popular magazine, *Woman’s Day*, Angelou traced the efforts to rescue Guy’s son, Colin, who had been kidnapped by Guy’s estranged wife. The story, written from a grandmother’s perspective, describes Guy’s pain as a parent and reminds the reader of Maya’s own anxiety as she tried to recover Guy from his own kidnapping by Big Mary Dalton, related in the powerful sequence of mother-loss

in *Gather Together*.

The delicate personal essay in *Woman's Day* seems to be the antecedent of two books of prose reflections, what Angelou's publisher labels on the dust jacket of

*Even the Stars Look Lonesome* a "wise book." A wise book; a collection of informal essays; a series of musings, observations, meditations, or reflections, often interspersed with poetry—each term aptly describes the unconfined genre that Angelou had selected for her more casual prose writings.

The first of the two reflections, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

(1993), is dedicated to her close friend, the prodigious talk-show hostess Oprah Winfrey. The title is from a Negro spiritual, part of which Angelou sang during

the “Icon” interview. “It’s such a great song, you know. It’s a song from slavery.

It’s got the most amazing kind of spirit.” Then, without a pause, Angelou started

to sing: “I’m on my journey now *Mt. Zion...And I wouldn’t take nothin’* for my journey now” (“Icon” 1997).

Although the title suggests that the book will develop the theme of the journey

that dominates her autobiographies, the journeys that occur between its pages are

more contemplative than narrative, reminiscent of traditional Asian poetry or of the kind of short meditations dating back to the *Analects* of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC). Whereas the Confucian reflections were told by a male to males, Angelou alters the traditional gender expectations in both books of musings, rendering her advice from a woman's perspective.

*Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* is a tiny book, consisting of a mere 139 pages. Nonetheless, Angelou manages to say a lot within the scope of

the text, on topics that range from instructions on how to be creative with fabrics to profound issues dealing with death,

racism, Christianity, and West African religious beliefs. There are also solid representations of Angelou's quoted sayings, including the well-known statement: "Human beings are more alike than unlike" (11).

The book is at its best when it is autobiographical—when it recounts episodes

involving Maya's brother or son or mother or grandmother, or when it presents a

separate episode consistent with the Maya character of the autobiographies. The

section, “New Directions,” for instance, further relates the heroic story from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* about how Annie Henderson saved her family

during the Great Depression by selling homemade meat pies to area factory workers. Other segments involving Annie Henderson include a fantasy in which

Maya sees her grandmother standing “thousands of feet up in the air on nothing

visible” (74). This exaggerated description of Annie’s physical and spiritual power is reminiscent of similar scenes in *Caged Bird*, although the mystery of Annie’s faith seems less convincing here because it is treated briefly and outside the broader autobiographical framework.



In a comparable sketch, Angelou creates an engaging portrait of her Aunt Tee

from Los Angeles, an old woman who had spent almost sixty years working for

white families and observing the sadness of their lives. As her employers began

to age and no longer need her services, Aunt Tee started to throw parties every

Saturday night, with fried chicken, dancing, and card playing. One night she discovers her elderly employers peeking in at the party, begging to be allowed to

just sit and watch. The Aunt Tee vignette is effective, although Angelou uses it

not as a narrative in itself but as a springboard to reflect on life and art and money and power, a typical technique in constructing an essay. This kind of sketch, interesting as it might be, demands the structural cohesion of the longer,

autobiographical work to make it part of a larger pattern and not a mere snippet.

Of the various autobiographical moments in *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, the one that seems to sustain itself most effectively is "Extending the Boundaries." The seven-page story is sufficiently developed to convey a narrative sense; it also gives us a Maya with the three-dimensional sophistication of

character that we find in *The Heart of a Woman*, in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, and in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*; she is a woman admired for her achievements but pitied for her inappropriate behavior and faulty

conclusions.

In “Extending the Boundaries,” Angelou describes being honored in the late 1960s at Terry’s Pub, a bar for “the black and hip in New York City” (107), after

having been named the *New York Post*’s Person of the Week. The regulars toast and cheer her and then eventually go back to their accustomed patterns. Having

drunk at least five martinis and desperately in search of a partner, she interrupts a group of African American journalists and begins a litany of her skills in housekeeping, cooking, languages, and lovemaking. She demands to know why,

with all of those qualities, she isn't acceptable to them. In a painful moment of

self-awareness, Angelou realizes that she had "overstepped the written rules which I knew I should have respected. Instead, I had brazenly and boldly come to

their table and spoken out on, of all things, loneliness" (111). She starts to cry.

Later she is escorted home by a sympathetic but critical male friend, who leaves her at the door. After she sobers up, she begins to reflect on her marriage to Tosh Angelos and on her sexuality in general. Because the marriage to Tosh

had failed, she has been determined not to look for love except among African

Americans. Her experience with the black men in the bar, though, had somehow

changed her opinion. If a man came along, whatever his race, she would “not struggle too hard” as long as he was sincere and could make her laugh (113).

This mini-episode, seemingly detached from the autobiographies, is

nonetheless related to them by way of her needs, her aggressiveness, her lack of

control. Similar in tone to the embarrassing quarrel with her husband's mistress

in *The Heart of a Woman* and to the angry exchange with a man who tries to pick her up in a bar in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, "Exceeding the Boundaries"

reveals a narrator more distraught and misguided than would be expected in a more conventional self-portrait. The pervading autobiographical content saves

*Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* from its tendency to sermonize on proper conduct or virtue, as in the sermon on death (“Death and the Legacy”) or

the several paragraphs on the morality of planting and cultivation (“At

Harvestime”).

*Even the Stars Look Lonesome* was published in 1997, four years after *Journey*.

It is similar in emphasis and layout, although the text is six pages longer. At the time of our interview, Angelou was proofing the final copy and confidently anticipating the release of *Stars*: “I think it’s the best writing I’ve ever done”

(“Icon” 1997). The book of reflections candidly discusses her mother Vivian Baxter, her husband Vusumsi Make, her son Guy, and other people prominent in

the autobiographies. It also contains excellent discussions about African history, West African art, and aging.

Two of the most enjoyable essays are, first, “Art for the Sake of the Soul,”

which begins with Lucille Clifton’s “Miss Rosie” and recollects, among other things, an impromptu concert in Morocco that occurred during the original *Porgy and Bess* tour in the mid-1950s. A dancer and not a singer, Angelou was called on to perform. Unable to offer an operatic rendition, she sang Momma Henderson’s



favorite spiritual, “I’m a poor pilgrim of sorrow,” to the shouting and clapping of the almost five thousand people in the audience. The essay moves from her autobiographical experience to a statement on the universality of art, ending with a strong plea for governmental funding of projects in the arts.

In a provocative 1955 interview with Ken Kelley of *Mother Jones* magazine, she spoke out against conservatives in the government who want to stop funding

for the arts: “The conservative right has decided that artists are apart from the people. That’s *ridiculous!* I mean, at our best the writer, painter, architect, actor, dancer, folk singer—we *are* the people” (1995, n.p.). She advises artists to sing, dance, and perform in public places so that the young do not have to surrender

their dreams.

The second recollection in *Stars* that has tremendous vitality is “Rural Museums—Southern Romance.” Also concerned with art and the preservation of

culture, “Rural Museums” is a grim recounting of Angelou’s journey to a slave museum in Louisiana, not far from Baton Rouge. The artifacts included a depressing statue of a bent figure, “Uncle Jack,” the exemplary Negro slave; an overseer’s house; a slave collar; nineteenth-century carriages being buffed by an

African American male; and some still-standing slave cabins, very neatly furnished. In Angelou’s view, the museum captured in its orderly presentations

“the romance of slavery” while eliminating any real sense of the brutality, the beatings, the cramped hovels, the exhaustion, the hunger. Missing from the reconstructed scene was “our historical truth” (94), truth being just what a museum should uphold. Having visited this same historical site in 2012, I strongly agree with her conclusions.

Although both of these wise books make use of the travel motif, that theme is

more central to *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* than to its earlier, journey-titled companion piece. Angelou gives the reader some priceless glimpses of her iconic

self in each of the collections, although the frequent citations of poetry seem out of proportion if what the reader anticipates is an

updated array of insights from

the woman whose autobiographies have set the standard for length, breadth, and

historical relevance.

In assessing Angelou's two early books of reflections, one must be cautious in

not confusing genres. The reader should be continually aware that both *Journey* and *Stars* contain a great deal of quoted secondary material. Above all, the reader should know that they are not autobiographies. Journalist Sandra Crockett, in a

September 1997 article in the *Baltimore Sun*, identifies *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* as part of Angelou's "continuing series of autobiographical books" (E1, 8). Although both texts clearly have autobiographical moments, they are in no way a continuation of the solid, book-length journeys into the self that Angelou

has been conducting since the 1970 appearance of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Neither *Journey* nor *Stars*, collections of short, informal essays, should be mistaken for autobiography.

Two later publications, *Letter to My Daughter* (2008) and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), can also be classified as musings. The first of these is not actually a "letter"

but rather a collection of short chapters about "growing up, unexpected

emergencies, a few poems, some light stories to make you laugh and some to make you meditate” (xi). The hypothetical “daughter” of the title refers to the long list of women to whom the book is dedicated, women who mothered her or

allowed themselves to be mothered: Vivian Baxter, Berdis Baldwin, Oprah

Winfrey, Gayle B. King, Annie Henderson, and thirteen other women. Implied in

this list of daughters is an imagined second person, the reader.

*Letter to My Daughter* is a pastiche of stories, aphorisms, recollections, revelations, and vignettes. Here one finds a number of tributes to women, among

them Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom

Party; Coretta Scott King (1927–2006), Angelou’s close friend, civil rights activist, and the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr.; Cuban singer Celia Cruz (1925–2003).

The slim volume contains as well a commencement address; an essay on

vulgarity; a remembrance of being beaten by a ferocious lover named Two Fingers Mark; an essay on poetry; an essay on violence; an essay on the national

spirit; a poem, “Surviving”; a concluding essay on Momma Henderson.

Perhaps the single most disappointing essay is “Poetry” (153–57), in which Angelou quotes fragments of poems by black writers—from Langston Hughes to

Mari Evans, from Sterling A. Brown to Aime Césaire—praising their

“negritude” but making almost no comment on their importance as poets. The essay, a fairly sophomoric appreciation of black poetry, does not convey the perspective of a woman who had been greatly admired for her achievements in

that genre. Given that Angelou by 2008 was an established poet, her omission of

a critical viewpoint is disconcerting.



*Letter to My Daughter* ends with the book's most touching portrait, a recollection about her paternal grandmother called "Keep the Faith." The two-page musing reintroduces the Momma of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, with her soft voice, her colossal presence, and her Christian devotion. In a brilliant periodic sentence near the end of the vignette, Angelou describes Annie

Henderson in terms of gospel music: "Whenever I began to question whether God

exists, I looked up to the sky, and surely there, right there, between the sun and moon, stands my grandmother, singing a long meter hymn, a song somewhere between a moan and a lullaby and I know faith is the evidence of things unseen"

(166).

*Mom & Me & Mom*, an autobiographical account of her relationship with her mother, was published the year before Angelou's death. The musing begins with

Vivian Baxter's birth in St. Louis, Missouri, to a Trinidadian father and to a mother of Irish descent. It ends with the dedication of the Vivian B. Baxter State Park in Stockton, California, in 1995, four years after her mother's death from lung cancer. The memoir presents a different view of Vivian Baxter than the one

the reader encounters in the six-book autobiographical series. It is more critical,

more severe, and more ambivalent. While it extolls "Lady B" for being founder and president of the Stockton Black Women of Humanity and a board member

for United Way and several other civic organizations, it presents a more violent

side, probably provoked by Vivian's being raised in a rough family known as the

“Bad Baxters” (4).

Angelou reveals that when she was two years old, Vivian hit her child with such violence that she fell off the porch. In another recollection Vivian confesses to having struck her then teenage daughter with a heavy ring of keys because Maya had come home late one night. The facial swelling was so severe that Bailey, usually overwhelmingly fond of his mother, threatens to leave the house:

“Nobody, but nobody, beats up my baby sister” (57). In yet another episode Bailey, convinced that his mother is cheating on her husband, is so appalled that

he joins the merchant marines.

The reader also learns that Vivian Baxter packs a pistol. When she and her daughter reserve a room in a recently integrated Fresno, California, hotel, Maya

sees her mother’s .38 revolver in the suitcase. Vivian remarks: “If they were not

ready for integration, I was ready to show it to them. Baby, you try to be ready

for every situation you run into” (141).

Angelou frequently contrasts Vivian’s delicate stature to her own awkward size, Vivian’s beautiful face to her own solemn countenance, Vivian’s bravado to

her own reticence. As Guy had been the center of Angelou’s early

autobiographies, so is Vivian Baxter the focus in *Mom & Me & Mom*. Much of the story of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is retold—the abandonment, the train trip to Arkansas, the muteness, the rape. But the mother-daughter narrative essentially begins when Maya is thirteen. In a reversal of the earlier train trip, Maya and Momma Henderson travel from Arkansas to the Baxter boardinghouse

in California. Maya's initial refusal to call Vivian "Mother" is further traumatized after Bailey's arrival. Her brother, enamored by his long-lost mother, comes close to rejecting his sister.

The musing moves back and forth in time as Angelou recalls her teenage pregnancy, her European tour, her brother Bailey's addiction to heroin, and her

California visit with her father and his wife, Loretta. The most bizarre recollection involves being severely beaten by a lover, Two Fingers Mark. Maya

is saved from near death by Vivian, who comes to Mark's room with "three huge

men” (87). These strong-armed rescuers clearly recall and most likely are Vivian Baxter’s brothers, who intervened in Maya’s childhood rape by kicking Mr.

Freeman to death.

A later episode covers Angelou’s tenure in Sweden, where a screenplay she had written was being filmed. After several clashes with the leading actors, Maya

is banned from the movie set except to dress the female star’s hair. Distraught,

she calls her “smart, glamorous, sophisticated mother” (167), who flies

immediately to Stockholm to smooth things over. Throughout these and other recollections Maya places her mother at her side, in the center of the action. She praises her mother for her spunk. Simultaneously, Vivian applauds her daughter,

claiming that Maya Angelou will someday be famous.

This open and ambivalent portrait of Vivian Baxter is not without its flaws.

One is that the structure, since it focusses on a single basic relationship, lacks a clearly developed plot line. Its main weakness, however, is Angelou's tendency to

repeat whole segments of previously published material, especially from the 2008



musings, *Letter to My Daughter* but also at times from the autobiographies.

Chapter 22 of *Mom & Me & Mom* (133–37) is a slight revision of her unsuccessful visit to a psychiatric clinic, followed by a helpful session with her friend Frederick Wilkerson (cf. *Letter*, 64–67). The riffs on philanthropy (16) and on her landlady Mrs. Jefferson's mysterious spaghetti (77) are repeated from the 2008

musings as well ( *Letter*, 11–12; 51). The episode involving Two Fingers Mark is laboriously retold.

The problem in these instances is most likely a lack of careful editing. It is also possible that Angelou, so accustomed to telling stories, was by this stage in her

life running out of fresh material or had become careless with her notes. In any

event, she was well aware of the tendency toward repetition when she writes about Two Fingers Mark: “It is a story indelibly seared into my mind, and I’ve

told part of it before” ( *Mom & Me & Mom*, 83).

Maya’s description of the death of her mother had also appeared in other texts

but never so eloquently as in *Mom & Me & Mom*. Vivian, diagnosed with lung cancer and emphysema, was given only three months to live. Thinking that only

she could give her mother the best care, Maya initiated another train ride, from

San Francisco to North Carolina, from the west to the south.  
Under the care of

Maya and Bailey's daughter Rosa, Vivian began to improve.  
When Angelou was

offered a three-week visiting professorship at England's University of Exeter, she at first declined but then accepted when Vivian insisted that she go. On her return she found Vivian in a coma. Maya's parting words to her were an expression of ambivalence: "You were a terrible mother of small children, but there has never been anyone greater than you as a mother of a young adult"

(197). The final line of the musing is a tribute to both mother and daughter, to

love and to memory: “I knew she deserved a daughter who loved her and had a

good memory, and she got one.” (197)

After Angelou’s death in 2014, Random House released *Rainbow in the Cloud:*

*The Wisdom and Spirit of Maya Angelou*. Like *Amazing Peace* and *Mom & Me & Mom*, this collection of sayings and aphorisms is a short book—a compilation of many of its author’s well-known and lesser-known comments on parenting,

childhood, diversity, God, black identity, laughter, independence, and other matters. Customer reviews on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Google.com](https://www.google.com), and [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com)

tend to praise the content of this posthumous musing rather than to offer critical evaluation. Monique, for example, wrote on the Amazon website: “Words of wisdom worth reading and meditating on from a lifetime of experiences, good and bad. Life is like that, isn’t it?” While the collection may appeal to the casual reader, its literary value is negligible.

### *Children’s Books*

Angelou’s children’s books, although listed in the Bibliography, belong outside

this survey, with the exception of *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1993), an illustrated version of a poem from her most popular volume, *And Still I Rise* (1978). *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* was done in collaboration with artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988). Its fear of the outside world is related thematically to Maya's fear of crosses and white invaders, eloquently depicted in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The short text offers a series of negative images—

barking dogs, ghosts, and so forth—all softened with the repeated line: “Life doesn't frighten me at all.” Thus Angelou relegates fear to the dream world.

Her message is an effort to combat the dreadful reality she experienced as a black child in Arkansas. It also speaks to the fears of many of today's African American children: the AIDS and

Ebola threats; guns in the streets and the schools; the high risk of poverty; gratuitous rape of the kind that Maya herself

had endured as a child. The poetic images are brilliantly complemented by Basquiat's illustrations of masked stick figures and black-faced grizzlies, testaments to urban violence that predict his own early death. Basquiat, friend of Andy Warhol and other famed New York artists, died at the age of 27 of an overdose of heroin-cocaine.

### *Cookbooks*

Preparing food for friends and guests was a favorite pastime for Maya

Angelou. She formalized this interest by publishing two cookbooks, *Hallelujah!*

*The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* (Random, 2004) and *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart* (Random, 2010).

*Hallelujah!* is a sumptuous treat—a combination of interesting recipes; great photographs of Angelou’s favorite dishes provided by Sockeye Studios; and marvelous autobiographical recollections, the best of them being about Stamps, Arkansas, and the cooking of Annie Henderson. In a section that includes a recipe

for her grandmother’s famous fried meat pies (2004, 59), Angelou tells a story of



how her grandfather left home one day, deserted his wife, and married a preacher's daughter. In order to provide for her two sons, Annie began to make

meat pies for two local factories, a cotton gin and a lumber mill. Eventually she

was able to build a hut between the factories so that she didn't have to haul a

coal pot and the pies back and forth from site to site. This hut eventually became the general store where Maya and Bailey grew up.

Many of the recipes are accompanied by anecdotes about friends visiting her in

North Carolina, among them Rosa Guy, Dolly McPherson, Oprah Winfrey, and

Nick Ashford, of the songwriting team Ashford and Simpson. In order to please

Nick Ashford, a vegetarian, she offered him a meatless Moroccan stew, a tomato

soufflé, and a mixed salad of romaine, dressing, tomato, and cucumber that was

so successful that she named it “Ashford salad '96” (211). When Ken and I dined

at her home on the evening of June 16, 1997, Angelou served a flavorful bean casserole and a take-out order of Mr. Bojangle's Southern Fried Chicken. Dolly

McPherson was also there for dinner and drinks.

*Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart* was published in 2010, when the author was in her early eighties and at an age when she had to watch

her diet. Doctors had warned about the possibility of high blood pressure and

diabetes. The solution to Angelou's weight problem was simple: eat what you want, but eat in moderation. By following her own

advice and not sacrificing flavor, Angelou was able to lose thirty-five pounds.

The first section, on cooking leftovers with her mother, begins with a recipe for

an eight-pound crown roast of pork. Cup by cup, piece by piece, and day by day,

the roast dwindles, to become pork hash, pork fried rice, and pork tacos. Angelou

wisely suggests eating only one pork taco for lunch, then having a second one three hours later. The marvelous dishes, which include braised lamb with white

beans, chicken Tetrizzini, cornbread, and a selection of desserts, can be eaten any time, all day long.

Although less rich in personal recollections than the earlier cookbook, *Great Food, All Day Long* is superior in the variety of recipes and in the intelligence of Angelou's approach to food. Her new interest in sensible eating was clearly related to her having in 2010 written the Foreword to *The Jean Nidetch Story: An Autobiography*. Nidetch (1923–2015) was the Brooklyn homemaker who founded

Weight Watcher's, probably the most successful corporation of its kind and one

that still honors the basic principles advocated by its founder.

## *Theater and Television Work*

It would be foolhardy for any biographer to try to include every accomplishment from so prolific a performer. I have been highly selective in listing Maya Angelou's achievements and awards since the first edition appeared

in 1998. In updating that information I have relied primarily on the list compiled by Jacqueline S. Thursby (2011, 412–13); on the research on Angelou conducted

by Celia C. Daniel of the Howard University Library System; on Oliver Gettell's

essay on Angelou's movie career, published in the *New York Times* four days after her death; on the posthumous tribute to Angelou in *Essence* magazine; on the search engine Google; on the Angelou archives at the Schomburg Center; and

on the information about Angelou's publications in [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

After Angelou decided to return from Ghana to the United States in the mid-

1960s, she immersed herself in a different America, where blackness was

becoming a matter of pride, where a creative racial identity was emerging in the

cities. In 1966, she finished a short play, *The Least of These*, which was staged in Los Angeles. In 1968, at the age of forty, she wrote a ten-part series on African

influences, *Black, Blues, Black*, which was aired on educational television and was followed by an impressive array of achievements in television and on screen.

In 1972, she wrote both the screenplay and the music for the television special,

*Georgia, Georgia*, about two African American women visiting Switzerland, thus becoming “the first Black woman to have a screenplay produced” ( *Current Biography* 1994, 28). Four years later, her play, *And Still I Rise*, was performed in California, and she wrote two specials for television, “The Legacy” and “The



Inheritors.” These television triumphs were followed, in 1977, by a prize-winning

documentary television series on African Americans and the arts. In 2009 she narrated *The Black Candle*, a documentary about the celebration of the African American holiday of Kwanzaa. The video is still being shown in public libraries

during the Christmas season.

In 1982 she wrote another television screenplay, *Sister, Sister* and in 1985, a play, *The Southern Journey*. Angelou also did the screenplay and the music for the 1979 film version of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, directed by Fielder Cook and starring Diahann Carroll as Vivian Baxter and Esther Rolle as Annie

Henderson. The video, available on the Internet (Web. November 16, 2014), is an

excellent resource for teachers of any grade level, from late elementary school to college. The film lends itself to a comparison/contrast with the book, especially in terms of what it omits, since it ends at the eighth-grade graduation, thus avoiding Maya's troubled adolescence, her fears about being a lesbian, and her teen pregnancy.

Angelou's informal dancing career in the Al and Rita team was projected onstage in 1957, when she performed in *Calypso Heatwave*, an off-Broadway production. In 1960 she and Godfrey Cambridge wrote, directed, and performed

in *Cabaret for Freedom*, a fund-raiser for Martin Luther King Jr. She was also the premier dancer for the touring production of *Porgy and Bess*, a role that demanded performing as well as dancing skills. Her greatest stage role, though,

was in 1961, as the White Queen in Jean Genet's award-winning play *The Blacks*.

Her participation in both the original off-Broadway play and in its European revival is described in *The Heart of a Woman* and in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. In 1966, after she had returned from Ghana, she acted in a modern version of *Medea*, as the faithful servant of the Greek woman who had murdered her children. In 1973, at the age of forty-five, she was nominated for a

Tony for her performance as Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker in the Broadway production, *Look Away*.

Over the years Angelou had many other acting triumphs in television and film.

In 1972 she wrote the screenplay for *Georgia, Georgia*, a Swedish-American film; the script received a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize. In 1977 she was nominated for a Tony for her portrayal of Kunta Kinte's grandmother in Alex Haley's explosive miniseries, *Roots*. In 1982, when she was fifty-four, she performed the narration for *Humanities through the Arts*, a series sponsored by public television. In 1993 she appeared in John Singleton's movie *Poetic Justice* and in 1995 in Jocelyn Moorhouse's film, *How to Make an American Quilt*.

During her prolific career, Angelou also had several experiences directing for

stage, television, and film. In 1974 she directed a film, *All Day Long*, from her original screenplay, while in 1968 she directed a play, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, written by Errol John. But it was not until 1997 that she engaged in her first major project as a director, with the film *Down on the Delta*, starring Wesley Snipes and her *How to Make an American Quilt* costar Alfre Woodard. The film is about a couple from Mississippi who head for Chicago looking for a better life.

In the early 1990s she received two Grammy Awards from the National

Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) for achievement in the music

industry, under the category “Best Spoken Word or Non-Musical Album.” The first was for her recording of “On the Pulse of Morning” (1994), followed a year

later by her tape of “Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women.” A

third Grammy was awarded in 2002 in the nonfiction category for her recording

of her sixth autobiography, *A Song Flung Up*.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, at the age when most actors would have been basking in retirement, Angelou became even more active in film

portrayals. She had a small role in Tyler Perry's *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), where critics praised her for reciting her poem "In and Out of Time" with the actress Cicely Tyson. In 2008 she narrated a Holocaust documentary, *As Seen through These Eyes*, about artists in concentration camps who fought Hitler with their drawings and paintings. Directed by Hilary Helstein, the documentary received mixed reviews. In 2009 she appeared in Jeff Stilson's hilarious film *Good Hair*, which featured Maya Angelou, Chris Rock, and Al Sharpton.

*Special Awards*

## *Special Awards*

In addition to being a recognized actor and writer, Angelou received a number

of special awards commemorating her service to the humanities. Again the list is

partial, a mere hint at the wide range of tributes Dr. Angelou has received from

civic groups across the country. Many of the unique works of art that my husband and I viewed in her sculpture garden testify to her having been honored

by institutions that do not always boast international reputations.



One of her most prestigious awards occurred in 1975, when President Gerald

Ford named her to the American Revolution Bicentennial Council. Angelou wore

this hat gracefully, as a patriotic duty: "I am an American, as much as the Irish

who live here are Americans.... There are many things I'm proud of and many

things I'm disappointed in, referring to my country. It would be the same if I lived in Birmingham, Alabama, or Birmingham, England. But I am an American"

(“Icon” 1997).

In 1976, a year after the appointment from President Ford, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* named Maya Angelou Woman of the Year in Communications. In 1977,

President Jimmy Carter named her to a commission in observance of

International Women’s Year. In 1993, following her Inaugural reading, she became a friend of president and Mrs. Clinton.

She has also been honored by foundations, receiving a Yale University

Fellowship in 1970 and the enviable Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship in 1975.

In the same year she received the Horatio Alger Award, Alger being an American

novelist who wrote about poor children who eventually became successful. In 1982, at the age of fifty-four, she was named first Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a lifetime

appointment. Two years later, the new governor, James B. Hunt, appointed her to

the board of the North Carolina Arts Council. In 1992 she received the *Essence* Woman of the Year Award. She also began her

involvement in the creation of the

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a London-based institution.

Nor was her political commitment limited to the Clinton and Obama

administrations or to British children. She also took what could have been a considerable risk when she actively supported the rights of gay marriage in New

York State in the summer of 2009 (freedomtomarryorg. Web. December 3, 2014).

Because of her unflinching support of civil rights and gay rights, Angelou was vilified by the right-wing group, the Westboro Baptist Church, who had

threatened to disrupt the funeral held at Wake Forest University. Their efforts were unsuccessful.

During her lifetime the activist/writer continued to earn praise from liberal and moderate institutions. In 2006 she received the John Hope Franklin Award,

named for the noted black historian (1915–2009). In the same year she earned the

Mother Teresa Award, given in remembrance of the Albanian nun (1910–1997) who left the convent to devote her life to the poor.

Two years later she received

the Lincoln Medal, an honor presented by the Ford's Theater Society that demonstrates leadership, wisdom, eloquence, and other aspects of Abraham

Lincoln's legacy. She shared this honor with the actress Ruby Dee (1924?–2014)

and with the late justice Sandra Day O'Connor (1981–2002). In 2013, at the National Book Awards, she received the Literarian Award for Outstanding

Service to the American Literary Community. Her greatest civic honor occurred

in 2011, when President Barack Obama bestowed on Dr. Angelou the Presidential

Medal of Freedom for her achievements in literature.

Meanwhile, her work had continued to diversify. In the late 1990s Angelou reportedly communicated to her public through the Prodigy Internet service provider, and she had helped to organize churches on Public Television. She also

participated in the Black Image circuit—African American women models,

lawyers, and writers toured designated cities conducting workshops offering tips

on clothes, poise, cosmetics, and problem solving. Women who have attended these workshops say that Angelou's engagement with black middle-class women

should not be trivialized, for through her example she was offering black women

an opportunity to direct their talents toward achievable goals.

Her service to major institutions, along with her remarkable self-confidence as

a speaker, opened many doors for Maya Angelou, especially in the area of public



policy. She had long worn the cloak of wise woman and stateswoman—

sometimes on daytime television with her close friend Oprah Winfrey; sometimes

for organizations such as the Women's Foundation, which sold more than two thousand tickets when she spoke in San Francisco during the spring of 1997; and

most often in college lecture halls, where seating was sold out long before the actual event. When Hilary Clinton was seeking the Democratic nomination for

President of the United States in 2008, Angelou was a loyal supporter and spokesperson.

Her writing, above all *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, has also been well received by an adolescent readership. A sample of the biographies about Angelou

aimed at young audience is listed in the bibliography, under the heading

“Biographies for Young Readers.” Because *The Iconic Muse* is primarily concerned with more scholarly viewpoints, these children’s books do not enter the

discussion. They are important, however, in assessing the scope of Angelou’s appeal.

Maya Angelou occasionally indulged in unexpected flights of whimsy, aimed

not at an academic or political audience but at a trendy clientele. She was notorious for having written the text for Hallmark greeting cards, many of which

are in a file at the Schomburg Center. She also presumably endorsed other popular items that bore her face and her signature. In its toys and games division,

[Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) offered during November of 2014 a Maya Angelou Portrait Jigsaw Puzzle. The 100-piece puzzle shows four different “scenes” from Angelou’s career.

Another product sold by Amazon in 2014 was a series of tile wall hangings, ranging in price from \$8.45 to \$18.49, with a choice of some of Angelou’s famous

quotes, for example, “I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be

reduced by it.” For sale at the same venue were a “Still I Rise’ black tee-shirt and an “I’ve learned” cell phone case for the Apple iPhone. I once walked out of a New York Barnes and Noble with my book purchases piled in a yellow plastic bag graced with her image, clearly a Random House promotion. But I saw no listing in my Amazon search for my favorite piece of Maya/anna: a set of Maya

Angelou wind chimes that my friend Carolyn Maun once gave me as a Christmas

present.

In celebrating Maya Angelou's various achievements, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp in April 2015. The stamp featured a popular

quotation that had frequently been attributed to Angelou: "A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song." Unfortunately, the Postal Service had failed to ascertain the authenticity of the quotation, which was actually from *A Cup of Sun*, a 1967 book by Joan Walsh Anglund. According to an article printed in the *New York Times* on April 9, 2015, the Postal Service will not be reissuing the stamp. It will remain in the hands of those faithful fans who

pre-ordered it; and it will very likely be filed in the Maya Angelou Archives as a sad reminder of governmental blunder.

## *The Archives*

When I was in North Carolina in 1977, I had the opportunity to meet briefly

with Sharon E. Snow, Curator of Rare Books at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at

Wake Forest University. Ms. Snow had already been making progress in

providing access to Angelou's letters and manuscripts, as well as to the mountain

of writings and video clips bearing her name.

Over the years a number of curators at Wake Forest have continued to compile

Angelou's work in the performing arts. According to a document e-mailed to me

on April 17, 2015, by Steven Fullwood of the Schomburg Center in Harlem, The

Maya Angelou Film and Theater Collection in North Carolina consists of "30.61

feet 60 letter boxes, 10 oversized letter boxes, 1 half-letter box, 1 oversize folder."

The collection contains such treasures as the manuscript and notes for Angelou's

1974 play *Ajax*; a copy of the first feature film directed by Angelou, *Down on the Delta* (1998); and the program notes for a production of *Macbeth* directed by Angelou at Wake Forest in 1985. In 2014 the material was updated by Curator Kristin Weisse.

In 2010 a separate collection, the Maya Angelou Papers, was purchased by the

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, part of the New York Public Library System. The Center houses an estimated total of 199 boxes consisting of



“original manuscripts, computer generated typescripts, galleys and proofs” of Angelou’s autobiographies and poetry as well as a huge file on her Inaugural poem and a file devoted to her correspondence with Rosa Guy, James Baldwin,

Malcom X, and others (“Guide to the Maya Angelou papers,” The New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division,” n.d.). Soon after her death the Schomburg Center sponsored a public exhibit in her memory.

According to the staff, a substantial portion of the Angelou Papers is devoted

to her fan mail; this file is unavailable to the public. In *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Muse* there are several references to the

holdings of the Schomburg Center. The entire collection, except for the fan mail, awaits the scrutiny of critics with specialized skills in reading and collating the massive assortment of documents, letters, and original drafts available to them.

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## Autobiography and Genre

The French word *genre* means a classification of literary works according to type—lyric, narrative, dramatic—which are further divided into novel, short story, epic poem, tragedy, and so forth. According to Meyer H. Abrams, genre is of use

to the reader because it creates a set of “expectations that alter the way that a reader will interpret and respond to a particular work” (2005, 117). In other words, if the reader knows for a fact that Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiography, then the reader also expects the sequel, *Gather Together in My Name*, to have understandable characteristics of the genre, such as first-person narration, a chronological order, and an emphasis on the self.

Autobiography is a major literary genre, the form that Maya Angelou uses in

her long prose works. Broken down, the word *auto/bio/graphy* means *self/life/story*, the narrative of the events in a person's life. It is also known as life writing or the literature of self-revelation. According to Alfred Kazin,

autobiography “uses fact as a strategy [It is a] history of a self, [and exhibits a]

concern for the self as a character” (1964, 213).

A number of critics have classified Angelou's six 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 the narrator. According to Eugenia Collier, 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 (1986).

At first glance, it is useful to view *Caged Bird* as a *Bildungsroman*, a German word that means a “novel of education” or a “coming-of-age” story. Because *Caged Bird* begins in childhood and ends in young adulthood, with Maya giving birth to a baby boy, *Caged*

*Bird* has been considered a *Bildungsroman*. Looking at the British *Bildungsroman*, *Mill on the Floss* (1860), there are many similarities between George Eliot's novel and Maya Angelou's first autobiography. Both are

about the coming-of-age of strong-willed young women; both focus on the

heroine's close relationship to her brother; both examine the effects of literature on character; both center strongly around family and community life. But while

*Mill on the Floss* is a developed work of fiction, a story that ends, according to Eliot's deliberate plan, with her heroine's death in a flood, Angelou's

autobiography is an unfinished narrative, told in the first person by the adult who recollects it years later. Angelou insists on calling her works

autobiographies, not novels. For her, autobiography is a special form, consciously chosen as her most effective genre. In an interview, she told Jackie Kay, “I think I am the only serious writer who has chosen the autobiographical form as the main

form to carry my work, my expression” (1989, 195).

Most readers of autobiographies have clear expectations about the

characteristics of the genre. First, it should be written rather than spoken. Second, it must have a first-person narrator. Third, it

should be of manageable length, one or two volumes. Fourth, it should be arranged chronologically, in an order that

roughly corresponds to the significant events of the narrator's life.

Exceptions to these standards are of course numerous; one of the most extreme

is Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Although autobiographies are typically written from the first-person point of view, Stein pretends to use the first-person perspective of her partner, the Alice B. Toklas of the title. Stein's autobiography thus approaches fiction in its playful invention of a first-person narrator who is actually a third person. James Weldon Johnson, a



favorite writer of Angelou's and an autobiographer in his own right, wrote a unique book that combined the perspectives of both the novel and the

autobiography. He called it *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and in the first printing it had an anonymous author, which made readers puzzle about the author's race. Johnson's point of view in this now-famous book was as

inventive in its way as Gertrude Stein's was in *The Autobiography of Alice B.*

*Toklas*. Like Stein's contrived Alice, so Johnson's narrator is not actually James Weldon Johnson but a pretend white man, the fictionalized self-portrait of a light-skinned black who passes as white in order to be esteemed and rewarded by

others.

The popular Lakota Sioux narrative, *Black Elk Speaks*, is also an exception to the standard autobiography, not in its structure but in its presentation. The very title, *Black Elk Speaks*, indicates an oral or spoken autobiography, told by Black Elk over the course of many years but put into writing by a European transcriber,

John G. Neihardt. In his effort to shape Black Elk's story into an artistic whole,

Neihardt wrote parts of the beginning and final chapters, thus defining the narrator's identity. This superlative collaboration between Black Elk and his transcriber resulted in the "first Indian autobiography" (Holly 1979, 121).

One critic of the genre, William L. Howarth (1980), has isolated certain elements common to all standard autobiographies. First is “character,” which designates the narrator, the one who tells the story and acts within it, as opposed to the more distanced “author.” The second element, “technique,” includes stylistic concerns such as metaphors, structure, and verb tense. Howarth’s third

element is “theme,” which addresses not only personal issues like love and death

but also political, cultural, and historical matters affecting the autobiographer, in Angelou’s case, the Great Depression of the early 1930s; the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s; the liberation movements in Africa in the same decade; and the riots in America following the assassinations of Malcom X

and Martin Luther King Jr.

In addition, autobiographical theme is affected by literary tradition. If a writer reads or thinks about a favorite book, he or she is likely to echo its structure or its ideas, either knowingly or unknowingly. The writer is thus “influenced.” A literary influence occurs when a piece of literature or a specific creative form, existing in the near or distant past, affects the language, metaphors, style, structure, and/or philosophy of any given work. To determine the influence of poet Georgia Douglas Johnson on Angelou’s *The Heart of a Woman*, for instance, one needs some knowledge of genres, of titles, of dates of composition, of mutual

metaphors, of existing attitudes toward black women, and so on.

Angelou is quite open about her literary influences, naming at least a dozen in

*Caged Bird*. Authors and genres are therefore likely to have influenced her autobiographies. Christine Froula (1986) makes the connection between Maya's rape in the first autobiography and Shakespeare's 2,000-line poem "The Rape of

Lucrece," which Maya memorized upon regaining speech. Other influences

include authors such as James Weldon Johnson and Edgar Allan Poe; genres such

as slave narratives, spirituals, poetry, and serial autobiographies; and individual autobiographies in the African American tradition.

Other than their length and thematic material, Angelou's autobiographies

conform to the standard structure of the autobiography: they are written, they are single-authored, and they are chronological. As will be observed in

forthcoming chapters, they contain Howarth's required elements of character, technique, and theme. However, the six volumes that make up Angelou's series

far exceed the standard number of volumes in an autobiography, so much so that

they are in a subgenre known as "serial autobiographies."

## Serial Autobiographies

A serial autobiography is a set of two or more related texts that reflect on, predict, and echo each other so that they are seen as parts of a whole. For later

volumes there are earlier ones behind them that must be recollected, just as in the larger tradition there are authors from the past—Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale

Hurston, and Paul Laurence Dunbar—who must be remembered if the reader is to

maximize his or her experience. Some African American critics call this attention

to past literary tradition by the name of “signifying.”

Angelou has written six autobiographies. She enjoys the multiple format, the

“stretching” required in going from book to book: “I pray that in each book I am

getting closer to finding the mystery of really manipulating and being

manipulated by this medium, to pulling it open, stretching it” (Angelou, quoted

in Kay 1989, 195). While the continuous fluctuation of the serial form allows the



writer a freedom not available in the fixed, single autobiography, it also has pitfalls, including the increased need for transitions, for cross-references, for continuity, and for discipline.

There are numerous examples of the multiple autobiography within the black

literary tradition. The foremost would be Frederick Douglass's two-part

autobiography: the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, followed by a second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855. The first volume is so widely considered to be the model slave narrative that few contemporary readers have become familiar with its sequel, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a

broader and more detailed work than its predecessor. William L. Andrews calls it

that “rare ‘I-narrative’ of the American 1850s,” one that explores Douglass’s

“identity, mission, and message” (1986, xxvi).

Richard Wright (1908–1960), well-known for the best-selling novel *Native Son*

(1940), is also the author of a passionate autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), a recollection of childhood and adolescence which is frequently compared to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In 1977, seventeen years after Wright’s death, a sequel to *Black Boy* was discovered, thus changing its status from single to serial

autobiography. The sequel *American Hunger*, written in 1944 at the time he was working on *Black Boy*, is a political autobiography that covers Wright's early

involvement with the Communist Party in Chicago and New York. The volumes are ages apart in tone and narrative style: *American Hunger* is dry and abstract in comparison with the painful and compelling *Black Boy*. Reading the two works as a pair makes the reader recognize just how smooth Angelou's transitions are from volume to volume, how consistent her character.

These are but a few of the important serial autobiographies published by African Americans since the Civil War. White authors who have extended the initial autobiographical impulse into a series include Sherwood Anderson,

Gertrude Stein, Doris Lessing, Anais Nin, and Theodore Dreiser. One of the twentieth century's most admired novelists, Doris Lessing (1919–2013) worked for many years on a three-part serial autobiography. The first, *Under My Skin*, begins with her childhood on a farm in Zimbabwe in southern Africa, while the

second, *Walking in the Shade*, chronicles her life as a writer and single mother living in London during World War II. The third was never finished.

But the autobiographer who has the most in common with Angelou is the

white American playwright Lillian Hellman (1895–1981). Almost as prolific as Angelou, Hellman wrote a serial autobiography consisting of four volumes: *An Unfinished Woman* (1942),

*Pentimento* (1973), *Scoundrel Time* (1976), and *Maybe* (1980). The first of the series, *An Unfinished Woman*, won the 1970 National Book Award for best book in Arts and Letters—the very same year that Angelou was

nominated for (but did not receive) the same award for *I Know Why the Caged*

*Bird Sings*.

Both Hellman and Angelou developed their sense of language and dialogue by

working in the theater, with Hellman receiving praise for her early play *The Children's Hour* (1934), a frightening drama about a schoolgirl's destructive behavior toward two women teachers.

After her return from Ghana, Angelou was active in the theater in terms of writing, acting, and directing, although she never achieved Hellman's stature as a playwright. Both Hellman and Angelou positioned their autobiographies in America, England, and continental Europe, with Angelou taking her international setting farther, into Africa. Both writers have been publically lauded in their lifetimes. Lillian Hellman received a standing ovation at the 1977 Academy Awards for the film *Julia*, which was based on an episode from her autobiography *Pentimento*, while Angelou has had many similar honors, perhaps her greatest being the invitation to read "On the Pulse of

Morning" at the 1993 inauguration of President Clinton. Finally, both engaged in an unlikely project when they combined the memoir with the cookbook.

*Hellman's Eating Together: Recipes and Recollections*, written with Peter Feibleman, was published in 1984, whereas Angelou's ventures in the same genre

were not realized until more than two decades later.

Given these resemblances, it is a bit surprising to read the concluding interview in Dolly A. McPherson's *Order Out of Chaos* (1990), only to discover a strong rivalry between Angelou and Hellman. Angelou's resentment of Hellman

is supposedly based on literary distinctions. Angelou tells McPherson that Hellman's books are "one-dimensional" or "romantic." Her black characters are stiff as "cardboard," while her white ones fail to represent the masses (1990, 135).

Angelou seems unnecessarily harsh in her assessment.

## Autobiography and Truth

In *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), Roy Pascal theorizes that autobiography must be a presentation of truth—truth in characterization, truth in

relationship to the world, truth in point of view. Many other critics share Pascal's opinion, including Angelou's biographer, Dolly A. McPherson (1990, 72). Another

follower of Pascal insists that autobiographies are "limited by the writer's need to speak in the spirit of the truth." He warns that the autobiographer should "never



allow himself to jeopardize credibility” (Mandel 1968, 224).

Angelou’s views to some extent diverge from the conventional notion of

autobiography as truth. Angelou, who is well aware of the truth-in-autobiography theory, admitted to George Plimpton that she has on occasion

“fiddled with” the truth, combining several characters for literary effect or being considerate to people who are still alive (1994, 18). In this author’s interview of June 16, 1997, Angelou said: “Certain things overstate the facts...I want to always

leave something for the reader to do, to imagine, to fantasize. I want to tell the truth but I can't because I'd ruin the thing." When I asked what she meant by

"ruin the thing," she responded: "Well, losing the reader is ruining the thing. If I tell the truth...in language which shocks but does not terrify, which shakes somebody up but doesn't make them run away, I may impart something which

might be of help" ("Icon" 1997).

What frequently goes unsaid when discussing the so-called truth in the history

of African American autobiography is that in many instances the truth has been

censored or hidden, out of the need for self-protection. Black autobiographers writing during the abolitionist movement (the antislavery movement that

flourished during the several decades before the Civil War) had to restrain or disguise their opinions, even toward their compassionate editors. Slave narratives withheld certain ideas that might have put the slave-teller in danger, no matter

how well intentioned the transcriber might be—secret hopes for rebellion; a buried contempt for white men as rapists; and other hostile opinions toward white benefactors. Jennifer Fleischner, author of *Mastering Slavery* (1996), insists there is much to learn from the gaps or omissions that appear in the slave narratives, since these gaps can reveal disguised attitudes toward self, race, and

resistance.

The nineteenth-century slave narrator, a recognized victim of the system, was

supposed to give an honest account of life on the plantation, with its beatings from white overseers and sexual abuses from white owners. Not only what the

slave wrote had to be “true,” but its truth had to be upheld or verified, in the preface or appendix, by conscientious white editors, publishers, and friends. Thus, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was verified in the preface by abolitionist leaders William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. Solomon

Northrup's *12 Years a Slave* (1853) was verified through its dedication to the abolitionist writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

Although Maya Angelou explored the effects of slavery and verified its power

in her life and works, her concept of truth and black womanhood was

transformed by its contemporary content. In *Caged Bird*, for example, she records a life story begun in fear of crosses burning in the night, a life that is directly affected by the brutal remnants of slavery. Her story ends, like the typical slave narrative, in celebration of her personal freedom and with the decision to tell her story. Angelou's autobiographies, documented with historical

personages and events, thus verify the changing attitudes toward race and gender from 1931 to

1969.

As David Levering Lewis observes, her stories contain such “inner truthfulness

that each of her books is a continuing autobiography of much of Afro-America”

(1997, 133). Sondra O’Neale alters the truth factor, locating it in a feminist vision.

She claims that the specific truth Angelou tells is the truth about the lives of black women. From this perspective Angelou is able to

correct historical errors and offer a role model not often seen in American culture (1984, 35).

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, despite the change which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, and 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.

As Joanne Braxton notes, Angelou's autobiographical sources derive from "her

celebration of the black women who nurtured her" (1989, 197).

Readers of *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self* will discover, from biographical sources, interviews, and Internet sources, an assortment of "truths" about Angelou, her son Guy, her brother Bailey, her first husband, Tosh, and her unidentified African lover. There is much critical material on which to draw. But

for the purist, the truth and the integrity of an autobiography or of an autobiographical series must be contained within the text itself



—with the way character and theme and setting are interwoven into one singular vision.

## Autobiography and the Black Literary Tradition

### Gender

Maya Angelou is one of the many contemporary African American women

whose works are written in the form of autobiography. Angelou has much in common with Zora Neale Hurston (1901–1960), whose autobiography, *Dust*

*Tracks on a Road* (1942), tells how she rose above her origins in Eatonville, an all-black town in Florida, to become a famous

folklorist and novelist. Like Hurston in Florida, Angelou in Arkansas flavors her autobiography with the language of black folk culture. As Angelou writes autobiographical texts that include the Bambara people of Africa, Hurston had written books such as *Tell My Horse* (1938), which describe her experiences with voodoo ritual in Haiti.

A second woman autobiographer whom Angelou resembles is the poet

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), in that both Brooks and Angelou locate their autobiographical experiences in Africa. In her autobiography *Report from Part One* (1972), Brooks describes her journey to East Africa in 1971. Her arrival is mixed with joy in being in the land of her ancestors but sadness in seeing her own

language diminish in importance. Like Angelou, Brooks is unable to resolve

the contradictions between being an African American while identifying with Africans, for whom she remains a stranger.

A third autobiography that demands attention in this survey is Anne Moody's

*Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). A student at Tougaloo, a historically black college in Mississippi, Moody took part in a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter, in what was to become one of the early, memorable actions of the civil

rights movement. Like Angelou, Moody knew and worked with Martin Luther

King Jr. An activist, Moody played an integral part in the grassroots movement of

the 1960s, whereas Angelou, who was in Africa from 1962 to 1965, saw her commitment to the American protest movement curtailed upon her return by the

deaths of Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Further books for exploration in the area of the black women's

autobiographical tradition are Nikki Giovanni's partial autobiography, *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being*

*a Black Poet* (1971), which begins well but loses its autobiographical structure, becoming part book review and part essay; and bell hooks's *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), a free-flowing autobiography that attempts to offer black women a model for writing about their lives.

In addition to gender distinctions (and these categories frequently overlap), one

needs to place Angelou's work within the historical development of African American autobiography. Two of the major black autobiographical structures, the

slave narrative and the travel autobiography, are discussed more fully later in this chapter. Other significant forms are the prison

autobiography, the success narrative, and the autobiography of the artist.

### The Prison Autobiography

The prison autobiography is the genre most directly related to the earliest black narrative form, the slave narrative; they share many themes, among them

captivity, self-education, mistreatment, and the desire to escape. The prison autobiography achieved prominence in the period surrounding the civil rights movement of the 1960s, through the writings of Eldridge Cleaver, George

Jackson, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and other articulate defenders of the black liberation movement.

Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968) was written from Folsom prison by the man who rose to become a leader of the Black Panther Party. Cleaver describes how his prison experience made it possible to free his mind from being oppressed by the

white woman, whom he has come to see as an ogre, her claws sunk into his chest.

Cleaver's attack on white women had a significant effect in discouraging the interracial sexuality common in the early 1960s. Cleaver used his prison years as

a way to deal with his troubled sexuality and to construct an ideology supported

by the writings of Karl Marx, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and other theorists.

Reading, learning, and being able to recognize historical distortions are part of

the mental discipline described in prison literature, for it was only within the walls of the jail that many African American leaders were able to set their minds

free. In his autobiography, Malcolm X is frequently thankful for the prison experience, because in jail he taught himself to read: "I don't think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did.... Where else but in a prison could I



have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much

as fifteen hours a day” (1965, 41).

For Angela Davis, who was arrested by the FBI on conspiracy charges in 1970,

her prison autobiography *Angela Davis* (1974) is extremely impersonal, as if she were deliberately avoiding the kinds of sentiment that would identify her as a female. In a philosophical application of the knowledge that she already had when she went to prison, she denounces its disorganized structure and

inadequate facilities. Davis notes that the library holds little other than “bad literature whose sole function was to create emotional

paths of escape” (51), although she does locate the autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois. When Davis learns that she is permitted to order books from publishers, she orders ten copies of George Jackson’s radical autobiography *Soledad Brother* (1970), which the guards prevent her from distributing. Despite the strict regulations, Davis is able to learn through her prison experience, especially through the relationships she

forms with women prisoners. She also relished visits from friends and lawyers affiliated with the Communist Party.

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 six volumes, represents her imprisonment within the racist structure of Stamps, Arkansas. After she is released from Stamps, the racial discrimination

continues, but with less intensity. She soon becomes aware of other forms of imprisonment—through drugs, marriage, and the economic

system.

### The Success Narrative

A number of black professionals have written different kinds of autobiographies that may be called first-person success narratives. This genre, meant to offer helpful models for young black men and women, is important to

the black tradition because it encourages a positive response from a community

where drugs and easy money are often more highly rewarded than hard work. In

*Along This Way* (1933), James Weldon Johnson, one of Angelou's major influences as a child, traces his development from birth, when he was nursed by a

white mammy in Jacksonville, Florida, to varied successes as lawyer, songwriter,

statesman, novelist, lecturer, and occupant of the chair of Creative Literature at Fisk University, a historic black institution.

Many African American success autobiographies have been written not by creative artists but by doctors, scholars, ministers, or other professionals. Dr. Ben Carson, a retired neurosurgeon at

the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, has influenced many people with his six books, the most famous being

his autobiography *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* (1996), which became a television movie in 2009, starring Cuba Gooding Jr. Carson began his career as a

poor and failing student in Detroit, but he eventually earned an undergraduate degree from Yale and a medical degree from the University of Michigan. In addition to his conservative writings, Carson gives inspirational talks on education, marriage, and politics. He is one of the announced Republican candidates in the 2016 presidential elections.

Also included in the success narrative category is *Colored People*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1995 autobiography. Gates, America's

foremost African American theorist, describes his coming of age in Piedmont, a small black town in West Virginia. Although there are hardships, he relates closely to his own supportive

community and to his family. At the end of the autobiography, Gates has come

home for vacation from Yale University—Yale being a symbol of success and superior future performance. Ironically, the autobiography ends at the annual mill picnic, an honored black tradition about to end because of integration. But

integration is too late. The narrator's aunt has the last word: "By the time those crackers made us join them, she added, we didn't want to go" (211).

Gates's witty and vivid descriptions of the folks in Piedmont, West Virginia, have a texture similar to Angelou's portrayal of the black community of Stamps,

with their rural ways and countrified speech. What biographer Robert E.

Hemenway says of Zora Neale Hurston seems sadly true of Gates, and Carson,

and Angelou as well: to attain success in an autobiography, the black narrator must see himself or herself as having risen above the associations of class and culture symbolized by the very rural black people who inspired the work (1977,

281).

Angelou's last three autobiographies have strong traces of the success

narrative. Her acting career, described in *The Heart of a Woman*, peaked when she portrayed the White Queen in Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*. Her fund-raising revue *Cabaret for Freedom*, which she coauthored with actor Godfrey Cambridge, won her the respect of Martin Luther King Jr. and a leadership position in his

organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou was associate editor of the *Arab Observer* and did freelance writing for the *Ghanaian Times*. She also successfully organized a solidarity demonstration in Ghana in support of Martin Luther King's 1965 march on Washington. In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* Angelou



emerged from her grief over the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King to

become an accomplished poet and party-giver. Her close friend, writer James Baldwin, urged her to begin writing an autobiography which, when completed,

would be nominated for the National Book Award. These achievements alone would support the claim that the majority of Angelou's autobiographies belong to

the category of the success narrative.

Literary Autobiography

Angelou's writings appear to fall into yet a third category, literary

autobiography or, by extension, the autobiography of a writer, artist, dancer, or

other art/professional. As a rule, writers in this genre are already established authors or performers; in their autobiographies they attempt to document their struggles but also to acknowledge the positive forces that enabled them to become recognized writers or artists. This class of autobiographer is concerned with language and tends to be conscious of style and technique. Angelou's forerunners in black literary autobiography include Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940); W. E. B. Du Bois, *What the Negro Wants* (1944, in Logan 2001); and James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1953).

Although the reader tends to think of Angelou as primarily a singer and entertainer, some of her earliest interests were in language

and literature—in the novels of Harlem Renaissance writer Jessie Fauset, in the poetry of Edgar Allan

Poe, and in the plays of Shakespeare. Her passion for poetry, art, and dance follows her through her autobiographies. It is not until the fourth volume, though, that Angelou starts to describe herself as a writer and that she begins to write performable theatrical pieces.

Travel Narratives: Dreaming of Africa

Like other autobiographical works, Angelou's autobiographies are a mixture of

several genres. In her case, autobiography is interlaced, especially in the fourth and fifth volumes, with travel narrative, a

classification that is popular among black writers, many of whom went to Africa and recorded their quest for identity

or their achievement of self-enlightenment. Of the twentieth-century black writers who recorded their travels in Africa, Langston Hughes provides the prototype in *The Big Sea* (1940). Hughes, who grew up in Kansas, longed for the faraway place of Africa. He traveled to the land of his desires in 1923, sailing there as a merchant seaman. Seeing Africa, Hughes salutes her as the

“Motherland of the Negro Peoples” and “the great Africa of my Dreams!” terms

similar to some of Angelou’s praises of Ghana in *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

In a comprehensive essay on travel narrative, Mary G. Mason documents the

journeys of Nancy Prince, Ida B. Wells, Eslanda Goode Robeson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, and other black women writers who took the long

African journey or the shorter one in the Caribbean. Mason contends that the historic journey taken by previous black women has become, for modern writers

like Angelou, a pilgrimage that reveals their African heritage. Angelou's 1986

travel narrative, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, is part of a genre that

“adds a unique theme to women’s autobiographical traditions” (1990, 355).

John C. Gruesser, in his 1990 study of travel narrative, provides a negative overview of how certain African American writers have disparaged the image of

Africa, showing the continent as blank, empty, and formless, as “a swamp, a question mark” (7). Gruesser discusses the image of Africa in Richard Wright’s *Black Power* (1954), Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Report from Part One* (1972), and Maya Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), claiming that each of these African American writers portrays Africa “either as a dream or a

nightmare” (9). They are disappointed when the Africa of their travels fails to equal the Africa of their imaginations. Gruesser contends that Angelou, although

she searches for an African connection in Ghana, fails to achieve the goal.

Instead, she forms her primary relationships among African American expatriates

who share romanticized views of Africa as mother. Like many Americans in Africa, they base their experience on distorted images rather than reality.

Using the narrative structure of the black American who goes to Africa, Angelou and other writers reverse the order of history.

Where black Africans were once brought in bondage to America, so black Americans retrace the journey back to Africa. Their travel books become reflections of the impact that

African captivity and African nationhood have had on their own lives.

One final narrative that needs to be mentioned in this context is Marita Golden's *Migrations of the Heart* (1983), a love story written in the first person.

Golden's title, with its telltale heart, is enough to prove, at least in her case, Gruesser's point that black American women who first encounter Africa are living out fantasies based on romantic images. A *New Yorker*, Golden migrates to



Africa to be with Femi, the Nigerian lover she met in Manhattan at a social event.

Like Angelou's initial relationship with Vusumzi Make, Golden's romance with

Femi, the handsome Nigerian, is based primarily on being fulfilled by a man.

After one miscarriage, Marita gives birth to Tunde, the valued firstborn son. But

she is unhappy, especially when Femi starts to beat her. Unable to adapt to Nigerian life, to the bonding among brothers, and to the economic obligations demanded from the extended family, Golden returns to America, taking her son

with her.

Golden's *Migrations of the Heart* was published in 1983, three years before the publication of Angelou's fifth volume, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

Although there are some similarities, such as the loss of community that pervades

both narratives, Golden's Nigeria is presented strictly from a woman's

perspective, with the emphasis on miscarriage, childbirth, and marriage. These autobiographical themes, while focusing on West African society, might have occurred in any urban setting that had inadequate housing and medical care.

Angelou, on the other hand, is extremely specific about the people, rituals, and

customs of her adopted nation, Ghana.

Slave Narratives

Historical Roots

Autobiographies written before the Civil War have taken numerous forms,

among them traveler's narratives, diaries, success stories, Indian narratives, and religious confessions (Sayre 1980, 146–47).

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. It is a genre that Stephen Butterfield (1974) and many other critics believe to be the foundation of African American

autobiographical tradition and a genre that many contemporary writers, Angelou

among them, have incorporated into their fiction, their autobiographies, their drama, and their poetry.

The slave narrative is structured in the form of a journey, from Africa to America or to some other unchosen location in the African diaspora—a term used

to describe the scattering of black people during the slave trade. The concept of

the journey is as old as song, as old as literature. Homer used the journey of the Greek hero, Odysseus, to establish a sequence of events in his classical epic *The Odyssey*, recorded around 750 BC. The journey is an integral structure in the West African epic *Son-Jara* (ca. 1300) and in various Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* (ca. 550 BC) and the *Mahabharata* (ca. 400 BC).

In its earliest expression, the slave narrative was the recollection by a former

slave of his or her struggle in crossing the Atlantic from Africa to America. Some critics claim the first printed narrative was Briton Hammon's account of his suffering and deliverance, published in

Boston in 1760; others give credit to James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw for writing the first slave narrative, *An African Prince*, in 1770 (Preface, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1997).

Traditionally, the slave narrative traced the journey of a slave or former slave of African descent in his or 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. William L. Andrews stresses the connection between freedom and literacy: “In the slave narrative the quest is toward freedom

from physical bondage and the enlightenment that literacy can offer to the restricted self-and social consciousness of the slave” (1986, 7).

The themes of reading, writing, and freedom are prominent in what many

critics consider to be the classic slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Like so many others, Frederick Douglass was writing for a literate white audience in behalf of his fellow black brothers. He uses the “power of language and persuasion to tell his own story and use it in the liberation of other men and women” (Sayre 1980, 116). In his narrative, Douglas describes being separated from his mother and being constantly mistreated by a host of masters and their hirelings. Frequently, Douglass associates the inhuman

conditions of plantation life with his thwarted desire to write: “My feet had been so cracked by the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (1845, 271). In presenting this harsh metaphor for life under slavery, Douglass is using his pen, his literacy, as an instrument for the liberation of others.



Selwyn R. Cudjoe (1984) has observed that Angelou, who was consciously

writing within an African American autobiographical tradition, often uses the

“we” instead of the “I” point of view, moving from the perspective of the single

person to that of the group. He contends that, like the slave narrative, her books are more public than private, more concerned with collective experience than with subjective concerns. Angelou, who is aware of her collective point of view,

told one interviewer that she is always trying to convert the first-person singular into the first-person plural (Plimpton 1994, 77).

The emphasis on collectivity is especially relevant to *I Know Why the Caged*

*Bird Sings*, with its church gatherings and its communal bonding. This form of identification within the group is a major aspect of black survival. Angelou has

frequently admitted Frederick Douglass's influence on her writings, most

significantly in her essay "Mother and Freedom," which alludes to Douglass's mother "enslaved on the plantation eleven miles from her infant son." She would

walk to him over this vast distance and then return to her own quarters, trying to convey her love ( *Stars* 47–49).

Editor Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1987) is convinced that Douglass's great narrative

of 1845 was influenced by an even earlier text, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), the story of an African also known as Gustavas Vassa whose enslaved condition began in Guinea, the country of his birth. The

strong style and vivid verbal patterns make Equiano's account similar both to the

Douglass narrative and to the Angelou series. Frederick Douglass's more-limited

journey begins in Maryland and ends in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a seaport

on the same Atlantic Ocean but several hundred miles farther north. Douglass notes that there are no signs of slavery and that the workers of New Bedford have not been beaten. Here he is able to enjoy the great pleasures of freedom and

employment. When he has enough money he subscribes to the abolitionist

newspaper, the *Liberator*. Thus, a slave narrative begun in bondage ends in the double reward of freedom and literacy. It is reading that takes him to the meeting halls and eventually to a publisher to recount his story about being a slave.

Whereas Douglass's adventures are geographically restricted, Angelou's

adventures occupy an enlarged, almost boundless space. Her tale begins in Stamps, Arkansas, but extends from St. Louis to California, from Africa to Europe, from Cairo to Berlin, to Ghana, to New York, and back to California. In a

sense, Angelou's voyage reiterates the enormous sweep of Equiano's journey; her

sixth volume begins as she leaves West Africa and boards a plane for the United

States.

At the beginning of his narrative Equiano is captured while playing with his

beloved sister. Their only consolation was in “being in one another’s arms all that night, and bathing each other with tears” (1789, 26). The children are temporarily confined in Africa. But when the slave boats arrive, Equiano and his sister are forever separated. The intensity of their friendship is not unlike the relationship between Maya and her brother Bailey. Abandoned by their parents, Maya and Bailey gathered strength from each other during their childhood in Stamps.

Equiano describes the horror and stench of the ship, the “loathsome smells”

from sickness and filth. Because of his youth and agility, he is spared the lower

deck, where slaves are chained together and die together. Equiano's captivity carries him from Guinea, to Canada, to the Mediterranean, the Arctic, Central

America, the West Indies, the East Coast of America, and numerous other locations. The voyage culminates in London with his conversion to Christianity,

much as Angelou's concludes in America with her acceptance of a dual heritage

and a desire to tell her story.

In an emotional sense, though, Angelou's narrative is more circumscribed than

either Douglass's or Equiano's, more maternal and more internalized. In its female preoccupations it has much in common with the slave narrative known as

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), written by Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Brent's title and her anonymity indicate the absence of a

"serious" narrative; her woman-oriented title does not introduce the adventures

of a specific man—Frederick Douglass or Briton Hammon or Olaudah Equiano—

but of "a Slave Girl." Her story does not tell "the life of" or "the interesting narrative of" but only "incidents in." Most of these



incidents involve her desire to protect her children. This powerful narrative is perhaps the paramount example

of how the historical African American slave narrative relates to Angelou's autobiographical series.

### Contemporary Applications

More than a dozen slave narratives have been reissued or reinvented in the twenty-first century, to critical acclaim. In 2014 British director Steve McQueen

adapted Solomon Northup's 1853 narrative, *12 Years a Slave*, into an Academy Award-winning film which stars Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup, a

freeman from New York State. Northrup had to deny his name and his status in

order to protect himself from brutal overseers after he was sold into slavery and

taken by force to Louisiana. Much of the plot involves his efforts to communicate

in writing with his Northern benefactor in an unwavering attempt to be rescued

from bondage. After his release Northrup published a written narrative about his

captivity, an account praised by Horace Greeley and many other editors and sympathizers.

In 2013 author James McBride won the National Book Award for *The Good Lord Bird*, the fictionalized story of John Brown's raid on the militia at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859. The historic John Brown was on a mission to arouse blacks to join him in an insurrection. The raid was a failure; Brown was

captured, arrested, and hung. The narrative, told by a young Kansas-born slave,

Henry Shackleford, is more comic than serious, full of Brown misquoting the Bible and of Henry humoring the "Old (White) Man." McBride, quite conscious of

the African American autobiographical tradition and the author of an excellent

memoir, *The Color of Water* (1966), turns the historic John Brown into a buffoon and the nineteenth-century slave narrative into a tragi-comic travelogue, using the generally somber elements of the tradition for farcical effects. The novel does have a serious conclusion, nonetheless. As Brown is being hung in Charleston, West Virginia, in front of a crowd of “white folks,” a group of Negroes are singing Brown’s favorite spiritual, *Blow ye trumpet blow*, while an incarnation of Brown, in the form of a black and white bird, circles in the sky (last page, Kindle edition).

In 2007 Canadian author Lawrence Hall wrote a historical novel, originally entitled *Somebody Knows My Name*, which was retitled and republished in 2015

as *The Book of Negroes* in conjunction with the Black Entertainment Channel's miniseries by that name. This carefully crafted novel-into-video tells the story of Aminata Diallo, a young West African Muslim who was taken captive and

branded. After she miraculously survives the Middle Passage, another slave teaches her to read and write. Aminata's narrative stresses her intelligence, her

gifts with language, and her love for her husband and their two children. Her journey, like Equiano's and like Angelou's, covers a vast geographical space as she moves from the American South and escapes to New York, goes to Nova Scotia, to Sierra Leone, and finally to London, where she helps the Abolitionist

cause through speaking and writing her story. The six-part miniseries features Aunjanue Ellis as Aminata.

Angelou's autobiographical series combines two distinct characteristics of the

slave narrative. It demonstrates both the narrative of movement, as represented

by Olaudah Equiano, and the narrative of confinement, a theme common to all

imprisoned slave narrators, but having a special significance for women, who were more threatened with the problems of sexual exploitation—rape, loss of dignity, and forsaken children—than

were male slaves. Under the slave system the African family structure was discouraged or forbidden or disrupted whenever

a male slave was sold. Deborah E. McDowell (1993) argues that among male slave

narrators like Frederick Douglass there is a flagrant disregard for women's issues such as rape, child care, and the stability of the family.

Like the nineteenth-century female slave narrator, Maya Angelou charts her arduous journey toward autonomy. Abandoned by her parents, raped by her

mother's boyfriend, and 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 personal liberation as she travels from Stamps, Arkansas, to

Accra, Ghana, and back to America. 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.

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 free woman. In all her autobiographies, but especially in *The Heart of a Woman* and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, the format of the slave narrative is enhanced through the African settings and the expanse of her journeys. 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 and her ability to redefine herself as mother and woman.

Other black women writers have considered the slave narrative from a

contemporary perspective. Critic Hazel V. Carby claims that women's slave narratives "haunt the texts" of contemporary African American women writers (1987, 61), reiterating the themes of humiliation, hunger, and physical abuse. In

*Praisesong for the Widow* (1984), Paule Marshall reinvents the story of legendary West African slaves who crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the banks of South Carolina, while in *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison reconstructs the narrative of a historic woman slave who murders her baby girl to save her from slavery. In her

1989 novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, Alice Walker's heroine fantasizes the ordeals of the horrendous journey in slave ships,

where nursing mothers shared

their milk with starving children. Like other contemporary black women writers,

Maya Angelou offers parallels between her stories and the slave narratives, recognizing in her own life certain elements inherent to the genre, such as isolation, abuse, and the absence of home and community.

The Spiritual

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. During the 1920s and 1930s people like art

historian Alain Locke, singer Paul Robeson, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston were dedicated to promoting the Negro spiritual as a pure, artistic form.

It was Hurston’s position that a spiritual could not be performed by a college choir: “The real Negro singer cares nothing about pitch” or other technical matters, Hurston argued. In the genuine spiritual, every singer is “fired by the same inner urge” (quoted in Hemenway 1977, 56).

In our interview Angelou responded to a question about the title of *Traveling*

*Shoes* by singing several lines from a Negro spiritual: “I’ve got shoes, you got shoes / All of God’s children got shoes” (“Icon” 1997). Angelou utilizes the spiritual for its thematic and symbolic connotations in presenting one of her major themes, her transformational journey to Africa and back.

The Negro spiritual frequently contains the dual motifs of travel and race—of

traveling to freedom and escaping the racial bondage of slavery. Angelou, who

was moved by an “inner urge,” sang parts of three different spirituals during the

“Icon” interview. Her attitude toward the genre is delightfully unacademic: “If they are songs about the spirit, then they are gospel songs. Some they call gospel and some spirituals. But those are just titles which help people to codify for the Dewey Decimal System or something. The people who wrote them and sang

them, they thought they were all spirituals.”

Perhaps the best illustration of her use of the spiritual occurs in *Traveling Shoes*, during a meeting in Cairo with William V. S. Tubman, who was the president of Liberia from 1943 to 1971. Liberia was founded in the early nineteenth century by a society

wanting to provide homes for slaves who returned to the African continent after achieving their emancipation. Tubman, recalling and naming his American African heritage, requests that she sing a Negro spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The chariot heading for the Promised Land is a symbol that reinforces the travel motif and places Angelou's

text within the African American oral tradition. She employs the genre to foreshadow her cultural return from an African identity to an African American

one, and to signify her connection with her Southern heritage.

Like the slave narrative, but on a lesser scale, the Negro spiritual traces the journey from slavery to freedom. In the slave narrative, freedom is achieved within the boundaries of an autobiographical

text, whereas in the spiritual, freedom is postponed until arriving in the heavenly kingdom of the New

Jerusalem. The spiritual is a collective outcry in a form repeated over and over,

whereas autobiography is an individual recollection, often combined with the collective or “we” point of view. Other examples of the Negro spiritual include the slaves’ journey to the biblical river in “Roll, Jordan, Roll” or to the restored kingdom of Zion in “Sabbath Has No End” (Southern 1971, 201–2).

Ironically, a number of religious travel hymns had a practical value, since many were encoded with directions for escape. It is no accident that James McBride ends his story about John Brown’s rebellion by referring to “Blow Ye the



Trumpet, Blow,” Brown’s favorite spiritual, with its refrain “The year of jubilee is come / Return, ye ransomed sinners, home” (Townsend, The Baptist Standard Hymnal, 194). The raid on Harpers Ferry, although initially deemed a failure, marked the beginning of a journey home that is still in transit.

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1970).

In 1970 a child with skinny legs and muddy skin was introduced into African American autobiography. Born Marguerite Johnson, she later became known as

Maya Angelou, an actress and dancer who performed in George Gershwin's

musical, *Porgy and Bess*, and in Jean Genet's satirical French play, *The Blacks*. In 1968 she wrote a successful series on African

heritage for educational television.

Angelou, well known by then as an entertainer and narrator, was urged by James

Baldwin and by the cartoonist Jules Feiffer and his wife Judy to try her hand at

writing an autobiography. After several refusals she agreed; the result was a unique series of autobiographical narratives.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the first of Maya Angelou's six autobiographies. It covers her life from the age of three, when her parents send

her and her brother Bailey to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas, until the age of sixteen, when she becomes a mother. Annie Henderson is the main influence on her childhood.

When Maya and Bailey are eight and nine, respectively, they travel to St.

Louis, where their mother, Vivian Baxter, and their maternal grandmother are leading a far more sophisticated life than anything Maya had known in Arkansas.

There are more parties and fewer church gatherings. In the loose atmosphere of

St. Louis, Maya is raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, who warns her

to be silent (mute) or he will kill her brother Bailey. After the trial Freeman dies after being violently beaten, presumably by Maya's uncles. Maya is indeed mute.

She cannot and will not speak. The silent Maya is returned to Momma

Henderson, remaining speechless for five years until she recovers her voice through the patient help of her grandmother's friend, Mrs. Bertha Flowers.

As Maya emerges from the traumas of childhood, she gains strength from

reading literature and graduates with honors from the eighth grade. Soon after graduation, she and Bailey move to San Francisco, where their mother, Vivian, was living with her new husband, Daddy Clidell. There, Maya simultaneously attends George Washington High School and on a part-time basis a Marxist labor

school. At the latter she takes courses in dance and theater that will prove

invaluable in her career.

Worried that she might be a lesbian, she engages in sex with a young man from the neighborhood to disprove her fears. The sixteen-year-old girl, supported

financially and emotionally by her parents, gives birth to a son, who becomes the

focus of most of the remaining autobiographies.

### Narrative Point of View

Autobiography is generally written from the first-person point of view, the “I,”

but while the “I” is the norm, it has occasionally been modified. For example, both Jamaica Kincaid, in *An Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and Maxine Hong Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior* (1976), recount their lives from the viewpoint of their mothers. James McBride, in *The Color of Water* (1996), uses a

double first-person point of view: his own autobiographical account is printed in

Roman type and his mother's, also first person, is printed in italics. Through this technique, McBride is able to represent the connections and antagonisms between

an African American son and his Jewish mother.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the five succeeding volumes use the first-person narrative voice, even though there are many moments that sound more like fiction than autobiography. *Caged Bird* is told by a child who is artfully recreated by the adult narrator. From a child's perspective, Maya records her separation from her mother and father, and her strong religious and communal



connections, shared with her paternal grandmother. Revealing her life story through a narrator who is a Southern black female who is at times a child, at times a mother, Maya Angelou introduces a unique point of view to American autobiography.

In classic American autobiographies—those written, for example, by the

inventor/statesman Benjamin Franklin (1708–1790), or by Harvard professor

Henry Adams (1838–1918)—the narrative is relayed by white men with sound family backgrounds and unlimited educational opportunities. The narrator's

purpose in writing his story is to impart a model for living. The memoirs of statesmen such as Winston Churchill (1874–1965), prime minister of England during World War II, would also fit this category.

In Angelou's case, the story is told from the unlikely perspective of a black Southern female whose chances to be someone were dreadfully limited, due to the constraints placed on the lives of African American people. And yet she is articulate, sarcastic, upsetting—not at all the kind of narrator that a frequent reader of autobiography expects. From the first moment, she records being underprivileged, an undesirable outsider. According to Sidonie Ann Smith, any

black autobiographer will reveal his or her oppression in those earliest moments:

“In Black American autobiography the opening almost invariably recreates the environment of enslavement from which the black self seeks escape” (1973, 367).

Maya feels ugly and awkward throughout the entire first volume, although she

does have flashes of self-pride, for instance when she believes that Momma Henderson is rewarding good behavior by putting her and Bailey in the front pew

of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Generally, though, she considers her “black self” to be the cage that entraps her.

Similar negative self-perceptions are frequent in black female autobiography, for example, in the raw first line of Zora Neale

Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942): "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out

of the material that went to make me" (3). For Angelou, the negative sense of self continues into the fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, where she learns to appreciate more fully her changing character.

As the first-person narrator, Angelou is able to tell her unique story while at

the same time sharing the contributions of black writers who came before her.

From the first moments of *Caged Bird*, she establishes communication with earlier African American art forms: with the

poetry of James Weldon Johnson, with the Negro spiritual, and with the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and

Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent). In that sense, the point of view becomes a collective one, the voice not only of the single autobiographer but also of the African American literary community. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes of the “collective identity of African American women” within the Southern landscape and in the

works of Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou (1990, 222).

## Structure

Structure relates to the shape of a narrative, to its overall design or patterns. C.

Hugh Holman and William Harmon define structure as “the planned framework

of a piece of literature,” determined by features like language, formal divisions, and organization (1996, 459). The “planned framework” in Angelou’s

autobiographies is the concept of a journey or journeys—from south to north, from west to east to west, from place to place in the United States or across the

Atlantic Ocean. 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”—to the word *traveling*, which dominates the title of the fifth volume, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, and initiates the action in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*.

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.

Following this jolting series of events, Maya returns to Vivian and, in a desperate plan to prove she is a woman, becomes pregnant by a neighborhood boy. On the day she graduates from the summer school of Mission High School,

still living in San Francisco with Vivian Baxter and Daddy Clidell, Maya leaves a

note on their bed informing them that she is pregnant. After her mother and stepfather assuage Maya's fears, the mother-to-be slows down. In the quiet conclusion of *Caged Bird*, Maya lies in bed with her baby, her mother present, in a tableau of stillness that suggests the Nativity scene. Angelou conveys the sacredness of motherhood here and in an earlier comment that she had had an

“immaculate pregnancy” (245), preparing the stage for the blessed journey into motherhood that will be the underlying theme for the next volumes.

## Plot Development

A successful plot is a whole; in the conventional work of fiction it contains a

beginning, a middle, and an end, each connected to the other. In an

autobiography, plot is far less necessary, since it is concerned with the concept of the self rather than with the actions the self performs. In an autobiography it becomes difficult to draw the line between character (the one who acts) and plot

(the action of the story). The two elements tend to fuse together, with plot becoming dependent on the feelings and mannerisms of the narrator.

Yet as many critics have maintained, the plot of an autobiography must also,

like the plot of a novel, have a beginning, a middle, and an end. For the novel, the ending can be contrived or implausible, wild or fanciful, since the novel is not guided by the dictates of rationality. For an autobiography to be of value, the ending must be consistent with the beginning and the middle. In other words, the

ending must occur within the predictable limits of what the author has already

revealed to the reader. Angelou ends *Caged Bird* with the altogether believable scene of Maya, her own mother at her side, lying in bed with her baby, afraid that if she falls asleep she will roll over on her infant. There are no fireworks but a lot of feeling. Few readers realized, when they read this touching last scene in 1970, that the sleeping baby represented not only the end of *Caged Bird* but the beginning of Angelou's serial autobiography. The question of how an

autobiography ends is examined in each of the subsequent chapters of *The Iconic Self*.

The plot of *Caged Bird* begins when Maya and her brother Bailey arrive in Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother and her crippled son,

Willie. It covers thirteen years of chronological time, from Maya's third to sixteenth year. Of the various incidents in the plot that greatly affect Maya, two of them are sexual in nature: being raped on a visit to St. Louis at the age of eight, and becoming pregnant at sixteen as a result of trying to prove to herself that she is not a lesbian.

Angelou's recounting of the rape and its aftermath is brilliantly done. One might contrast Maya's rape to John Grisham's depiction of child molestation and

rape in *A Time to Kill* (1992). Grisham's fictional account, though, for all its

graphic detail, is told from the perspective of a white male lawyer and not, as in *Caged Bird*, from the personal experience of a

black female child. Grisham the novelist is removed from the event, while Angelou the autobiographer is

painfully present.

The rape scene, so powerful in its physical and emotional impact, contains narrative elements that are magnified to the extent that the reader might think of the rape as the essence of plot. Maya's stained panties, Mr. Freeman's "cold face

and empty eyes" (67), Maya's outburst in court—each of these details is loaded with action. Ironically, for Maya the rape is the ultimate learning experience.

Through her pain she becomes aware of being a small girl in a world controlled

by men. The violation to her undeveloped body and the guilt she feels when her

uncles evidently kick Mr. Freeman to death create a negative chain of events followed by five years of silence as Maya refuses to speak. She is finally restored to language through her close relationship with Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a learned friend of her grandmother's, who liberates Maya from her wordless cavern.

The second major event in the plot is Maya's decision to test her femininity by

having sex, an action that results in pregnancy. For many young women, a teenage pregnancy might end in trauma, abortion, or parental rejection. For Maya, the pregnancy ends in her mother's acceptance and the birth of her son.



Sidonie Ann Smith connects the ending and the birth to Maya's affirmation of self: "With the birth of her child Maya is herself born into a mature engagement

with the forces of life" (1973, 374).

It is this "mature engagement," this "birth," that generates character

development and theme in the remaining five volumes. Depending on where

Maya goes, theme and character build upon the oppositions within the

mother/son relationship. No other serial autobiography places the theme of mother and child within the eye of the conflict, making it of supreme importance

to the narrative(s).

### Character Development

Angelou's autobiographies tend to derive their form through the interaction of

characters rather than through the development of a dramatic line of action.

When Maya and Bailey arrive in Stamps, hungry, alone, and unprotected, their

characters lack all substance. They are as empty as the name tags they wear to

assert their identities.

In her evolution from child to woman, Maya Angelou fills her readers'

imagination, as have very few similar characters in American autobiography.

Alfred Kazin (1964) argues that recreating those early years offers the

autobiographer the greatest incentive. Childhood, he contends, is the perfect perspective for revealing the self, in part because the

narrator derives pleasure from transferring the informed thoughts of an adult into the imaginative visions

of a child. Although he is not writing about Angelou, Kazin's remarks fit her perfectly. This chapter investigates Maya's character as a child and young adult,

with attention to how she acts and is acted upon in three specific areas: in the

family, in the black community, and in the white community. Maya's

performance in these areas reveals the diversity of her character and gives a sense of the various moods, attitudes, and strategies

involved in her survival as a black child in a world manipulated by images of whiteness.

Autobiography is a genre designed to be a revelation of the self, as shaped through personal attachments, often with present or absent family members. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya's interaction with her mother, brother, son, and grandmother tends to order and solidify her experiences. Although these

are all strong relationships, Maya's ties with her grandmother are probably the

most important in forming her character.

Momma Henderson is a churchgoing, God-fearing woman whose store is the

heart of black socializing in Stamps. She has strict ideas about taking God's name in vain and even stricter ones about relating to white folks. Believing in the safe approach, Momma insists that talking to "white-folks" is taking a chance with

"one's life" (39). Despite her many strengths, she is a woman who submits to racist behavior without a struggle, maintaining the submissive manners of the past. Maya is unable to accept her grandmother's position that for Southern

blacks to survive in a racist society, they must develop a strategy of obedience.

She disagrees with Annie Henderson's passive stance but fears how whites might

react to Bailey's having witnessed a black man's death at their hands. Annie, fearing white vengeance, finally sends the children to the safety of California.

There are a number of episodes in which Maya and Momma Henderson

disagree about white folks. The most dramatic involves some rural white girls who stand in front of Mama's store and taunt her, like the witches from Macbeth.

One of the "powhitetrash" girls brazenly exposes her private parts in a butt-naked handstand to the God-fearing Momma. Symbolically, the adolescent is displaying

her white sexuality before Annie Henderson, store owner, a black woman who is

unable to respond except through passively humming a spiritual. In his

interpretation of this episode, Stephen Butterfield sees Momma's passivity as a victory in self-control (1974, 211), whereas Dolly McPherson reads the

confrontation as an example of white girls using their power to "treat a Black woman like another child" (1990, 32). Maya, furious at her grandmother's compliance, wishes that she could blow away the problem with a rifle.



In another racist episode, Momma takes Maya to the town's white dentist, who

humiliates his black patients by saying that he'd rather put his "hand in a dog's

mouth than in a nigger's" (160). In each instance, it is Annie's passivity that disturbs Maya, who is beginning to articulate her anger about racism. Maya's response is to invent a fantasy in which Momma Henderson holds Dentist

Lincoln by the collar and orders him to "leave Stamps by sundown" (161). This

stock phrase from a western movie grants Annie the male authority that Maya

wants her to have: Annie is the hero, and the dentist is the unforgiven villain.

The fantasy, printed in italics, is Maya's way of dealing with the dentist's racist behavior and with her grandmother's inability to question his racism.

It hurts Maya to see her grandmother humiliated by a so-called professional who is unworthy, who even owes her interest payments on a loan. These

humiliating situations cause Maya to feel confused toward Momma Henderson,

who represents conflicting qualities: she is both strong and weak, courageous and

fearful, caring and cold. Angelou exaggerates Annie's power, recalling that Momma Henderson—over six feet tall—was “taller than any woman in my

personal world” (38). To Maya her physical strength is unequalled. Mildred A.

Hill-Lubin, who argues for the cultural importance of the black grandmother in

African and African American communities, selects Annie Henderson as a grandmother who represents physical strength and the “stability and the

continuity of the Black family and the community” (1986, 257). Although

Momma becomes Maya's source of knowledge, values, and morality, she is still

troubled by her grandmother's opinions about language, race, and white writers

such as Shakespeare, Maya's "first white love" (11). When they recite poetry for

Momma, Maya and Bailey are careful to choose the black poet James Weldon Johnson instead of the dead, white Shakespeare.

Uncle Willie, Annie Henderson's son, has been under her special care since he

was a child, crippled at the age of three when a babysitter dropped him. Willie

walks with a cane to support his disfigured body. In an early scene, Maya witnesses Momma burying Uncle Willie in a large bin, under layers of potatoes

and onions, to avoid being detected by the Ku Klux Klan. Still, Uncle Willie has

an active role in running the store, which is the hub of the black community. He

handles the sales on the night of the heavy-weight championship between the famed black boxer, Joe Louis (1914–1981), and a white man. All of black Stamps

gather at Annie's store to watch the historic fight. Men and women living under

the yoke of racism think that if Louis loses "we were back in slavery and beyond

help" (113).

In the film version of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, directed by Fielder Cook, there is a touching scene between Willie and Maya that occurs after the fight is over. Joe Louis has won and Uncle Willie feels that he has been redeemed, that he, too, is a man who can stand up to whites. Although Uncle Willie's sentiments are, strangely, not conveyed in Angelou's book, they are beautifully

presented in the film in dialogue between Maya and her uncle that adds depth to

his character.

After Momma Henderson, Maya's brother Bailey is the family member who

has the greatest influence on her young life. He is bright, clever, and good-spirited. Maya measures people by her small-framed brother, her hero, her

"Kingdom Come" (19). For five years Vivian has ignored Maya and Bailey, at times trying to buy their affection by sending presents. During their

estrangement from Vivian Baxter, Maya learns to cope by putting her trust into

the strong hands of Annie Henderson and the reliable good feelings of her brother.

One day Bailey Sr. arrives from California to take them on a journey. After the trip has started, he announces that they are going to see their mother. Vivian has left California and is living in St. Louis, Missouri, with the Baxter family, headed by Grandmother Baxter, a neighborhood precinct leader of German/black descent

who has connections with the city police. There are three formidable brothers, Tutti, Tom, and Ira. Maya is in awe of her



beautiful mother, a woman “too beautiful to have children” (50). She often describes her mother through images

of lightness or floating: for instance, she moved “like a pretty kite that floated just above my head” (54).

Six months later, Vivian and the children move into a house with Mr. Freeman,

who works in the Southern Pacific Railway yards. The harmony of the newly formed family is brutally disrupted, though, when Mr. Freeman rapes Maya.

After the rape it is Bailey and not Vivian who is able to comfort Maya; he is her

voice and spirit during the years of silence that follow their return to Stamps.

In a powerful episode Bailey comes home to Momma Henderson shaken and

pale. He saw a dead, bloated black man, covered with a sheet, pulled from the water. A white man ordered Bailey and some colored men to put the corpse into

a jail filled with prisoners. Confused and unable to understand why white people

could have such hatred of blacks, Bailey gets no answers from his grandmother

or his uncle.

Bailey's encounter with the dead man prompts Momma Henderson to send the

children to Vivian Baxter, who has since left St. Louis and returned to California.

In a poignant image that emphasizes the geographical distance between

California and Arkansas and between mother and children, Maya imagines a mother who could never "laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children" (42).

Again on a train, Maya and Bailey return to Vivian Baxter. Maya is thirteen

and Bailey a year older. Vivian captivates both children with her worldliness and

elation. Not until her early twenties does Maya see herself as having separated herself emotionally from her mother. She told novelist Rosa Guy, “I began to see

her as a character I would have read about” (1989, 221).

Maya’s father, Bailey Sr., is less prominent than Vivian Baxter in shaping Maya’s character. He represents the absent father, the man who is not there for

his children. This figure is prevalent in American literature, among urban and

rural, poor and middle-class, black and white families. Maya sees her father only twice in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—first, in his initial appearance when he drives his children to St. Louis; and second, when Maya visits him for a bizarre summer vacation in Southern California. In neither instance is he able to

show much affection for his daughter. He does not reappear in the other autobiographies. Bailey James Johnson died in San Diego in 1968, the same year

that marked the death of Martin Luther King ( *Essence* 2014, 104).

In her father's absence, Maya finds substitute father figures, men like Mr.

Freeman, who will give her the attention her father cannot, or she makes fun of

men so they become undesirable to her. She enjoys joking with Bailey about pompous fatherly types like Reverend Thomas, who visits Annie Henderson to take advantage of her home cooking. Uncle Willie, her father's blood brother, is a substitute father in the strictest sense. At one time, Maya, feeling sorry for her uncle's disability, comments that if he wishes, she would be his make-believe daughter. She admits that Uncle Willie would have been a better father than Bailey Sr. But his speech problems and her insecurity prevent a good relationship

from developing between them.

The most apparent father substitute is Mr. Freeman, a man who sits up and waits until Vivian comes home from dealing poker in gambling parlors. When Maya has nightmares, the three of them sleep together. One morning after Vivian

gets up, Mr. Freeman touches Maya and pulls her on top of him, his right hand

moving rapidly. Maya feels “at home” and imagines that he is her “real father”

whom she has finally found (61). While not a member of the family, Vivian’s live-in boyfriend has a husband’s place in Vivian’s

sex life and a stepfather's role with regard to Vivian's daughter, a trust that he violates in both cases.

When Maya reveals that it was Freeman who raped her, he is put on trial and

found guilty. Soon afterward, Freeman's body is discovered, beaten to death.

Maya suspects her uncles. After Maya becomes mute, Vivian is unable to break

through her wall of silence. Maya and Bailey are once again returned to Stamps.



The black community of Stamps is an extended family. Through her

interaction with the black people of Stamps, Maya develops her character, growing stronger and sharpening her wit by associating with people like Sister Monroe, Reverend Thomas, Mr. McElroy, and Mrs. Flowers. Some of Maya's

insights are related to social class. Mr. McElroy is the only black man Maya has

ever seen whose trousers match his jackets. She learns that he wears suits, and she claims that suits are good things because when men wear them they look a

bit like women, making their appearance less severe. Maya and Bailey admire Mr. McElroy because he doesn't go to church, which makes him "courageous,"

since he is Annie's neighbor (16).

Almost everyone else in the town is a churchgoer, from Momma Henderson to

Deacon Jackson. A great deal of the humor in *Caged Bird* derives from Angelou's caricatures of Southern black folks who've got religion. The funniest episodes involve Sister Monroe, who is not always able to come to the Sunday service.

When she does, she shouts as loud as possible to make up for having been absent.

One morning when Reverend Taylor is preaching the sermon, Sister Monroe

starts yelling “Preach it” so loud the church shakes (33). One deacon hits the preacher, who hits another deacon in a chain reaction while Sister Monroe walks

calmly from the altar.

Another figure of ridicule is Reverend Thomas, a repulsive church official who

comes to Stamps four times a year; on those occasions he eats “like a hog” at the

home of Annie Henderson (27). There are several reasons why Maya and Bailey

despise Reverend Thomas: He is obese; he never remembers their names; and worst of all, he eats the very best pieces of chicken at Sunday dinner. He, too, becomes Sister Monroe's victim when one Sunday while he is preaching she hits

him so hard on the head with her purse that his teeth fly onto the floor near Maya and Bailey. At this point the children roll on the floor, laughing hysterically until Uncle Willie takes them next door to a church building and gives them "the whipping of our lives" (37).

Of all of the black residents of Stamps, the one person Angelou treats with unqualified respect is Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Maya calls

her the “aristocrat of Black Stamps” (77). A self-supporting, independent, graceful woman, Mrs. Flowers gently nurses Maya through her years of silence by reading to her and loaning

her books so that Maya’s love of literature makes her want to speak it. The critic Mary G. Mason (1990), although she doesn’t specify Angelou, has observed a pattern in women’s autobiographies in which another woman—a mother, a

daughter, a grandmother, a friend—helps the subject identify herself as a writer.

This pattern certainly holds true for Mrs. Flowers, whose encouragement is a major factor in Maya’s development as reader, autobiographer, and poet.

Through her experiences with the strong women of Stamps, Maya “links herself to the Southern roots and history of her people—to a succession of American Negro female survivors” (Fox-Genovese 1990, 230). Her involvement with the black community in church, at the store, and at picnics empowers Angelou, enabling her to understand the rules for survival in a racist society.

Through her growing awareness, she is able to articulate her observations about

racism, if not aloud then at least in her thoughts. Thus, she can witness the Joe

Louis fight and fear that in his possible defeat each blow to Louis’s body is like a black man being beaten or a black maid being slapped for being “forgetful” (113).

It is many years before Angelou is able to put such thoughts into spoken words to

share with white and black audiences.

The episodes concerning the powhitetrash girls and Dentist Lincoln provide apt examples of Maya's reaction to the racism coming from the white

community. As a historical document, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* captures the vulgarity of white Southern attitudes toward African Americans. Angelou presents this material by recalling racist characters so real that one can feel their presence—Mr. Donleavy, Mrs. Cullinan, and other whites whose bigotry

dramatically affects Maya's childhood and leaves such a scar on the mature Maya

Angelou that when she finally returns to Stamps in 1982 to film an interview with Bill Moyers, she refuses to cross the bridge into the white part of town.

Of the whites who affect Maya's character, one is Mrs. Viola Cullinan, a woman Maya works for when she is ten. Mrs. Cullinan has a vast array of cups

and glasses, including the ones set aside for the servants. The woman treats Maya

as though she does not exist, calling her Mary or Margaret instead of her given



name, Marguerite. As Maya explains, whites called black people too many other

names for centuries for her to tolerate Mrs. Cullinan's abuse. Maya tries to get

fired by coming late to work, but to no avail. One day, in a moment of anger, she

smashes several pieces of Mrs. Cullinan's prized china. Dolly McPherson sees Maya's intentional breaking of Mrs. Cullinan's china as an affirmation of Maya's

"individuality and value." The confrontation is necessary if Maya is to save herself from the "dehumanizing atmosphere of her environment" (1990, 45).

Another white whose bigotry affects Maya is Mr. Donleavy, the guest speaker

at the eighth-grade graduation at the segregated Lafayette County Training School. Amid all of the pride and loving detail that surround Angelou's exquisite

description of graduation day, Mr. Donleavy hangs over the event like a dense white cloud. All his ideas about education are formed along divisions of race and

gender. Some first-rate baseball and football players once graduated from Lafayette County Training School, he remarks, never mentioning the black girls.

He is pleased that because of his efforts, the white students at Central High School will be getting new microscopes for their laboratories. When Donleavy leaves for a more pressing obligation, having destroyed the educational dreams of

the black children, Henry Reed, the valedictorian, turns to the audience and starts singing the Negro national anthem.

Angelou, who wrote the script for the film version of *I Know Why the Caged*

*Bird Sings*, presents the graduation scene quite differently, making Maya more central to the episode and making her more rebellious than she is in the book.

Maya, not Henry Reed, delivers the valedictory speech. Instead of reading her prepared remarks, she attacks Donleavy's concepts, saying that black boys don't

need to be football players and that black girls don't have to be cooks or housekeepers. The audience is at first shocked, and even more so when Maya, not

Henry, begins to sing James Weldon Johnson's inspirational Negro national anthem, which had been banned from public ceremonies in the schools. But they

gradually join her until their voices rise in a powerful chorus. As the camera pans the faces of the proud black audience, the film ends. Sadly, Maya's triumphant rebuttal of Donleavy's sexist and racist beliefs was not the reality at the 1940

graduation of the Lafayette County Training School, which occurred two decades

before the civil rights movement and the reluctant integration of public schools.

There are many other white people in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, people Maya knows through direct exposure, like Mr. Donleavy, or through a general awareness of their power over her life. Most of the men, like Mrs.

Cullinan's husband, remain blurred in her memory, like "all the other white men

that I had ever seen and tried not to see" (89).

Once she leaves Stamps for the more liberated atmosphere of San Francisco, Maya discovers a few whites who are kind to her. Miss Kirwin, Maya's civics and

current events teacher at the predominantly white George Washington High

School, is a "rare educator" (182). Although Maya is one of three black students,

Miss Kirwin shows no favoritism. She attaches no difference to the fact that Maya is black. The adult narrator confesses that Miss Kirwin was "the only

teacher I remembered" (184)—and perhaps the only white person besides Mrs.

Flowers who had ever befriended her.

## Setting

Setting includes such considerations as racial distribution, climate, work environment, and other associated factors. In Angelou's autobiographical series,

the variety of settings is remarkable, as she sweeps the reader on a magic carpet

that flies from Arkansas to Ghana, with stopping points in New York, Egypt, Los

Angeles, and a number of European capitals. Setting designates how the

characters interact. Her rape, for example, would not likely have occurred in Stamps, Arkansas, with its close-knit community and its rigid moral code.

The first side of the triangular setting in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* begins on a train that takes Maya and Bailey to a small Southern town. There, in

Stamps, Arkansas, she is engulfed with feelings of rejection and abandonment, countered by her love for Momma Henderson, for her brother, and for poetry. In

Stamps, Maya is naive and innocent. She has fantasies of power involving her grandmother and herself as they conquer racism.



The second side of the triangle is St. Louis, Missouri, where her mother Vivian

is a card dealer and her paternal grandmother is a political power in the community. Maya and Bailey attend a large school where the students are so ignorant that the “country children” from Arkansas are moved up a grade. The

extended family lives together until Vivian and Mr. Freeman get a house to share

with Maya and Bailey. At this juncture, Maya is left vulnerable to assault.

The triangle is completed in San Francisco, the West Coast city that will be the

central geographical focus of Angelou's autobiographies until *The Heart of a Woman*. Her mother's home furnishes the final setting for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, with three generations—Vivian, Maya, and Guy—united in a harmony that belies the separation and abandonment of Maya's beginnings.

### Thematic Issues

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; of her brother Bailey; of her father, Bailey Sr.; of her mother, Vivian Baxter; and of 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's

*Beloved* (1987), or the mother who strives for decent housing in Lorraine Hansberry's *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 that part of 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 Laurence Dunbar’s 1896 poem,

“Sympathy,” a poem about a caged bird that beats its 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*, the last word and the one that creates an upward mood. But as we have observed, *sings*



also suggests the survival of African Americans through the spiritual. 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 it 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).

A cage, as the poet 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). It feels pulpy like the

“inside of a freshly killed chicken” (61). 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). 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.

Literary Style

The literary style in *Caged Bird* is rich, humorous, intense, and engaging.

Sometimes Angelou's language is frightening, as in the camel metaphor, or vicious, as in the white dentist's remark that he'd "rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (160). Angelou's use of the tabooed and inhuman

word *nigger* is meant to emphasize the clash between the dentist's presumed profession as healer and the low-level nature of his language and philosophy.

Another feature of her style, evident in the depiction of the dentist, is the use

of sharp and direct dialogue to convey the distinctive language of a character.

Although dialogue is a stylistic feature throughout Angelou's entire autobiographical series, it seems most dynamic in *Caged Bird*, owing to the string of such wild-speaking characters as Sister Monroe, Mrs. Cullinan, or Dentist Lincoln.

As the discussion of Maya's rape looked closely at the use of language to communicate overwhelming pain, so the comparison of Negroes to dogs places Angelou's use of language within the stylistic tradition of black protest literature.

In much African American literature, one finds the theme of dehumanization, meaning the state of being denied human

qualities such as intelligence and sensitivity. Thus, the hero of Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*

(1944) is depicted as less than human: he crouches in a sewer and gnaws on a pork chop bone, as do dogs. Claude McKay, in his poem "If We Must Die" (1919),

uses a series of animal references to convey the dehumanization of black men in

America—hogs, barking dogs, and packs of doglike men—to emphasize the

ferocity of whites and the victimization of blacks.



There are a number of such references in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. At the beginning of the book, Bailey and Maya wear instructions on their wrists announcing their names and destination: like cattle, they are named and branded.

Maya, who initially pities her mother's lonely boyfriend, compares him to some

cute little pigs who were slaughtered in Stamps for sausage. After the trial, Grandmother Baxter calls Freeman a "mad dog" (72). These comparisons are precise, exact. In fact Angelou's most valued technique as a stylist may be the precision with which she describes objects or places, a precision so sharp that

readers carry the descriptions with them, even when the book is closed. Her observations are sensual, keen to the essences of

smell, sound, and sight. Her writing resembles a series of photographs or fragments of music: snapshots taken

from many angles, notes played from a variety of instruments.

Although Sondra O’Neale (1984) claims that Angelou for the most part avoids

a stereotypical black vocabulary, and that her style reflects the rich language of her literary models (Poe, Dunbar, Dostoyevsky, to name a few), readers should have ears tuned to the folksy charm of the dialogue in *Caged Bird*— to Angelou’s drawing on Southern speech patterns such as Momma’s saying “didn’t cotton to”

(39) or “he gonna be that kind of nasty” (164). The narrator of *Caged Bird* projects a youthful exuberance as she harvests one

figure of speech after another from her

fertile imagination.

Reports from newspapers and Internet sources suggest that not all readers have

appreciated the effectiveness of Angelou's language. An Edgewater, Maryland, mother has campaigned against *Caged Bird* being a required book in South River High School because it is "sexually explicit, racially divisive and too graphic about lesbianism" (Gross 1997, A1). In Mebane, North Carolina, in the state where Angelou once lived, wrote, and taught, similar charges were brought against her poetry. Threatened with losing his job for bringing Angelou's poetry

to class, a fourth-grade teacher apologized: “I never in my wildest dreams thought that anybody who would read a poem at the presidential inauguration

could write such filth” (<http://www.blackvoices.com/thenews/97>. Web. July 6, 1997).

Unhappily, this fear of Angelou’s truth-telling has been spreading as white parents discover her power and confront the anger of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a black classic written almost five decades ago. One news source, summarizing the censorship of Angelou’s first autobiography, claims that it was

the book “most frequently challenged in schools in the 1995–1996 academic year”

<http://www.planetout.com/pno/newsplanet/article.html/1998/01/13/4>.

Web.

January 4, 2013).

These objections to *Caged Bird* from parents and school boards lead to a final aspect of Angelou's style, one that distinguishes it from so many other autobiographies. That is its element of candor, of openness, as though she were

telling the truth and nothing else—"as if" because Angelou the autobiographer

often alters the “truth” for artistic reasons. What matters from a literary standpoint is not the question of Angelou’s telling the absolute truth but rather

her gift of convincing readers of the narrator’s desire to be accurate, so that her rape becomes a believable account of a young black girl’s horrifying experience.

Profanity and sexual references are a necessary part of this experience.

### A Feminist Reading

Feminism is a system of thought that is focused on women’s rights. It insists

on equality of women in the home, in the marketplace, and in those institutions

that control women's lives: education, medicine, and government. One basic feminist assumption is that women are victims in a patriarchal society, in which

power is held by the father or by his male representatives in the community, and

in which all important decisions are made by men. Women who contest those decisions in the quest for social change are feminists, whether they identify with the term or not.

Most scholars trace the origins of feminism to the Industrial Revolution in Europe and America in the late-eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. As large groups of working men experienced democracy and freedom for the first time, women began to demand similar privileges—the right to vote, to own property,

and to control their bodies and their minds (Wright 1992, 98–99). In America, the

feminist movement grew but then subsided in the 1920s, after women won the right to vote.

A second wave of feminism began to surge in America in the late 1960s, at about the time that Angelou was getting ready to write *I Know Why the Caged*



*Bird Sings*. Called the New Women's Movement, this revival of feminism was indebted to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, with its grassroots appeal and its strategies for social change. After a number of black women refused to accept

inferior positions in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality, the two leading civil rights groups, a split occurred along gender lines. Many black women separated themselves from male authority

and formed their own organizations on campuses and in the community.

The heroine of *Caged Bird* arrived on the literary scene in 1970, at the very moment when women in America were creating black sister's leagues or forming

small discussion groups to share their experiences of oppression under the patriarchal order. Emerging American feminists, most of them white, were

getting ready to learn, to discuss, and to listen. In an editorial from *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, a group of Baltimore feminists claimed that the “women’s movement has provided a vehicle for self-realization and a growing collective

consciousness, out of which we can form a new culture, with goals that ultimately stand in opposition to the goals of capitalism” (1972, 1). The time was indeed ripe for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Angelou herself worked with pro-African women’s groups through her

affiliation with the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage

(CAWAH). The women of CAWAH organized a sit-in at the United Nations

building in New York after Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister of Zaire, was

assassinated. Angelou also accepted a leadership role in the civil rights movement after Martin Luther King Jr. invited her to become Northern Coordinator of the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It is unlikely that she affiliated with

groups exclusively defined as feminist. When asked if she is a feminist or if she

supports the feminist cause, Angelou has been vague. She told Jeffrey M. Elliot

that she considers black women to be more self-reliant than white women. She

also believes in “equal pay, equal respect, equal responsibility” for everyone (1989, 93). As for her being a feminist, Angelou had a practical but elusive comment: “I am a feminist. I’ve been female for a long time now. I’d be stupid

not to be on my own side” (Forma, quoted in Elliot 1989, 162).

A feminist reading of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* raises a number of questions relating to women and their social conditions. First, does *Caged Bird* develop themes of specific relevance to women? Second, is *Caged Bird* centered around a strong, aware female character or characters? Third, do the women characters bond with other women in an effort to change conditions under patriarchy?

The first question, is *Caged Bird's* theme relevant to women? is emphatically answered in the text. Momma Henderson's nurturing of her granddaughter

mirrors the mother/daughter relationship that forms the emotional foundation of

feminism. As Marianne Hirsch argues, feminists must “find ways to speak as mothers” if they ever hope to estimate and understand women’s differences (1989, 195). Maya is daughter, granddaughter, and finally mother as she charts her development as a woman. She is concerned with the women in her

community, even though she sometimes sees their lives as limited. Like the majority of women, she gives birth to a child. Because the various plot strands in *Caged Bird* are tied to the theme of motherhood, it is an excellent example of a feminist book.

With regard to the second question, does the central female character of *Caged Bird* project a strong, positive image of women? Probably not. In one of the most quoted phrases from the book, she describes herself as an “ugly black dream” (2).

Unfortunately, Maya shows contempt for herself in the parts of the autobiography that take place in Stamps and St. Louis, for reasons that have to do with her racial and sexual experiences. When she is raped by Mr. Freeman, Maya's self-esteem plunges to the point where she refuses to speak. Not until she regains her voice and moves to California does her sense of self-worth expand.

Although Maya is to some degree a negative character, she is a potential feminist

because she is aware of the forces in society that are working against her.

In answer to the third question, does the character in the autobiography form

bonding relationships with other women? Maya does bond with other women on

a close, personal level, but she and the other women of Stamps are unable to affect any major changes in the patriarchy. Black women in the late 1930s, although they could influence each other's lives, had no power to question the social order because the people in power were white and racist. There were no

civil rights laws to protect political dissenters in Arkansas. Were a woman to challenge the system in Stamps, Arkansas, in the 1930s or 1940s, she might end up



dead. Only years later, when Maya leaves Stamps and goes to California, does she challenge the patriarchal order by becoming the first black female streetcar

conductor in San Francisco.

On a personal level, there are significant bonding relationships among women.

The bonding that takes place between Maya and Mrs. Flowers clearly supports the reading of *Caged Bird* as a model for feminist autobiography. Mrs. Flowers is the primary example of feminism in Stamps: she is independent, she has the economic resources to survive on her own, she respects herself, and she cares about other women, to the extent that she takes control of Maya's

education, helping her to read and regain her own voice. Without her, Maya would never

have become a writer.

At the end of the narrative, Maya returns to her mother, Vivian Baxter—city

woman, blackjack dealer, and free spirit. She is able to draw from Vivian Baxter

the strength and support she needs as she prepares to have a baby. Thus, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which begins with the separation of mother and daughter, ends in their bonding. The mother/daughter/infant triangle of the final

scene marks the completion of Maya's journey to womanhood. Although she is still fearful and dependent, she shows signs of being able to control her life as a black woman.

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*Gather Together in My Name* begins in San Francisco shortly after the end of World War II. The illusion of racial equality in San Francisco during the war years begins to vanish. With white soldiers reclaiming their lives as civilians, black workers were expected to return to their farms and black military heroes to

their ghettos. Angelou's prefatory observations about race and the job market are

intended to place the autobiographer within a historic framework, with her personal economic situation echoing the postwar decline of African American society.

At seventeen, Maya is looking for a job that will bring her recognition, money,

and independence, but she lacks the skills necessary to achieve these goals in a

dominant white economy. In addition, she believes, as do many young women,

that to achieve her own goals she must leave her mother and stepfather, who have supported her, and define a new life for herself and for her two-month-old

son. Leaving her family thus creates a double bind for the struggling single mother; she depends on them, but at the same time she wants to be independent.

*Gather Together* traces Maya's emergence into the world of work, carefully recounting her pursuit of economic stability as she moves from job to job—from

Creole cook, to dancer, to prostitute, to fry cook. During the course of the autobiography she sometimes acts irresponsibly, endangering the safety of her son, who is kidnapped by a babysitter. She also exposes herself to a number of

risky relationships with men: a dancer, a married man who sells stolen clothes,

and a vein-scarred drug user.

At the end of *Gather Together*, she is finally saved when her most reliable friend, Troubador Martin, demonstrates the dangers of

drug addiction by walking

her through a heroin den. Shocked and repentant, Angelou, in a promise to reclaim her innocence, abandons her degenerate life and vows to return with her

son to her mother's protection.

### Narrative Point of View

In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou continues but alters the point of view of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. *Caged Bird* is the first-person account of a child who becomes a mother; *Gather Together* is the first-person account of that mother and her struggle to survive as a black woman in white America.

Thus, the autobiographical form makes a surprising leap away from the growing

pains of the sensitive child narrator of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to the survival tactics of the continuation of the narrative. Despite the difference, Angelou continues, as in *Caged Bird*, to challenge the norm of standard American autobiographies, in which the narrator is usually a prominent,

educated white male.

The Maya of *Caged Bird* is easily recognizable as a child growing up in rural America whose experiences of abandonment and rape make her as memorable, in



her way, as Mark Twain's adventuresome Huckleberry Finn is memorable in his.

The Maya of *Gather Together* is a different kind of person, one who has come of age, a survivor whose endurance is representative of a new class of black women.

The point of view thus changes from that of an engaging girl to a sexy, willful

mother who is the same person but dramatically different.  
Angelou's unorthodox

altering of the growing-up pattern or *Bildungsroman* by way of a sequel surprised her critics, many of whom never guessed that

the author would transform the girl from Stamps into the loose-living mother from California.

Angelou's deviation from proper conduct was a violation of autobiographical

tradition. A black woman who deals with lesbians, hookers, and drug addicts is

bound to rock the standards used for centuries in evaluating American and European autobiography. Traditionally, the genre has been subdivided into

professions occupied by men: statesmen, educators, soldiers, financiers, church fathers, and the like. Not until the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s did a significant

number of writers challenge this elitist notion of life-telling. Like Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), *Gather Together in My Name* is one of several contemporary black texts that reinvent the very notion of autobiographical decorum. They tell it like it is, without obeying the strictures of language and

behavior found in mainstream works.

When she first tried to tell her story, Angelou confessed to her difficulty with

point of view. She felt that she was fragmented, that to convey her personality

she would have to split herself into two women, one respectable and the other improper, one the autobiographer and the other her seamier self. “I wanted this

fictional girl to do all the bad things and I was Miss Goodie Two Shoes,” she explained in our interview. She thought she needed to have “a fictional character

go along side, I guess in the margins.” She told her editor, Bob Loomis, about her plan and he said, “Try it.” But it didn’t work. So her husband Paul encouraged

her to reject this split point of view, believing that the truth of her experience was real and whole: “Tell it. Because if it happened to black girls it happened to black boys, happened to white girls it happened to white boys. This is true” (“Icon”

1997).

Angelou told this writer that before *Gather Together* was published, she became increasingly worried about the adverse effect her autobiographical truth

saying might have on her family. Thus, she gathered them together—Bailey, Vivian Baxter, her husband Paul Du Feu, and her son—and read to them the sections on prostitution and drugs. And she said, “I want to read you this. If it

hurts you, I won’t put it in.” Each accepted what she had written about her life—

Vivian with a joke, Bailey with absolute trust. “My brother said, ‘I love you. One thing about you, you don’t lie. I love that.’” As for

Guy, Angelou continued, “He

came between me and my husband and just took me and said,  
‘You are the great

one” (“Icon” 1997). Her family’s encouragement made it possible  
for her to represent a young black woman’s struggle to tell the  
truth, even when the truth

could possibly cause harm to herself and others.

Like the literary titles of the other five autobiographies, the title  
*Gather Together in My Name* is elusive, perplexing. It seems to  
relate, as Sondra O’Neale argues, to a New Testament passage  
that calls the “travailing soul to pray and commune” (1984, 33).  
Although Angelou does not discourage a religious reading,

she offers a more specific interpretation, explaining that too many parents lie to their children about the past. She says: “Somebody needs to tell young people, listen, I did this and I did that. I thought, all those parents who lie, and fudge, and evade and avoid, could gather together in my name and I would say it” (“Icon”

1997).

Angelou wanted the title, *Gather Together in My Name*, to convey the same point of view inherent in the autobiography—the narrator wanted her gathering

of readers to know what had happened to her so that other young people in similar straits could avoid the same pitfalls. It seems,

then, that the narrator of Angelou's most controversial book is gathering a double audience: young people

who need direction and older people who need to give it. In her name the tarnished past will come forth. The truth will be told.

What the narrator achieves in the second volume is a remarkable sense of authenticity. As a straightforward recorder of life, she replaces the smooth chronology of *Caged Bird* for an episodic series of fragments that mirror the kind of discord found in actual life. *Gather Together* has an expanded consciousness that enables the reader to identify with an African American woman

experiencing life among a diverse class of people, including prostitutes. Sondra O'Neale writes that Angelou "so painstakingly details the girl's descent into the



brothel that Black women, all women, have enough vicarious example to avoid

the trap” (1984, 32).

At least one black woman experienced the kind of salvation that O’Neale is describing. A young woman came to a book signing in Cleveland, Ohio, shortly

after *Gather Together* was published. It was a large crowd, and Angelou tried to speak to everyone in turn: “Suddenly there was this girl, black girl, with false nails, badly put on, and I looked up, and she had fake hair hanging down, false

eyelashes, and it was 10:30, 11:00 in the morning. In a micro-miniskirt. I said,

'Hello. And your name?' She leaned over and she said, 'I saw you on television.

You even give me hope.'" Angelou paused. "If she's the only person I wrote the

book for, it's all right, because I talked to her" ("Icon" 1997).

As it turns out, the girl in the miniskirt is not the only person Angelou wrote

the book for. Despite some negative reviews, and despite some rather unflattering

remarks from one television commentator, the Maya of *Gather Together in My Name* is an inspiring woman primarily because of

what she dares to reveal about herself. Her point of view in this second volume can best be described as open or

naked—a first-person perspective so honest that autobiography becomes personal

contact.

## Structure

Each of Angelou's autobiographies is structured through the use of a journey,

either an extensive one such as from America to Europe in *Singin' and Swingin'*

*and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), or a condensed one, as in the San Francisco-Stamps-St. Louis triad in *Caged Bird*. In contrast, the movement in *Gather Together* consists of far smaller segments or episodes, almost like bus rides or, to use a more artistic comparison, like dance movements. Thus, Angelou

recounts her work and sexual experiences in a rhythm familiar to the many young black people who, like her, have been excluded from high-paying careers

or elegant housing. She circles in place, at the edge of the dance floor, whereas in the following four volumes she is in the air, like a bird or a jet, soaring to Europe, Africa, Germany, back to Africa, and finally landing in America.

Like certain kinds of twentieth-century African American music, especially jazz, *Gather Together in My Name* has a musical structure in which several melodies are played simultaneously by different instruments. These melodies intertwine or cross each other. For example, the piano and the saxophone play against each other in John Coltrane's monumental album *My Favorite Things*, recorded in the early 1960s around the time when Angelou was in Ghana. This

crossing of sounds, called "polyphony," rarely results in harmony.

Like the masters of modern jazz, Angelou structures *Gather Together* by recalling a series of discordant episodes or chords, scenes so dissimilar in texture that they give the autobiography a chaotic or fragmented quality. For example,

when Maya finally gets to dance, she feels eternally anchored to the spot, as if a

“stake had been driven down through my head and body” (102). In the next episode, without a transition, Maya visits her mother, who is cooking dinner for a male friend. Maya agrees to run to the neighborhood grocery store, only to discover on her return that Vivian has stabbed David, one of her lovers, who had

attacked Vivian for inviting a rival for dinner. The layering of images—dancing

and eating, the stake and the knife, lover A, lover B—creates the impression of upheaval. The two episodes immediately follow one another, like a double exposure or two pieces of cellophane stuck

together. Although Maya is the ordering element—the glue throughout the text—she experiences such a variety of

disjointed incidents that at first there seems to be little connection among them.

This layering of narrative elements resembles polyphony and creates the kind of

ordered chaos that characterizes Angelou's style and themes.

In gathering together the disparate episodes into a loosely rounded structure,

Angelou initiates what Dolly A. McPherson calls “the pattern of a circuitous journey” (1990, 70). The journey in the second volume

resembles a choppy tour

through the coarser side of San Francisco and its surrounding communities.

These wanderings are interrupted by two journeys outside the city: to Stamps, Arkansas, to visit Annie Henderson, and to Bakersfield, California, to rescue her

kidnapped son from the babysitter known as Big Mary.

### Plot Development

In an autobiography, plot usually provides a chronological overview of the actions relayed in the story. According to Meyer H. Abrams, a unified plot is one



that has a “complete and ordered structure of actions” (1993, 160). Such a definition does not seem relevant to *Gather Together*, in that the actions seem unstructured and the narrative incomplete.

The plot of *Gather Together* is concerned with a young black woman who describes in detail the process of becoming an adult, emphasizing parenting, personal development, and survival. Survival, in Angelou’s case, is defined as her perseverance in dealing with the emotional, racial, economic, and relational aspects of her life. Her apprehensions about her son, coupled with her recurring

sense of being an inadequate mother, create a special kind of tension, repeated and interconnected as the plot is relocated from one autobiography to the next.

The plot resembles a walk through the underworld, with Angelou's salvation

at the end hoped for but in no way guaranteed. She is still a girl, unfinished, like autobiography itself. In the process of becoming, the narrator, like the plot, is

“open-ended and incomplete...always in process” (Olney 1980, 25).

*Gather Together* stands out from Angelou's other autobiographies because it is the one in which the details of plot are centered almost exclusively in one geographical area, the city of San Francisco, California. Ironically, the concentrated locale produces the most disjointed of Angelou's plots; she lacks the necessary

power over events and now the plot is in control, squeezing her into

the unpleasant situations that are her life. Without money, without support from

friends, she has no place to run to, no way to propel herself into the sweeping spaces of her later volumes.

Another important plot distinction is that the second volume initiates the series. No longer does *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* stand alone as a single-volume autobiography. Unwilling to let this very successful first volume be her

last word, Angelou deviates from the conventional plot by continuing her life story in a second volume. The ending of *Caged*

*Bird* is no longer the “complete and ordered structure of actions” defined by Abrams. Rather, it is the catalyst for a new beginning.

### Character Development

Angelou begins the story of *Gather Together* with a blunt, factual statement about her character: “I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a son

of two months, and I still lived with my mother and stepfather” (3). She is in conflict between being too old and too young, too responsible (she has a son) but

too dependent (she lives at home). Maya’s character develops, as it does to some

extent in all of the volumes, through this sort of opposition.

Like the fluctuating plot of *Gather Together*, the character of its narrator shifts and flickers. Maya is never firmly grounded, always changing jobs, lovers, perspectives. Her life is irritating, often painful. In an interview she remarked that in *Gather Together* she “wrote about the unpleasant, well not just unpleasant, but the certain parts of our lives that are very painful” (“Icon” 1997).

Her pain and dislocation are, once again, alien to the spirit of more optimistic autobiographical accounts like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) or Nikki Giovanni’s *Gemini* (1971) or Angelou’s own *Caged Bird*. What happened, readers wondered, to the sprightly, imaginative child who lived in Arkansas?

In 1974, when Random House published *Gather Together in My Name*, respected critics were disappointed with Angelou's changed character. Selwyn R.

Cudjoe claimed that while *Caged Bird* had a stable "moral center," *Gather Together* was fragmented, therefore "weak." He particularly objected to the sequel's sense of "alienation and fragmentation" (1984, 17). Like Cudjoe, Lynn Z.

Bloom found the second volume disappointing; she felt that *Gather Together* lacked the "maturity, honesty, and intuitive good judgment" of *Caged Bird* (1985, 5).

Yet if looked at carefully, it becomes obvious that Maya in *Gather Together* is not terribly different from the Maya in *Caged Bird*. The

dance-obsessed mother of the second volume is merely an extension of the adventuresome heroine of /

*Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—not the preteen who quietly reads Shakespeare, but the wild child who deliberately gets herself pregnant and who, without knowing how to drive, steers a car down a mountainside in Mexico while her drunk father sleeps in the passenger seat. Critics have paid little attention to the

summer vacation in Southern California with Bailey Sr. and his knife-swinging girlfriend, Dolores. Yet in that episode, which covers twenty-six pages of text, Angelou predicts the person she becomes in *Gather Together*: rebellious, risk-taking, reckless, audacious.

What is more, Cudjoe, Bloom, and other critics tend to overlook the strength of

character that makes *Gather Together* so convincing an autobiography and Maya so captivating a narrator. Dolly McPherson argues that the fragmentation of character and plot in *Gather Together in My Name* is a merit rather than a flaw, since it artistically reflects the “alienated fragmented nature of Angelou’s life”

(1990, 62–63). The word *fragmentation* is used in this context to convey a sense of incompleteness or disconnection.

Maya’s fragmentation can be observed in any number of her relationships: with her mother, with the prostitutes she tries to control, with her grandmother,



with her lovers. Vivian Baxter, the absent mother of *Caged Bird*, is restored to importance in the second volume. *Gather Together* begins and ends with Maya's mother. At the start, Maya and her child are living with Vivian and Daddy Clidell, Maya's stepfather. When the book ends, Maya and Guy intend to return

to the protection of Vivian Baxter following Angelou's glimpse at the horrors of

heroin addiction. In its promised reunion of mother, child, and grandmother, the

concluding paragraph directly parallels the ending of *Caged Bird*: Vivian turns out the lights of her house as Maya and her baby fall asleep.

Fragmentation is also a component of her relationships with other women. In

*Caged Bird* Maya has one girlfriend, Louise Kendricks. A lonely girl, Louise has the kind of imagination that appeals to Maya. They hold hands, close their eyes,

and pretend to be dropping from the sky. Together Maya and Louise “challenge

the unknown” (119). The semi-erotic description of Louise, along with Maya’s concern about being a lesbian, takes a much sharper focus in *Gather Together*.

Here there is no sweet Louise. Maya becomes a madam and the women who work for her, Beatrice and Johnnie Mae, are lesbians

and prostitutes. The relationship between Maya and her whores is fragmented, built on distrust, controlled by Maya's desire for money.

Maya is quite aggressive in securing the services of Beatrice and Johnnie Mae.

She promotes herself as a madam and persuades the lesbian couple to work as prostitutes in their own small home. Maya does well enough to buy a car and

some clothes, but the arrangement disintegrates when Maya arrives late one night and finds the girls working after hours, in flagrant violation of Maya's orders. Johnnie Mae threatens to turn Maya over to the police, where she will be

jailed for owning an automobile purchased with money earned illegally.

Following the shakedown with Johnnie Mae and Beatrice, Maya gathers Guy

and her suitcase, abandons her car at the train station, and goes by rail to Stamps, in search of the “protective embrace” of Momma Henderson (61). For a while she

works at Momma’s store, although customers are constantly wondering why any

woman who left for San Francisco would come back to Stamps. She gets drunk at

the Dew Drop Inn with her high school friends. Guy is happy to receive the attention of Momma and Uncle Willie.

During her stay, Maya goes into the white area of town to purchase a

Simplicity sewing pattern at the Stamps General Merchandise Store, only to find

that the pattern has to be special-ordered. The day she returns to pick it up is a hot, hot Southern day, so hot that Maya's "thighs scudded like wet rubber" (75).

At the store she gets into trouble for talking brazenly to a saleswoman who has

blocked her entry. Maya realizes that she has become too racially liberated to accept the restrictions of the white community. In a parallel manner, Momma Henderson has remained fearful of white intolerance and continues to adhere to

the unspoken rules concerning whites. In a memorable scene, Momma slaps her

rebellious grandchild again and again, ordering her to leave Stamps for her own

protection and the baby's. It is the last moment of contact between them.

Although Maya's outspoken attitudes lead to a termination of their

relationship, her grandmother continues to be a reminder of morality and Christian values. In San Francisco one evening, Maya, working as a prostitute, notices a cook on the premises, a woman who so reminds her of Annie

Henderson that she has to lower her gaze when the cook puts dinner on the table.

The woman in the whorehouse represents Momma Henderson's continuing

spiritual influence and reminds the reader of how far Maya has strayed from the

teachings of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Stamps, Arkansas.

Perhaps Maya's major source of fragmentation comes from her relationships with men. She often misinterprets the behavior of men with whom she is infatuated. Because she becomes involved too quickly, she is "repeatedly hurt by

men who are far more experienced than she, who are far more able to see her

neediness and exploit it before she is able to see it in herself" (Ramsey 1984–1985, 149).

Angelou's male companions are rarely constructive. While the adult males in

*Caged Bird* are crippled, absent, or abusive, the men in *Gather Together* are manipulative, unfaithful, or damaged. Early in the



second autobiography she meets Curly, who gives Maya her first “love party” (18). Overjoyed with the lovemaking, Maya senses maturity and pleasure for the first time. They take Guy

to parks and playgrounds. Maya buys Curly an expensive ring on Daddy Clidell’s

charge account. Then one night he tells her that his girlfriend has come back from San Diego where she had been working in a shipyard.

In her distress over losing Curly, Maya turns to her brother, who is again her

defender, as he had been in *Caged Bird*. Bailey works for decent pay on an ammunition boat out of San Diego. Promising her two

hundred dollars, he persuades her to leave San Francisco and make a new start in San Diego.

Meanwhile, Bailey marries a high school chum named Eunice who, much to his

despair, contracts tuberculosis and dies. Fragmented and incomplete after her death, Bailey has a breakdown and then turns to drugs to ease the emptiness.

Of the men who take advantage of Maya, L. D. Tolbrook is the worst offender.

A married man, he lures Maya into becoming a prostitute for his sake. Professing

that he owes money to some hardened criminals, Tolbrook convinces the

“innocent” Maya to turn tricks. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the whorehouse scenes is the dialogue. Maya’s coworkers are intelligent women who

know the trade. Clara, Maya’s boss, advises further on how to talk and act when

she’s with a man. Clara promises that if she’s good, L.D. will get her a “little white girl,” meaning cocaine. Maya is beginning to suspect, from the way the whores talk, that L.D. is really a pimp, someone who is hiring her out for his own profit. When Maya tells Bailey how she is earning a living, he is furious. Once

again Maya's savior, Bailey forces her to quit the whorehouse and orders her to

warn Tolbrook that her brother Bailey is after him.

The climax of *Gather Together in My Name* occurs when an unexpectedly compassionate boyfriend, Troubador Martin, takes Maya, now smoking a lot of

marijuana, on an unnerving tour of the underworld of heroin addiction. Troub makes her watch while he shoots up, makes her watch as the needle punctures a

scab and "rich yellow pus" runs down his arm (180). Maya's refusal, at Troub's

advice, to do hard drugs marks the end of her irresponsibility and the inauguration of new standards that help safeguard her and her son's survival.

The end of *Gather Together* gives little indication that someday Maya will be a successful performer, wife, or mother. Deserted by her dancing partner, R. L.

Poole, and betrayed by her pimp, L. D. Tolbrook, the best break she receives by

the end of the narrative is to have narrowly escaped heroin addiction. The book

closes with an experienced Maya preparing to return to her mother's protection:

“I had no idea what I was going to make of my life, but I had given a promise and

found my innocence. I swore I’d never lose it again” (181).

Although the reader may feel jolted by the suddenness of the ending, this sort

of high-speed projection into the future is a common element in Angelou’s conclusions. Sondra O’Neale comments on the “abrupt suspense” and drama with

which the central character draws together her story: “In this way dramatic technique not only centralizes each work, it also makes the series narrative a collective whole” (1984, 33).

The Maya of *Gather Together in My Name* is a person of potential strength and moral integrity, perhaps even “innocence,” who is struggling against the

temptations that the fast world of California is holding before her: sex, money,

getting high. Through it all, the narrator is determined to present Maya as honestly as possible, in a way that readers will believe: “Young people feel safe

with me,” she claims, “because they know I’m not going to lie and I won’t fudge.

I’m not going to tell them everything I know, but I will try to make sure that what I say is the truth” (“Icon” 1997).

## Setting

With the exception of a return visit to Stamps, the setting in *Gather Together* is confined to the state of California. The setting includes the various dwellings where Maya and her son are forced to live, sometimes separately; the job sites where she feels threatened or demeaned; the places that offer her temporary contentment, like Vivian's house in San Francisco and Annie Henderson's store

in Stamps, Arkansas.

The narrative opens in a smooth and leisurely manner, at the San Francisco residence of Vivian Baxter and Daddy Clidell. When Maya leaves on her quest



for independence, the setting changes swiftly: one day she works in a hospital cafeteria, the next as a cook in a Creole restaurant. She moves from San Francisco to Los Angeles, to San Diego then Stockton, and back, trying to provide for her

son. Always in motion, always changing, Maya circles her surroundings as she

looks for work, for love, for contentment.

The dizzy changes of setting culminate when Maya, fearing that Johnnie Mae

will report her for having an illegal automobile, goes with Guy to Stamps on a

desperate train ride that echoes the journey of the two children with name tags at the beginning of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In the first volume, the small town in Arkansas represents a state of innocence, a place of refuge for two lonely and unwanted children. In *Gather Together*, Stamps cannot offer solace to Maya, whose knowledge of city life makes her challenge Momma Henderson's

unbending rule that you just don't talk to white folks. When Maya, in violation

of her grandmother's wishes, leaves the black community of Stamps and crosses

the dusty road into the white section of Stamps, she initiates a confrontation with two white saleswomen that Momma Henderson

hears about even before Maya

gets back to the general store. Maya's violation of decorum results in a severe beating from Momma and a prompt return to California.

### Thematic Issues

In creating an autobiography, the narrator depends on thematic issues to act as

reflections on character and plot. A theme is a repeated motif that creates a pattern or design in the text. When it is skillfully handled, as it is in *Gather Together*, theme can enrich the plot, help organize the volume, and even determine how the plot begins and ends. Three major themes dominate *Gather*

*Together*—motherhood, clothing, and work.

The theme of motherhood controls the plot of *Gather Together*.  
Maya makes

decisions or forms relationships with the constant image of her  
son before her, as she tries to provide him with a stable  
environment or console herself when they

are separated. Maya's motherhood is what keeps her connected  
to the world of

responsibility. However, she often falls short in her duties as  
mother, due to complications in her work or the enticements of her  
male friends, who also want

time with her. This situation highlights the duality Maya feels throughout the series between mothering and working.

Recall the mother/mother/son still life—Vivian, Maya, and the baby in repose—

with which Angelou ended *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This tranquil scene is disrupted in *Gather Together* as the young mother roams the streets of San Francisco looking for a way to survive. In the second volume she inverts the motherhood theme of *Caged Bird*: the little girl who longed for Vivian's love is now a mother herself, a teenage girl responsible for the nurturing of her son.

Maya's redemptive mother in *Gather Together* remains a character for the rest of the autobiographies, although Maya's

responsibility toward her son recedes as an  
issue.

With the theme of motherhood Angelou engages the reader in a  
mother/child

configuration that is of vital concern for the remaining  
autobiographies. As Marianne Hirsch argues in another context,  
African American women writers during the past three decades  
are one of the few groups who tell the mother's story and feature  
the mother in "complex and multiple ways" (1990, 414). In  
developing the theme of motherhood, Angelou applies the same  
quality of

honesty to her role of mother as she does to her role of prostitute; in fact, the two tend to interconnect in their elements of pain, struggle, imperfection, and loss.

One of the problems any working mother faces is finding child care. Maya needs an adequate sitter to care for Guy while she is working, which means, at

least in the case of being a prostitute, all-night assistance. She finds an excellent sitter in Mother Cleo, a fat woman who likes babies and even takes in white infants, although she charges more for them. Another sitter, acquired after the interlude in Stamps, is Big Mary Dalton, an affectionate woman who lives in Stockton, where Maya takes a job first as a fry cook and then as a prostitute. Big Mary arranges for Guy to live in her house, with Maya taking her son on her day

off. After she meets L. D. Tolbrook, though, Maya occasionally forfeits her day

off with Guy to be with her boyfriend.

In a powerful treatment of child loss in *Gather Together in My Name*, Maya

goes to Big Mary's house and finds it deserted. A neighbor tells her that Big Mary had moved away three days earlier and that she probably went to her brother's in

Bakersfield. After a desperate search and a long bus ride, Maya locates Big Mary



Dalton and her angry son, whose feelings of abandonment echo her own

unhappiness during childhood.

Of the numerous references in *Gather Together* that address Maya's feelings of inadequacy as a mother, the Big Mary episode is surely the most intense. Guy cries, pulls his mother's hair, and expresses his fury at being deserted for so long a time. Maya sheds bitter tears and acknowledges her "first guilt" (163). Earlier in the autobiography Maya admits to having ignored her son to such an extent that

Big Mary Dalton asked: "Ain't you got time for him?" (147). She also leaves him

alone on the night that Troubadour Martin ushers her to the drug den near the

San Francisco docks. These and other instances of maternal conflict or neglect give *Gather Together* a special tension. The tension does not vanish in the volume's affirmation of "innocence" but continues with lesser or greater gravity

throughout the series.

The second theme, clothing, is also of great importance in the writings of African American women. Clothing is an indicator of class and character; black

women writers often use clothing symbolically, as a kind of second skin or mask.

In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984), for example, the heroine is on a cruise ship. The six suitcases filled with linen dresses and evening gowns become, on both literal and symbolic levels, the excess baggage that keeps her trapped in bourgeois values. Similarly, Jade, the light-skinned model in Toni

Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), owns a sealskin coat, a rich, black fur that covers her sleek body. The coat becomes a multileveled symbol in the novel—a barricade between her and her primitive lover; a sign of capitalism, with its slaughter of innocent seals for profit; a reference to the famed tar baby of African American

folklore that traps its victims and won't let go. Morrison uses similar images in

her 2015 novel *God Help the Child*. Her central character, Bride, is a beautiful model with dark skin who wears nothing but white clothing in order to

accentuate her features and her status.

Angelou introduces clothing as a theme on the first page of *I Know Why the*

*Caged Bird Sings*. Maya's ugly purple frock made a noise "like crepe paper on the back of hearse." A sign of her humiliation, the dress is also, as Liliane K.

Arensberg (1976) observes, symbolic of the themes of death and rebirth that operate in the first autobiography. In *Gather Together in My Name*, however, Angelou tends to use clothing as a form of

deliberate costuming that either covers up or augments her character's body, often conveying her bad taste and

inexperience. Frequently, the way she dresses is determined by the men she is involved with.

As in *Caged Bird*, the theme of clothing is introduced on the first page of *Gather Together*, where Angelou describes Southern black women living in San Francisco during World War II. Although they knew only "maid's uniforms and

mammy-made dresses," they changed these garments for men's work pants and

took jobs in the shipyards. Prostitutes were so busy they didn't have time to take off their shoes, the narrator remarks in the

prologue, foreshadowing Maya's work

as a dancer, a prostitute, and a madam.

Clothes become a tool of the trade when L. D. Tolbrook begs her to "dress her

age" in short skirts, ankle socks, and hair ribbons. Teenage attire becomes her identifying feature as a prostitute and her clothing an ironic statement about the theme of lost innocence that helps structure the book. Maya buys too revealing a

dance costume for her first Poole and Rita performance.

Troubador Martin stashes stolen clothing in her rooms until Maya's closets are stuffed with sweaters and skirts.

Clothing takes on special significance when she returns to Stamps wearing her

city clothing: white, off-the-shoulder peasant blouses and brightly colored skirts with floral prints. Her high school friend, L. C. Smith, tells Maya the truth.

Everyone is laughing at her for wearing “the very clothes everyone here wants to get rid of” (69). Maya’s reason for going to the white section of Stamps is presumably to change her manner of dress, since she orders a Simplicity sewing

pattern for a design not available in Stamps. Reading the situation symbolically,

“simplicity” can be associated with innocence. The pattern, too complicated for the Stamps General Merchandise Store to stock, marks the end of Maya’s simple

and innocent life in Arkansas. Because of her arrogant outburst over a piece of

clothing that doesn’t yet exist, Maya and Guy are finished in Stamps, ordered away for their own good by Annie Henderson.

A third theme, work, is also connected to related ideas in each of the volumes.

Recall Maya’s delight in *Caged Bird* at being hired as the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. In *Gather Together*, work is of supreme importance as the narrator persistently



searches for a means of survival. Her greatest job disappointment occurs when, about to be inducted as an army recruit, Maya is

suddenly rejected because the army learns that she attended the Mission Labor

School for two years, a school on the list of the House Un-American Activities

Committee (HUAC). HUAC, a committee created by the authority of the United

States Senate, was headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908–1957). Its business

was to uncover communists among educators, entertainers, governmental

employees, the army, the State Department, and anyone else suspected of

sheltering “Reds” or “Commies.” The army said *no*, even though they had no evidence that Maya was ever a communist sympathizer.

She is more fortunate with other job applications in the service or entertainment businesses: cafeteria worker, cook, prostitute, dancer, and so forth.

Food service—short-order cook, waitress, restaurant manager—offers work that Maya feels fairly comfortable with, perhaps because of Annie Henderson’s great

success in selling lunches to mill workers in Arkansas during the Depression.

Although Maya’s work in a San Francisco diner is dismal, she lifts her spirits by

listening to jazz: “I let the music wash away the odors and moods of the restaurant” (80). Her restaurant jobs eventually become ways to meet male friends who, like her jobs, tend to be short term and unreliable.

Maya loses one decent job as the manager of a small restaurant in Oakland because of her own compassionate personality. Appalled to discover that her boss, Mr. Cain, promotes prizefighting, she becomes hysterical when she sees a

small young boxer who looks like Bailey being “whooped” to death. When Maya starts screaming “Stop them” and “Freak,” she knows her job is over (173–74).

A second category of work in *Gather Together*, and one that has the greatest impact on her later years, involves the entertainment industry. As an individual

or as part of a team, Maya shows promise as a dancer and cabaret singer. In a

display of modesty, though, she refuses to dance nude for stag parties, telling R.

L. Poole that she won't have a "bunch of white men to gape at me" (113). Maya

learns her routines quickly and incorporates the steps into the Poole and Rita performances until Poole's girlfriend returns to replace Maya as his partner. By

the time of the third volume, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), Maya's talent and diligence will earn her a solid reputation as a performer, solid enough to be offered the opportunity to dance in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

A third kind of work in *Gather Together* involves illicit sex. One night in a bar where Maya works as a B-girl, pushing watered-down drinks at inflated prices,

she meets two lesbians, Beatrice and Johnnie Mae. As usual, she is suspicious of

gay women. Nevertheless, she accepts an invitation to visit them at their house,

where she smokes marijuana for the first time and where, maybe because she's

high, she concocts a plan to be their business manager or madam while Johnnie

Mae and Beatrice turn tricks.

While the idea of being a prostitute disgusts Maya at first, she later succumbs

to the wishes of L. D. Tolbrook, who begs her to prostitute herself for him so that he can pay off his debts. Maya is the least popular of the three whores at Clara's.

As Clara warns her, men don't want to get married; they just want to "trick"

(141). Maya dislikes the strong smell of disinfectant but enjoys the way the women talk to each other. The whorehouse scenes contain exactly the kind of material that Angelou was afraid to

disclose to the public, fearing that her family would be offended if they knew she had been a prostitute. Nonetheless, the theme of sexuality in *Gather Together* reveals a great deal of honesty and daring on the part of the narrator.

### Style and Literary Devices

Due to the provocative sexual nature of *Gather Together*, Angelou's writing in this volume is a mixture of elegant, mature prose coupled with the language of

low-life characters for whom *reefer*, *trick*, and *pimp* are major words in their vocabularies. At times, Angelou seems to sink along with her troubles to the very



depths of the earth; she describes the “slimy world” of prostitution with a sensuousness that includes the feel of a “man’s zipper” on her thigh, the feel of

Lysol irritating her throat (140–41). Even when she writes with eloquence, her topics tend to be grim, as in her description of Bailey following the death of his wife from tuberculosis, or in her presentation of her breakup with Curly.

Only rarely is an elated Maya stretching her wings. She is most ecstatic when

she is onstage, with the movement of the dance pushing her toward freedom and

letting her forget the “crushing failures in my past” (100). In one splendid passage, Angelou, in an exultant style, again describes the dancing narrator: “The music

was my friend, my lover, my family.” In a series of comparisons she writes that

dance music is a bright day, a happy son, poetry recited in a “warm bath” (112).

What Maya needs for emotional sustenance she obtains by tapping her feet to the

rhythm of the music.

Much of her style, though, reflects a negativity of moods and cadences. She describes the heights of a love affair, only to fall; she depicts the uncontrollable laughter that comes from smoking grass, only to crash. After she is fired for interfering in the boxing match, her language vividly records her depression.

Guy's smile no longer moves her. She has lost her strength and her courage. Her

marijuana is all gone. She feels "defenseless" for the very first time (175). The negativity of Angelou's style near the end of the book, immediately before she meets Troubadour Martin, suggests that Maya is looking for a way out, probably

through drugs. Her style is slow, measured, in preparation for the trip to the lower depths that ends the volume.

The descent into the underworld has been a literary device in European

literature since Homer's *The Odyssey* (ca. 750 BC). Odysseus, the epic hero, goes to the land of Hades and learns about the value of life from the slain Greek hero, Achilles: "Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand...than lord it over all the

exhausted dead" (Homer, *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, 1995, 344).

Like Achilles and Odysseus, Troubadour Martin shows Maya a vision of hell that

serves as an affirmation of life. By shooting up before her eyes, Troub proves to

her that the drug high, which looks like paradise, is really the ultimate dead end.

Realizing that “one man’s generosity pushed me safely away from the edge,”

Maya regains her footing and vows to change the course of her life (181).

Troubadour’s name has literary associations as well. During the Middle Ages

(AD 1200–1400), troubadours were musician-poets from the south of France.

Inspired by lyric poems from the Greeks, troubadours resided in royal courts or

wandered the countryside, composing words and music. Given the idea of music

as salvation in *Gather Together*, it seems that Troubadour Martin behaves like a soothing musician in keeping Maya away from the turmoil of drug addiction.

Angelou admits that Troubadour Martin is not his real name, but that the episode

was accurate: “[I]n the bathroom he made me stand there and watch as he tied

himself up and then probed for a place which would accept...and he had scars so

that...Oh God, it was so awful" ("Icon" 1997).

Other critics have noticed parallels between *Gather Together* and Greek literature, especially to the Persephone-Demeter myth of Greek mythology.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1990) remarks that *Gather Together in My Name* is a reimaging of the Persephone myth in which a daughter, Persephone, is raped and

kidnapped by Hades, the god of the underworld. Her mother, Demeter, goddess

of agriculture, grieves so deeply that all of nature becomes barren. To save the world from complete starvation, Hades permits his bride to visit Demeter for half

of the year. For the other half Persephone must return to Hades. This profound

attachment between mother and daughter, one of the very few woman-oriented

myths in Greek legend, explains the power of mother love and accounts for the

change of the seasons. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulous (1980) develops the



parallel more fully in her study of symbols of the mother in four American autobiographies.

Angelou may have the Demeter-Persephone myth in mind in her treatment of

the mother/daughter theme in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*. Maya's rape in *Caged Bird* initiates a five-year separation between mother and daughter and thrusts Maya into a hell of silence that is alleviated by another mother figure, Mrs. Flowers, whose name indicates

springtime and fertility. Reunited at last with her mother, Vivian Baxter, Maya nonetheless leaves her at the beginning of the second volume. She descends into a

world of prostitution, visits the underworld with Troubadour Martin as her guide, and finally emerges with the promise to return to her mother. While the

Persephone story is to some degree relevant to Maya's situation, the mythological

reading fails to take into account Vivian Baxter's remoteness in both volumes.

Nor does it address Maya's primary emotional commitment, which is not to Vivian, the mother, but to her son, Guy.

A Womanist Reading

Maya Angelou has been more than eloquent in writing about the conditions of

black women in America. Near the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she presents several moving paragraphs on the subject, from the point of view of a

high school student who has stopped attending classes but who continues to learn

and observe. Angelou argues that the black woman is entangled by her own nature as well as by three powerful enemies: “masculine prejudice, white illogical hate, and Black lack of power” (231).

Angelou published these comments in 1970. Almost three decades later she wrote in a similar vein that the “heartbreaking tenderness of black women and

their majestic strength” are responsible for black women’s survival ( *Stars* 44).

Each of these passages speaks to the “womanist” issues raised in *Gather Together in My Name*: masculine bias; white racism; women’s lack of power; and women’s tenderness, strength, and survival.

*Womanist* is a more appropriate term than *feminist* for identifying Angelou’s attitudes toward black women in *Gather Together*. Novelist Alice Walker popularized the term *womanist* in the introductory section of *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1967)

to make explicit the racial distinctions between black feminists and white feminists. A womanist is a “black feminist or feminist of color,” wrote Walker. “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” The color purple indicates strength, power, and woman/love, what Walker calls

“being grown up,” as opposed to the less forceful, lavender qualities of the white feminist movement. According to Deborah King, a “womanist is spirited and spiritual, determined and decisive, committed to struggle and convinced of victory” (quoted in Tierney 1991, 390).

Black women in America committed themselves to the struggle for civil rights

well over one hundred years ago, in associations such as the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston and the more broadly based National Association of Colored Women. A year before the publication of *Caged Bird*, black poet Sonia Sanchez introduced a course, "The Black Woman," at the University of Pittsburgh, the first college course to concentrate on the experiences of black women in the Americas (Tierney 1989, 45). If black women have not

displayed a great interest in feminism as defined since the 1970s by white women, it is because of racism in the women's movement, claims Deborah King,

who outlines the three major items on the womanist agenda: first, establishing positive images among black women; second, recognizing that race, class, and gender play a part in the

oppression of black women; and third, becoming increasingly aware of the cultural heritage of black women (quoted in Tierney 1991, 42–44).

With her focus on positive self-image, race, gender, and black women's

heritage, Maya Angelou fits the cultural definition of “womanist” far more comfortably than she fits the category of “feminist.” Although she does not ascribe to labels, she did tell one interviewer that if she was a female she was of course a feminist. “I’d be stupid not to be on my own side” (Forma 1989, 162).

Because *Gather Together* takes place in the mid-1940s, the character known as Maya would have had no contact with the theories of either womanism or feminism. These terms did not

become significant to women's thinking until 1963, when Betty Friedan published her explosive book *The Feminine Mystique*, arguing that women did not need to be tied exclusively to the roles of mother and

homemaker. In many ways, Angelou's life had been a constant struggle to prove,

long before Betty Friedan, that she could have a career as well as a child, although the immature eighteen-year-old protagonist of *Gather Together* was hardly thinking in such sophisticated terms. A single mother needed a job; it was

that simple.



Maya's sense of being a black woman centers on economic survival. In her effort to stay afloat, she epitomizes Walker's definition of a womanist as one who often exhibits "outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior" (1967, xi, Walker's emphasis). One example of Maya's outrageous behavior is her slick-talking proposal to Johnnie Mae and Beatrice that they set up a whorehouse with

Maya as the Madam. With no prior experience, with no idea of the legal consequences, Maya acts outrageously and audaciously in manipulating the two

women. At the same time, she is courageous when she interrupts L. D. Tolbrook

at home, demanding that he help her retrieve her son, kidnapped by Big Mary Dalton.

According to Alice Walker, a womanist is *willful*, in the sense of indicating a positive expression of the black female self. In *Gather Together* Maya shows

strong evidence of being willful. From her initial decision to leave her mother to her final decision to return to her, Maya acts in a self-determined way. At times

she fantasizes about being married and protected, but she rejects these dreams as

unrealistic. For the most part, she directs her own course of events. She willfully disrupts a prizefight when a friend is beaten,

knowing she will lose her job. She

willfully challenges the salesgirl in Stamps who blocks her way, knowing she may lose her grandmother's affection. She willfully decides to give up all thoughts of heroin after she witnesses Troubadour's undoing, knowing that if she

doesn't she may lose her life. In her willfulness, Maya at eighteen is a forerunner of Walker's iconic womanist: "Responsible. In charge. *Serious*" (1967, xi, Walker's emphasis).

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[Singin' and Swingin' a n C](#)

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Me rry Like Christmas (1976)

When Angelou's second volume, *Gather Together in My Name*, reached its conclusion, Maya, luckily released from a life of drug addiction and prostitution, vowed to maintain her innocence. In the following volume, *Singin' and Swingin'*

*and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, Maya, now in her early twenties, displays a sense of self-rejection that negates the more

positive ending of *Gather Together*.

She's too tall, too skinny. Her teeth stick out. Her hair is "kinked" (4). She is distrustful of people who show an interest in her. How similar this portrait is to the beginning of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where she believes herself to be ugly and deploras her ruffled purple dress. The description is also reminiscent of negative self-images in other autobiographies by African American women, for example, in the early pages of Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*

(1942), or in the racial confusion experienced by bell hooks when her parents gave her white dolls when she longed for "unwanted, unloved brown dolls covered in dust" (1996, 24).

For the lonely Maya, the major escape is contemporary music. She frequently

visits a record store on Fillmore Street in Los Angeles, a place with turntables and stalls for listening to the newest records. Here she is befriended by a white woman, Louise Cox, who offers the suspicious Maya a job. Here she meets her

first husband, Tosh Angelos.

Throughout this troubled autobiography, Angelou's emotions are focused on

her son, Guy. She marries Tosh Angelos, in part to please her son. But the marriage is not workable and ends in divorce. Maya is once again a single mother

—once again the person responsible for Guy's needs, his well-being, his survival.

Her achievements and failures as a mother-identified woman conflict with her aspirations for a career. These antagonisms form a pattern of tensions in this, Angelou's most complex volume.

Angelou's conflicts are concentrated in three basic areas: her marriage; her responsibilities as a mother, daughter, and granddaughter; and her desire to experience the joy of her *self*. Two incidents in particular contribute to the feelings of dissatisfaction that permeate the book. One is the death of Maya's

beloved grandmother, Momma Henderson; the other is Angelou's characterization of herself as someone out of tune, someone whose confusion over priorities leads her to certain regrettable

errors in judgment. In the final scene, set in Hawaii, these uncertainties are partially resolved.

### Narrative Point of View

*Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* marks a historical moment in the history of African American autobiography. At this time, no other

well-known black female autobiographer had taken her story into a third volume.

Maya Angelou's decision to keep going affects point of view, for there is now a



narrator who is telling her life story in three distinct but connected segments, each linked to the other by the changing central character and by the first-person point of view. In extending her story into a third frame, Angelou deviates from

the more contained autobiographical pattern, which tends to begin in a moment

of revelation and to end at some decisive moment in the autobiographer's life, as

in *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), which begins in boyhood and ends in the emptiness of reservation life following the 1890 massacre of the Sioux nation at Wounded Knee. Black Elk's story has a strong sense of tradition; the narrator relies on established cultural myths and dream figures, using repetition in order to affirm

the importance of Native American life. *Singin' and Swingin'* lacks this kind of assured uniformity.

During our interview Angelou seemed very concerned that her serial

autobiography would not result in repetition: “Somehow, if one thing tells the truth and were able to say it, then that thing is enough. You don’t have to tell it again and again. If you’ve told it so delicious that it seeped in by osmosis, then you’ve done it” (“Icon” 1997). Osmosis is defined as a process in which a fluid passes through a cell wall or some other lining, leading to a spreading or diffusion of liquids. For Angelou to use that concept to explain the writing process, especially when she needs to structure multiple volumes of material, seems to indicate a lack of control. Later in the interview she did acknowledge

the need to consciously repeat certain material: “Some things which are repetitive can be boring and really not serve you well. Some things, on the other hand, which seem to make the point again, if they are extended or if another color is

put in, are okay because that does drive the point” (“Icon” 1997).

Angelou’s third installment reveals her good traits while also exposing her weak ones, so that what emerges is the familiar narrator who has become more

dynamic, more open. Her use of flashbacks and flashforwards enables her to

move up and down the narrative scale, for instance, when she recalls Momma Henderson selling meat pies to workers or Vivian

Baxter making good money as

she “ran businesses and men with autocratic power” (11). Both recollections extend the point of view from an individual to a collective one; it is not only Angelou’s pride that is at stake, it is the family’s. The Baxters and Johnsons exercised “unlimited authority” in their financial affairs (10), to the point that welfare is not a job alternative. The narrator’s memories of her enterprising family members serve as connective threads, helping to create a sense of unity among the individual volumes of the series.

### Structure and Setting

Throughout this work structure is defined as an arrangement of the story according to the motif of movement or travel, while setting is the number of locations where specific events unfold.

The first two volumes occupy a varied American setting represented by Arkansas, Missouri, and California. In *Singin'*

*and Swingin'* the setting breaks open, shifting from its American focus to include a European location. The expanded setting continues throughout the remaining

autobiographies: volume 4, *The Heart of a Woman*, takes place in California, New York, Europe, and Egypt; volume 5, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, ends in West Africa and anticipates Angelou's return to America, volume 6

marks her return to New York, then to San Francisco, to Hawaii, to California,

and back to New York.

The movement from one journey to another establishes the narrative form, both in the single volume and in the series as a whole, with interconnected routes denoting places where action occurs. Angelou's autobiographies are informed not

only by her experiments in structure but also by her journey into Asian, African,

and African American literature. In her view, anyone who emerges from the journey of life is an autobiographer. She thus draws all of God's children into her encompassing definition of what makes an autobiographer: "Each one is an autobiographer.... So I think we're all on journeys, according to how we're able

to travel, overcome, undercome, and share what we have learned" ("Icon" 1997).

The scattered adventures into song, dance, and men that give *Gather Together in My Name* its chaotic structure are more organized and tightened up in *Singin'*

and *Swingin'*, where the most sustained journey is Angelou's European adventure.

In 1954, Maya becomes the lead dancer with the touring company of *Porgy and*

*Bess*. Her extensive coverage of the tour, which accounts for about 40 percent of the third volume, indicates how very important it was to her life. On the European tour, Angelou carefully details the course of travel, dividing the journey into subgroups: the plane to Milan, the bus from the Milan airport, the

fast train or Blue Train from Venice to Paris, the astounded crowd preventing her

movement in Yugoslavia, and so forth. In recording her momentous journey,

Angelou's point of view is that of an aware and articulate black woman who does not hesitate to make racial generalizations. Angelou is quite conscious, for instance, of the white personnel in European hotels and of how they react to the

lively African American cast. She listens to a wealthy white French woman, who

remarks that West Africans living in Paris are hated but black Americans are not.



She notices that Italians tend to approve of black Americans but not white ones

(147). Her observations of race, gender, and class, along with the personality that she brings to every situation, prevent *Singin' and Swingin'* from becoming a travel narrative.

The author illustrated her theme of the journey when she alluded to the tortured condition of her friend and burn-victim Betty Shabazz, whose doctors could not understand her phenomenal fight against death. We need to learn from

her struggle, Angelou commented about the widow of Malcolm X: "But there's

something about the journey, the onerous climb. It may be part of the lesson to

learn. I imagine that each of us is on a journey” (“Icon” 1997).

So varied a set of journeys helps create the sense of flux or change in the series.

Imagine that Maya had stayed in Stamps, Arkansas, for her entire life, had gotten

a job as a school teacher, and had married the manager of the lumber mill.

Although there might still be an autobiography as intense as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it would have ended there and

would not have become a series, a structure that is dependent on changes in setting, values, and culture.

### Plot Development

The plot of *Singin' and Swingin'* is not a progressive action from beginning to end, like the plot of a standard novel, but rather a sequence of conflicts or oppositions that emerge, recede, and often disappear from the text, only to be revived pages later in a different form.

The construction of the plot of Angelou's third autobiography is best described

as the effective placement of opposing incidents and attitudes. *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* explores a

variety of issues affecting Angelou's life—motherhood, making a living, being a wife, being a grandchild. In

almost every instance Angelou's attitude toward these and other issues is ambivalent, what some people call the "Yes, But Syndrome" and others the

"Affirmation/Denial Syndrome."

At the beginning of the volume, Angelou is in her twenties, struggling to provide herself and her son with fundamental needs but unwilling to go on welfare. She is offered a job selling records. At the shop she meets a Greek sailor whose knowledge of black music is equal to her own. She wants to marry him,

but she is suspicious. He is white but he is also Greek. She marries him but there are conflicts. They divorce.

Angelou's great love is for her son Guy, but she also needs a chance for her

career to grow. She leaves Guy with her mother, Vivian Baxter, and dances in Europe, Yugoslavia, and Egypt. But while she is overseas she always misses her

son. Vivian tells Maya that she has taken a job as a dealer in Las Vegas and that

there's no one to care for Guy. Maya leaves the tour, giving one month's notice,

although she wants to stay. At the end she is reunited with her son, but he is sick.

They go to Hawaii together. The story is finished.

This skeletal summary of the plot demonstrates how the patterns of

affirmation and denial protrude from the flesh of the autobiography, advancing

the plot while at the same time retarding it. The pattern of “yes, buts” or denials is the bare bones of the plot. Once the reader recognizes what Angelou is doing,

sometimes with awareness, sometimes not, he or she will gain a new appreciation

for her dialectical method—a critical term to indicate a construction or arrangement based on a conflict of opposites. This dialectic is particularly

relevant to the characterization of black motherhood, introduced in the childhood narrative but finding its fullest expression in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin'*

*Merry Like Christmas.*

Character Development

The term *conflict of opposites* appropriately describes the character development in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*.

Character development in a standard, single-volume autobiography reflects a clear and consistent pattern of behavior that shows growth and change in the narrator from the beginning until the conclusion. In Angelou's extended series, however, the central character, rather than being a self-directed autobiographer,

frequently demonstrates qualities of self-negation/self-acceptance as she

vacillates back and forth between denying and accepting herself. This wavering



of character from one volume to another is most extreme in *Singin' and Swingin'*

and *Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, where Maya's personality is often ambiguous

—uncertain, indefinite, and unsettled. And yet, it is because of these negative characteristics that Angelou engages readers in the awesome reality of her personality. She is a woman who dramatically demonstrates that the self-conscious narrator can be aware of her mistakes.

In the construction of an autobiography, character and plot are almost

inseparable. The character of the narrator is married to the plot as decisions are made or postponed, unions are done or undone, and children are sent away or kept at one's side. Both Angelou and the other characters in *Singin' and Swingin'*

often surmount the oppositional forces that divide them. Indeed, there are moments of exhilaration. But even her great success in *Singin' and Swingin'*, the *Porgy and Bess* tour, for example, has its down side.

The elation implied in the title is contradicted by other, discordant experiences

that play for and against each other in the formation of Angelou's character.

Confused and uncentered, she is forced to make a number of choices concerning

her mothering, her profession, and her sexuality. Her character develops as she

confronts these choices, which involve the people she is closest to: her son, her

grandmother, her mother, her brother, her husband, herself.

The first significant circumstance affecting her character is her relationship with Tosh Angelos. Maya meets her husband-to-be early in the third

autobiography. Impressed by the young sailor's enthusiasm for jazz, she

introduces him to Guy, who is immediately won over. Vivian Baxter is not. She

warns Maya against marrying Tosh because he is a "poor white man" (24). Maya, though, evades that problem by telling herself that Tosh is really Greek, not white.

The marriage is initially satisfying, but eventually Maya begins to resent Tosh's demands that she stay at home and be the perfect housewife, the provider

of suitable meals and "fabulous jello desserts" (26). She is also bothered by what she senses as disapproval from her friends

because of the interracial marriage. As Tosh takes greater control of her life, Maya, who “mistakes prison for security,”

does little to challenge his authority (McPherson 1990, 83).

The conflict between Maya and Tosh centers on two issues: gender roles and

religion. When Tosh tells Guy that there is no God, Maya is furious. She reacts by secretly visiting black churches, searching for the faith she left behind in Stamps with Momma Henderson. She is also looking for a way to get back at Tosh. Her

quest ends in her conversion at the Evening Star Baptist Church, in one of the first great celebrations of African American culture in

the series. The shouts, gospels, spirituals, “polyrhythmic” clapping of hands all converge on Angelou

“like sweet oil” as she shakes with elation (28).

The religious transformation, like the marriage, is short-lived. The differences

between Maya and Tosh grow until one day he says he’s “tired of being married”

(37). In a quiet rage that lasts for several pages, Maya ponders the issue of race, fantasizing that Tosh is a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Using her sexuality as revenge, she goes to a bar, gets smashed, and spends the night with an older man,

knowing that Guy will be safe with his stepfather. When she returns home her

attitude toward Tosh has changed. She is no longer the perfect housewife, cook,

or cooperative lover. Maya loses her affection for him, and the marriage of nearly three years collapses.

The second struggle that strongly influences her character is the conflict within

the family: between Maya and her son Guy; between Maya and her mother; between Maya and her paternal grandmother. The mother/son conflict is

intensified by Maya's guilt over not being a responsible mother. Social standards

determine that a good mother is faithful and ever-caring. Social standards dictate that a good mother is one who sacrifices her own happiness for that of her child,

who makes no move that disrupts her child's friendships or schooling.

The complicated issue of motherhood is a unifying but also a disruptive theme

throughout the series and one that receives its own treatment in the Thematic Issues section of this chapter. In terms of character development, the



mother/child opposition is an essential aspect of Angelou's growth. She said in an interview that "the absolutely greatest thing that happened to me was my son, because I had to grow and learn not to smother him" (Toppman 1989, 144). She

seems to be searching for the right balance: neither smothering nor slighting him.

Because of her year's absence from Guy, Maya suffers during the primary action

of the volume, the company tour of *Porgy and Bess*. When the tour is over, Maya makes a vow to her son never to leave him again. On that promise the book ends.

Maya's relationship with her mother, Vivian Baxter, takes on new dimensions

in *Singin' and Swingin'*. Recall that at the end of *Gather Together in My Name*, Maya had returned to Vivian and Daddy Clidell for comfort, love, and lodging.

When the subsequent volume, *Singin' and Swingin'*, opens, Maya is living an impoverished but independent life. She and Guy again return to the protection of

her mother and stepfather's house on the condition that Maya pays a fair share of

the expenses. Although happy with this arrangement, she is forced to retract it

when, against Vivian's advice, she marries Tosh.

A few years later, following the divorce and the invitation to perform in *Porgy and Bess*, Maya relies on Vivian to take care of Guy while she is on tour. At this point Maya becomes aware of the comparison between Vivian, who left her children with their grandmother in Stamps, and Maya, who left her child with his

grandmother in San Francisco. She is in effect echoing her own unhealthy child/mother experience, not because she wants to but because, despite the pain,

she has to work. In a promise to herself that does not quite ring true, she claims:

“I would make it up to my son and one day would take him to all the places I was

going to see” (129).

In a further imitation of her mother, the absent Maya sends money to Vivian

from Paris, asking her to buy Guy a present but to tell him his mother had sent it:

“Then perhaps he would forgive my absence” (157). Maya thus copies her

mother’s actions when in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Vivian sends her daughter the hateful blonde doll that she

subsequently destroys. While she is very much indebted to her mother for being willing to care for Guy while she is in Europe, the downside of such well-meaning child care is that Maya starts feeling

guilty. She confesses that she sends home most of her pay to support her son and

to “assuage my guilt at being away from him” (153).

A third confrontation, this one with her grandmother, Annie Henderson, is discreetly presented. The conflict occurs outside of the narrative, after Tosh informs Maya of Annie’s death, to which she reacts in a dazzling passage three

paragraphs long. Momma, the foremost influence in Maya's development,

vanishes from her autobiographies—no longer able to comfort Maya or introduce

Guy to the church; no longer able to caution her about racism. Momma

Henderson's death is a major source for the feelings of futility in *Singin' and Swingin'*. The death of Maya's grandmother underscores a problem that Angelou never seems fully to come to terms with in the autobiographical series: her ambivalent feelings toward those she loves.

In writing about her grandmother's death, Angelou shifts from her generally

more conversational tone and becomes passionate, religious, emotional: "Ah, Momma," she cries, lamenting that even if she were as "pure" as the Virgin Mary,

she would never feel Momma Henderson's hands touch her face again (41). This

moving farewell is not typical of Angelou's writing. Her words here betray a conflict, as if she is trying too hard, as if her guilt at having forgotten Momma is causing excessive emotions. The three-paragraph passage is a funeral elegy, a prose poem, a gem cemented within the narrative. As a poem, it relies on gospel

tradition, on the language of Bible stories, and on certain African American literary texts, especially James Weldon Johnson's "Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon" (1966).

Angelou's farewell to her black grandmother in this passage contains other refrains from the past. She longs to have Momma's "rough slow hands pat my cheek" (41). In terms of conflict, these hands are the ones that slapped Maya on

the face for having sassed two white saleswomen in *Gather Together*. That slap, the bad slap that ended Maya's relationship with Momma, is changed in the funeral elegy to a good slap, a soft tap on the cheek. The two different slaps are a perfect example of what has been described as the conflict of opposites, frequently stated in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like*



*Christmas*—the good/bad mother. Angelou’s lament throughout these paragraphs softens, as she

expresses the wish to be “as good as God’s angels” and as “pure as the Mother of

Christ.” Both metaphors are aspects of the good/bad conflict, in which Angelou

attempts to deal with her guilt toward her grandmother and seek a loving

reconciliation, if not here, then in the Hereafter.

In *Singin’ and Swingin’* Angelou is extremely quiet not only about her grandmother’s death but also about the fate of her brother,

Bailey Johnson. In both cases she delegates a major autobiographical relationship to a private, unreachable place. As if to emphasize her distance from Bailey, Maya mentions

the letters he sends her from prison while she is in Europe, which Maya shares

with her mother on her return to America. Maya remarks coldly that his touching stories about life in prison “left me unmoved” (233). That she is

“unmoved” is at least one solution to the problem of the conflict of opposites, for if one feels nothing there is no conflict. One imagines that Angelou, after her shocking collision with drugs and drug addicts at the end of *Gather Together*, would like to put those experiences behind her. But Angelou says that the minimal

information regarding Bailey is protective. She is doing what he asked:

“Don’t use my name in books.” She added, “I am also silent for his protection”

(“Icon” 1997).

Bailey is again mentioned near the end of *Singin’ and Swingin’*, where Angelou confesses that he is in Sing Sing prison for “fencing stolen goods” (234).

She does not communicate with him directly but mentions to Martin Luther King

Jr. that her brother is in jail. Dr. King advises her to keep on loving her brother, reminding her that Bailey has more freedom of spirit than those who imprisoned

him. Bailey is resurrected in the sixth autobiography, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, where he plays a major role in comforting Maya, much as he had done in childhood.

One final area of conflict for Angelou—and in many ways the primary one—is

her interior struggle as she attempts to identify her life and desires and defend

them against demands from the outside. It has been a hard struggle getting recognition as a dancer, something she has been

trying to do since she was part

of the dancing team of Poole and Rita. Aware that she has talent, Maya has been

unlucky at finding a job in the entertainment business that will offer decent pay

and some respectability. She had been dancing in bars and strip joints as artistic backup for the more exotic showgirls. She had put in time as a B-girl—a woman

who entices men to buy her watered-down bar drinks or cheap champagne at high prices. As in *Gather Together*, these scenes of the low life provide glimpses of a seedy underworld as Angelou wears sequined G-strings and the text

approaches pornography, so stimulating is Angelou's language and descriptive power.

Maya is performing an assortment of dances and ballads in local cafes,

including the calypso, a popular kind of rhythmic music that originated in Trinidad in the West Indies. Her big break comes when, at the intervention of some friends, she is invited to perform calypso music at the Purple Onion, a cabaret in the North Beach section of San Francisco, where at one point she shares the show with comedian Phyllis Diller. Following the successful stint at the Purple Onion, she receives other offers, including the tempting proposal to replace Eartha Kitt in the 1954 musical, *New Faces*. She accepts instead the primary dancing role in *Porgy and Bess* for its European engagement of 1954—

1955. This is a true victory, the foundation for her later performances in dance,

theater, and song.

The strain of the *Porgy and Bess* tour takes away from Maya emotionally almost as much as it gives her professionally. Dolly A. McPherson writes that *Porgy and Bess* is like an “antagonist that enthralls Angelou, beckoning and seducing her away from her responsibilities” (1990, 85). McPherson’s use of the

word *antagonist* captures the oppositional aspect of the European tour and its strain on Angelou’s loyalties. Sometimes an antagonist is not a person but instead an internal conflict that exists within an individual. This distinction is applicable to Angelou’s internal, at-war personality.

The European travel sequence has a great effect on both plot and character as

Maya's absence generates a tug-of-war between Guy at home and his mother in

Europe. Travel is a magnet that contributes to the overall tension of the narrative, a tension that momentarily ends with Maya's return to her son. When she arrives

home after an exhausting boat and train trip, she learns that Guy is suffering from a skin disease that appears to have emotional causes. Promising never to leave him again, she takes him with her to Hawaii, where she has a singing engagement. In the last pages of *Singin' and Swingin'*, Angelou vows to Guy that she will



never leave him, using words that are both simple and oppositional: “If I go, you’ll go with me or I won’t go” (232).

This volume closes in a sentence that highlights, through three nouns, the opposing tensions of Angelou’s temperament: “Although I was not a great singer

I was his mother, and he was my wonderful, dependently independent son” (242).

Again, the dialectical construct is apparent: I/you; singer/mother; dependent/independent; mother/son. This sentence effectively concludes the first

three books in its thumbnail summary of the major contradictions in Angelou’s

character. At the same time, it alludes to similar mother/son patterns in future volumes.

Angelou's writing in the third volume is brilliant, its strength deriving in part

from the way in which she duplicates the actual conflicts underlying the plot, characters, and thought patterns. This kind of development is also found in *Hunger for Memory* (1982), an autobiography by Mexican American writer Richard Rodriguez, who examines the opposition between his Catholic-Mexican

family and his alienated, Anglo-centered education. Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976) also looks deeply into class and familial conflicts in the clash between her Chinese and American upbringing. Not many other

contemporary autobiographers have been able to capture, either in a single volume or in a series, the opposition of desires that is found in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and, to a far lesser extent, in Angelou's other volumes.

### Thematic Issues

The theme of maturing motherhood evolves in the second volume, *Gather Together*, and continues in *Singin' and Swingin'*. The thematic issues of both volumes remain similar as Maya faces comparable problems of parenting,

relationships, and survival. All are pertinent to her role as a single black mother determined to make a life for herself and her son against a stacked deck—against

the obstacles of race and gender that for women in the 1950s were in some cases

insurmountable. Much of Maya's struggle in this, the most tangled of the autobiographies, concerns her private role as a single mother versus her public role as a committed actress, one whose career makes it necessary to leave Guy for

long stretches of time.

Chosen to perform in the European tour of *Porgy and Bess*, she faces the realization that in leaving Guy with his grandmother, she will repeat the hateful

pattern established by her parents when they left her and Bailey in the hands of

Momma Henderson. Her feelings are compounded by the fact that, as a young,

black, single mother, she bears the ultimate responsibility for her son, whom she

wants and needs to support. By identifying the most fundamental conflict between working and mothering, Angelou presents a rare kind of literary model,

the working mother. This kind of model is becoming more and more essential as

women insist on both roles.

The mother/son behavior pattern in *Singin' and Swingin'* shows Guy as the son seeking affection and Maya as the mother in conflict over the need to love

versus the need to be a fully realized person. This conflict, as we saw earlier in the chapter, causes stress and indecision. One expects Maya, lead dance

performer of the *Porgy and Bess* tour of Europe and North Africa, to enjoy what her labor has earned. Instead, on almost every page of description about Milan,

Paris, or Venice, there appears a lament about Guy that shuts off her positive experiences. On seeing French children playing outside the train window, she writes: "The longing for my own son threatened to engulf me" (191). When she

comes home to discover Guy's skin scaling from disease she says, "I had ruined

my beautiful son by neglect, and neither of us would ever forgive me" (233).

It is not until she takes Guy to Hawaii that mother and son get a clearer

perspective. She is his mother and she is a celebrity. He is her son and he needs her nurturing. Although Angelou avoids a fairytale-perfect ending, she gives readers, at this middle stage of her autobiographical series, a glimmer of the Maya Angelou to come and a tangible sense of the personal price she has paid for

the opportunity. Although at the end of *Singin' and Swingin'* her exploration of the rewards and pains of motherhood appears to have been temporarily resolved,

Angelou continues to unfold the tensions between career and motherhood in the

remaining volumes.

Directly and indirectly related to the motherhood issue is the theme of music.

*Music* is the first word: "Music was my refuge" (1). As the word *music* opens the narrative, the idea of song (singin') and dance (swingin') dominates the title.



Then, as if to leave no doubt in the reader's mind about the importance of music,

Angelou introduces the volume with an epigraph, as she had introduced *I Know*

*Why the Caged Bird Sings* with the line: "What you looking at me for?" An epigraph is a short poem or prose piece which sets the tone of the work that follows, usually by making a connection to the theme.

In *Singin' and Swingin'*, the epigraph is a quotation from an unidentified three-line stanza in classic blues form. For the first two lines, the blues singer asks if the moon is lonesome. The third line asks: "Don't your house look lonesome

when your baby / pack up to leave?" In conventional blues, the word *baby* means lover. In this case however, Angelou changes the usual meaning to refer to her

leaving Guy for a job in Europe, and to leaving her mother for an independent

life. The poignant words and rhythms are related to at least three of the major

themes of the third autobiography—motherhood, separation, and music. In terms

of genre, it is important to note that music, not poetry or fiction, introduces the reader to the narrative.

The lonely Maya, who initially finds solace in the cool notes of black music,

later in the same volume discovers that music offers her economic opportunity and the chance to be married. Her first daytime job is in a music store. She meets Tosh Angelos while selling records, falling for him when she discovers that his

love for Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, and other jazz musicians is genuine.

Later Maya excels in her singing and dancing performances, winning

engagements in quality clubs because of her accomplishments in music.

The structure of *Singin' and Swingin'* is related to musical composition. By

looking at the doubling of plot lines (Maya the mother/Maya the B-girl) as being associated with Angelou's use of opposition—pitting one force (good mother) against another, contrasting force (bad mother)—it is possible to see that Angelou uses certain kinds of music, especially jazz, that are based on similar oppositions.

Such music is “polyphonic,” where more than one line works in opposition to another. In *Singin' and Swingin'* certain perplexing issues touch each other and disconnect, so that the overall effect resembles a jazz composition. Angelou's narrative is constantly playing certain discordant or polyphonic notes. Thus, Vivian Baxter's dominant tones are pitted against her daughter's more tentative

ones, or Tosh's loud cursing contends against Maya's silent rage.

The use of music is also effective in the funeral sermon for Momma

Henderson. Angelou's sad notes are heard as she struggles to record the death of

her now silent grandmother. To produce the desired effect, she uses the tones of

the Negro spiritual to reach into eternity for her grandmother. At the end of the

sermon Angelou cries that death is real "only in song" (42). Although such attention to music is observable in each of the

volumes, it is only in *Singin' and Swingin'* and *Gather Together* that the musical theme affects the development of plot, structure, and character.

### Style and Literary Devices

Angelou achieves her powerful effects in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin'*

*Merry Like Christmas* through a number of literary devices. First is her use of repetition. Angelou uses the current time period, the 1950s, to reflect on earlier events, repeating certain details in order to enhance the style. The most dramatic use of repetition is Angelou's leaving her son with Vivian Baxter, repeating the

incident from her childhood when Vivian left Maya and Bailey with Momma Henderson. Another example is Maya's turning to an older man in the bar for sympathy during a crisis, as she had turned to her older lover, Troubadour Martin, in *Gather Together*. From a psychological perspective, she may be repeating her need for Bailey Johnson Sr., the father who once abandoned her.

Her technique is reinforced through repeating certain words such as "confront"

(43), "the past" (129), and "absence" (156).

Another stylistic technique that Angelou puts to excellent use is the simile, a

comparison between two objects that is directly expressed through the presence

of the words *like* or *as*. Although there are a number of similes in *Singin' and Swingin'*, several deserve special attention. First is the explosion of images surrounding her religious conversion where, in a further reference to the theme

of music, she describes the Negro spirituals as “sweeter than sugar.” Angelou further expands this straightforward simile into an elaborate image of her connections to the oral tradition of black culture. In other words, much of African American tradition derives from slave narratives and gospels (see [Chapter 2](#)). In this image of sugar, Angelou’s connection to her oral heritage is through her mouth—what she speaks, what she sings, and what she tastes.



She praises the spirituals she heard during her conversion: “I wanted to keep my mouth full of

them” (28). This image of fullness contrasts with Vivian Baxter’s empty mouth in

*Caged Bird*—Maya’s fantasy of a dead Vivian, her face a vast empty O, and Maya’s tears “like warm milk” (43) in the absence of a milk-giving mother.

When Angelou returns to San Francisco near the end of the autobiography, she

expresses her confusion through the use of simile: “Disorientation hung in my mind like a dense fog” (232). The fog is antithetical to

her occasional moments of clarity: “clear as the clink of good crystal” (233). Through these two comparisons

Angelou is exposing a mental confusion strong enough to make her hastily consult and then reject a prosperous-looking white psychiatrist.

Finally, Angelou likes to use the simile for humorous effect, especially when she is exaggerating certain clichés concerning black culture. For example, the cast of *Porgy and Bess* runs into Lionel Hampton’s band at a reception in Israel.

Hampton (1908–2002) was the first jazz artist to perform successfully on the vibraphone (Southern 1971, 495). Angelou writes that the cast jumped on

Hampton's band members "as if they were bowls of black-eyed peas" (216). This

simile reveals the racial hunger that African Americans experienced during their

white engagements. The hunger motif connects the black-eyed peas simile to black-skinned people and to the mouth full of sugar used to describe the spirituals. Each takes its meaning from an oral reference. The title of the third volume is also based on a simile: *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry* LIKE

*Christmas.*

A Deconstructive Reading

In *Singin' and Swingin'*, Angelou, through her care for language and style, imaginatively renders the black experience from the perspective of a mother who

is also a daughter. This chapter discussed the conflicting aspects of Maya's character—her tendency to represent herself in terms of indecisiveness or uncertainty. Emphasis on these conflicts is a modest form of deconstructive criticism.

Deconstruction is a field of criticism heavily grounded in the linguistic theories of French philosophers Fernand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, and has been

practiced by American critics such as Barbara Johnson and J. Hillis Miller. One of the main assumptions of deconstruction is that

language in itself has no fixed meaning, that a word or words have significance only as they are different from

other words surrounding them. Therefore, it is necessary to give a work of literature—a novel, a poem, an autobiography—what is called a “close reading,”

the kind of probing verbal analysis that until the 1960s had been generally reserved for poetry. A close reading invariably leads the deconstructionist to the conclusion that the author has no claim to what the piece of writing means, that

the text has no authority, and that there can be many, many meanings to words,

none of them right and none of them wrong.

A critic committed to deconstruction scrutinizes the language of *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, looking for evidence of uncertainty, of multiple meanings. Words, passages, and episodes are interpreted in a multitude of ways because the words of the text lean toward ambiguity and are

therefore open to a deconstructive reading. The most radical application of the theory is that the deconstruction of the text has already happened before the critic approaches the material. The critic realizes that the “construct, by its very nature, has already undone, dismantled, or deconstructed itself” (Harmon and Holman 1996, 142).

A deconstructive reading of *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* might first consider the title, which in its complexity of language reflects a multitude of meanings related to the text.

The title is ironic, meaning that the “actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning”

(Harmon and Holman 1996, 277). It is composed of what might be assumed are positive words: *singin'*, *swingin'*, *Merry*, *Christmas*. But on closer inspection, singing and swinging are words that depict Angelou's career, words that at times

signify success but at other times create such a vast distance and separation between herself and her son that when she returned home from Europe she contemplated “killing herself and possibly even the child” (234).

Although *Merry* and *Christmas* initially reflect happiness, these words, too, must be seen ironically as expressing the opposite meaning. *Singin' and Swingin'*

*and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* is Angelou's most unmerry autobiography.

The reader who tries to understand the series as a whole may recall another Christmas and the bitter scene from *Caged Bird* in which the absent mother, Vivian Baxter, sends her black child a tea set and a blonde-haired white doll (just as the absent Maya sends Vivian money from Paris to purchase Guy a present in

*Singin' and Swingin'*). Angelou writes that the next day she and her brother ripped the doll to shreds. These gifts appear to be metaphors for Maya's divided

self, symbolized by the torn and unwanted doll. As she negates the doll, she negates her self.



In a telling passage from *The Heart of a Woman*, she uses a comparably negative scene in identifying the joys of Christmas when, at her first meeting of

the Harlem Writers Guild, she was devastated by a group critique of her play.

The judges attacked her and damaged her ego, but “now they were as cheery as

Christmas cards” (40). Another pun on the word *Christmas* appears in *Gather Together in My Name*. Maya is talking to a prostitute who’s “off the streets”

because she was too hot. The woman says she’s cooling down. “Then I’ll be back

switching and bitching and getting merry like Christmas” (137). The parallel between the whore’s bragging in *Gather Together* in 1974 and Angelou’s title in *Singin’ and Swingin’*, published four years later, is unmistakable.

There are several other associations between the title *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* and the series. The word *merry* is a homonym, a word that is identical in pronunciation to another word but that has a different

origin and meaning. “Merry” has the same sound as “Mary,” a name with rich associations. In *Caged Bird*. Maya is horribly offended when the white woman she works for, Mrs. Cullinan, keeps calling her “Mary” and not by her right name.

One will also recall the significance of Big Mary Dalton in *Gather Together*. She

is the babysitter who separates Maya from her son by kidnapping him. In *Singin'*

*and Swingin'* Mary, the Mother of Christ, is the pure virgin of Maya's dreams.

For each of these three Marys there are surrounding implications of ambivalence

and denial.

Two final suggestions come to mind in a deconstructive reading. First, Angelou

intentionally changes the *ing* endings that indicate the present participle in standard English. In transforming the standard spellings into the slangy “singin’,”

“swingin’,” and “gettin’,” she jazzes up the verbs, much like Henry Louis Gates Jr.

does throughout his study of the “signifyin(g) monkey” (1988). Both writers create the sense of the black vernacular, the sound of a down home blues singer,

by dropping the formal *g*. Second is Angelou’s concern that her brother Bailey is in prison, namely, Sing Sing. The *ing* sounds call Sing Sing to mind, if only in the ironic name of the prison: Sing Sing is an unmerry place to be.

Angelou had an understandably different interpretation of the title. She told an

interviewer that the title *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* derived from rent parties, Saturday night survival parties popular in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. People paid their host a quarter, then ate, drank, and were

merry for the weekend. They would “sing and swing and get merry like

Christmas” (Angelou, quoted in Saunders 1991, 6).

Rent parties, also called “parlor socials,” were swinging and merry, full of fun

and dance. Looking at the economic implications of rent parties, they were mainly attended by “laundry workers, seamstresses, porters, elevator operators,”

and other members of the working class who could not afford or could not have

been admitted to the “classier Harlem night spots” (Jervis Anderson 1981, 152–

53). Indications of desperate economic conditions, rent parties offered black musicians a place to be heard and were, according to Anderson, not native to Harlem but the continuation of a Southern tradition. The concept of the rent party helps describe Angelou’s position in volumes 2 and 3: she is a single mother from the South who goes to California and sings and swings for a

living. She entertains others for little money as a singer, B-girl, and dancer, without getting very merry at all.

Not until years later, in 1970, did Angelou find her true voice through the autobiographical narrative form. Her singing and swinging performances at the

Purple Onion and her outstanding dancing in *Porgy and Bess* brought her some

measure of the public recognition that would be her due in the future, following the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. But her primary cultural role in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* is as a stage performer, not as a writer. As a person who dramatized the songs and dances of

the African, Caribbean, and African American oral traditions, she was giving expression to other people's words and music. Not until volume 4, *The Heart of a Woman*, does she begin the difficult task of giving voice to her own narrative.

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In the personal opening sequence of *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou and her son Guy are living communally on a houseboat near San Francisco, trying to bridge

the gap between black and white and living on the savings she has put away while singing in California and in Hawaii. Within a year, she and Guy move from the commune to a rented house near San Francisco and finally, in 1959, they

cross the continent to New York City.

In New York, Angelou, no longer satisfied with singing in nightclubs, dedicates

herself to acting, writing, political organizing, and her son. She becomes involved with Martin Luther King's growing civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), doing a significant fund-raiser for King

and becoming a key organizer in his group. These activities make *The Heart of a Woman* the "most political segment of Angelou's autobiographical statement"

(Cudjoe 1990, 297).

Her activities with SCLC cease shortly after Angelou meets Vusumzi Make, a

handsome South African. After a wedding ceremony in London that is never legalized, Maya, Vus, and Guy move to Egypt. While

living in Cairo, Maya discovers that Vus has been buying expensive items of furniture without her knowledge and that he has been unfaithful. After a public display of emotion, Maya leaves with Guy for West Africa, hoping that she might set up residence in

Liberia. But en route, in Ghana, Guy is seriously injured in a car accident. On this event, which happened in 1962, *The Heart of a Woman* ends and the fifth volume, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, begins.

Narrative Point of View

*The Heart of a Woman* is narrated from the point of view of a mother/woman

who tells much the same intimate story that she told in *Caged Bird*, *Gather Together in My Name*, and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*—but with an enormous difference. By the time she is ready to present the fourth segment of her life story, Angelou has accumulated a multilayered memory that affects not only what she remembers but also what readers who have followed her previous books remember. As a serial autobiographer she must

continuously look backward, unveiling the various layers hidden in earlier volumes, remembering what she has already written without being repetitious.

Autobiographer Lillian Hellman named this process “pentimento,” a term used in

painting to indicate the reappearance of a design that has been covered over by

layers of paint.

Of the many instances in which Angelou uses this layered point of view in *The*

*Heart of a Woman*, perhaps the most effective is the incident in which she confronts Jerry, the leader of the Savages, a Brooklyn street gang that has threatened Guy because he reportedly hit Jerry's girlfriend. Enraged, a borrowed

pistol in her purse, Angelou tells Jerry that if anything happens to Guy she will

shoot him and his family, kill the grandmother, kill the baby, kill anything that

“moves, including the rats and cockroaches” (84). Read from a multileveled point

of view, Maya’s violent reaction in this episode goes back to *Caged Bird*, back to her rape, and back to the vengeful actions that Grandmother Baxter and her family took against Mr. Freeman. Her violent behavior in handling Jerry may involve an unconscious effort to rewrite her own history. She will be aggressive,

like the Baxters. She will not be passive, like her paternal grandmother, Momma

Henderson, who hid Uncle Willie in the potato bin when the Ku Klux Klan arrived; who hummed submissively when the three offensive white girls taunted

her in front of the store; who slapped Maya and sent her away in *Gather Together* because Maya challenged a white saleswoman. Maya will do whatever it takes to protect her son. At the same time, her aggression is played out against her fear that she cannot save Guy from harm, an attitude that reveals “the vulnerability she feels as a mother trying to protect her child from any form of danger” (Neubauer 1987, 128).

In addition to the multilayered narrative, another difference in point of view is

determined by the author's changed self. *The Heart of a Woman* depends far less on the strategies of fiction than *Caged Bird* did; there is less use of dialogue and less reliance on dramatic episodes to convey action or emotion. Angelou unfolds

the events affecting her in a more confident, less troubled manner. The young mother is now older and wiser, more capable of dealing with matters still confronting her.

Although she remains to some degree distressed by the challenges of

parenting, personal development, and survival, she nonetheless demonstrates significant growth in these areas. Part of her development comes from her political commitment. Her growing self-assurance, strengthened by her



friendships within the Harlem Writers Guild and relationships with Godfrey Cambridge, Martin Luther King Jr., and other public figures, leads to her participation in African American and African protest rallies. Angelou attends a

huge march in New York following the death of Prime Minister Lumumba, of Zaire. She also does fund-raising and organizational projects for Dr. King.

Although the narrator repeats and improvises on earlier motifs, *The Heart of a Woman* is considerably more uplifting than its predecessors, all of which ended with Angelou questioning her authenticity and her status as a woman who let her singing career interfere with her duties as a mother. Her apparent resolution

to the mother/child conflict was to subordinate the maternal self to the needful

child. In the fourth autobiography there is a significant new direction in Angelou's story. She has gone from childbirth at the end of *Caged Bird* to fragmented chaos and pain in being a mother in *Gather Together* and *Singin' and Swingin'* to a volume that for the first time affirms the achievement of a personal and public maturity.

What is more, *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou enlarges the scope of autobiography in both form and content, providing it with a fourth dimension.

By adding a fourth book to the series, she has conceived a multivolume narrative

structure unsurpassed in American autobiography. In presenting herself as a mature individual, Angelou approximates the perspective of classic American autobiography as described in [Chapter 2](#), in which works by Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, and others are said to provide models for successful living. In the

fourth volume, Angelou, no longer a threatened Southern child, no longer a deluded prostitute or a fledgling dancer, is now in the position to offer direction to black women and men younger than herself, to be a model like many

autobiographers before her. Where she differs from most male narrators, though,

is that she is a “woman” with a woman’s “heart.” As such, Angelou is able to offer a woman’s perspective as she reveals her

concerns about her self-image and

her conflicting feelings about her son and her lovers.

In the fourth segment of the six-part life story, *The Heart of a Woman* fulfills the mother/son narrative. Rich in theme and characterization, it represents the point of view of a prominent African American woman whose talents are in the

service of humanity. She is engaged in the civil rights movement, in political protest, in feminism, yet Angelou is also at her most introspective. *The Heart of a Woman* is an open, revelatory book; Angelou's feelings dictate the form.

According to Dolly A. McPherson, *The Heart of a Woman* is an intensely truthful volume: "Her writing here, describing her

longings, doubts, and shortcomings, is raw, bare honesty” (1990, 98).

### Structure

Like all of Angelou’s narratives, the structure of *The Heart of a Woman* is based on a journey, from place to place, from house to house, from coast to coast.

To emphasize the theme of movement, she opens the text by quoting from a spiritual that repeats the line: “The ole ark’s a-moverin.” The repeated reference to Noah’s ark, an allusion to the biblical narrative and to Angelou’s secret pursuit of Christianity in *Singin’ and Swingin’*, also heralds the motif of the journey. By implication, Maya Angelou is a new Noah, “a moverin’ along” in

the quest to survive, much as Janie Crawford, the powerful central woman character of *Zora*

Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is a reincarnation of Noah in her survival of the flooding of Lake Okechobee (Lupton 1982, 52).

On the first page of *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou makes a number of references to moving, as in her mention of Jack Kerouac's 1951 novel *On the Road*. Kerouac (1922–1969) was one of the writers of the Beat Generation, a group that included such renowned figures as poet Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and novelist William Burroughs (1914–1997). Angelou recalls in *The Heart of a Woman* that Ginsberg was reading poetry in a coffeehouse next door to the nightclub where she was performing.

Like him, she saw San Francisco as a proving ground for her talent.

*On the Road* was an explosive autobiographical novel about Kerouac's travels westward with Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassidy, 1926–1968), a fast driver and aspiring writer from Denver. *On the Road* became the supreme testimony to hip traveling in the 1950s. In *Heart of a Woman* Angelou compares the uncertainty of Kerouac's novel to life in America: Although we were traveling, we knew neither

our “destination nor our arrival date” (3).

Thus, in these early pages, travel is connected to literary figures and uncertainty, to not knowing what is going to happen or when. The idea of indecision that Angelou so skillfully inserts into the

beginning of her text diminishes as the story continues. As she moves from one setting to the next, staying nowhere for long and nowhere for certain, Angelou orchestrates the journey, moving the action back and forth in a spiral pattern with herself at the center. Like Noah, she has the stamina to stay afloat.

The journey outlined in *The Heart of a Woman* ends in the West African country of Ghana, a location that marks the end of *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* as well. In these two volumes, in spite of the geographical sweep of the narrative, Angelou has settled down and has moved from without to within. Although there is, as in the other texts, a narrative journey, the journey in *The Heart of a Woman* involves a voyage into her iconic self as she discovers the power of her language.



## Plot Development

Unlike fictional forms such as the novel or the short story, the plot in autobiographies focuses on the revelation of character rather than on the development of a line of action. Further, the narrator of most autobiographies is

more intent on exploring personal relationships than in plunging his or her characters into actions or escapades. Add these complications to the unusual, multilayered form of serial autobiography, with its mass of allusions to past situations, characters, and locations, and the non-plot thickens.

The incidents in *The Heart of a Woman* have fewer emotional disruptions than in the three earlier autobiographies. As an

actress in Jean Genet's play *The Blacks* and as a political organizer in Martin Luther King's Southern Christian

Leadership Conference, she achieves a level of competence not evident in the earlier volumes. She becomes more certain in her mothering, now that Guy is an

adolescent. She promises herself to give up major tours, and finds fulfillment in

her New York/Brooklyn environment. Angelou's professional activities are

suddenly interrupted when in 1961 she meets a South African, Vusumzi Make. At

Vus's insistence they pretend they are married (133). The new husband goes to

Cairo; Maya and Guy soon join him. The so-called marriage goes poorly, mainly

because of money problems and Vus's promiscuity. The fourth volume ends with

Angelou and Vus divorced and with mother and son en route to Liberia when Guy is seriously injured in a car accident.

### Character Development

Like all of the autobiographies in the series, *The Heart of a Woman* begins by creating a mood or an atmosphere into which

the changing narrator is

reintroduced. The fourth volume immediately places the story within a racial framework, with references to the military protection of Little Rock

schoolchildren, to the blocking of a civil rights bill by South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond, and to other pertinent examples of the racist climate to which

Angelou returns after a year in Europe performing in *Porgy and Bess*. As the story opens, she and Guy have moved from the security of Vivian Baxter's home

to a houseboat near San Francisco that they share with four whites. Usually distrustful of white people, she is now, during the

loose and free 1960s, part of an experimental gathering that she calls the “beatnik brigade.” Her connection to her white roommates parallels her affinities with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and other liberated white writers of the 1950s.

However, Angelou is still somewhat distrustful, and it shows through in

indirect ways. She does not describe either her character or the characters of her roommates in a positive way; in fact, she barely describes them at all. In her remembrance of those “beatnik” days she provides the professions of her

roommates—“an ichthyologist [a scientist who studies fish], a musician, a wife,

and an inventor” (4)—and their race. But she never names or characterizes the people with whom she lives for almost a year, even though “naming” has been an

important process in Angelou’s upbringing, ever since Mrs. Cullinan so angers Maya by calling her Mary in *Caged Bird* that “Mary” deliberately breaks the nasty white woman’s favorite casserole. As autobiographer, Angelou hastily bypasses the year on the houseboat, giving the impression that it was either too

unpleasant, or too embarrassing, or too trivial to recollect; it was, however, a necessary rite of passage in an era when the relationship between blacks and whites became looser, especially in large, “hip” areas like San Francisco.

While Angelou is not altogether satisfied with the integrated living situation and the communal structure of the houseboat, she is a long way from the experience of estrangement depicted at the beginning of her earlier volumes. On

the houseboat she relaxes and becomes imaginative with her hairstyle and

clothing. She particularly enjoys the experiment because her roommates neither ignore Maya's and Guy's skin color nor do they romanticize it. Angelou's brief

stay in a commune reveals her capacity for cooperation and anticipates her later

group involvements with writers, actors, professors, expatriates, and civil rights workers.

Within a year, Angelou, tired of sharing space, craves privacy. She attempts,

without initial success, to rent a small house in a segregated white neighborhood.

The house, insists the landlord, is “taken.” Angelou seeks the help of some white

friends, who pretend that the house is for them. Although the landlord finally concedes, the theme of racial discrimination is in the forefront during the early



part of the book. At times Angelou cheerfully coexists with white people, but at

other times, as in the case of the landlord, she encounters prejudice similar to the episodes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, when the brazen children taunted Momma Henderson, or in *Gather Together in My Name*, when the saleswoman in

Stamps insults Maya.

Similarly, Guy experiences racial discrimination from the staff of the white school he is attending. He is accused of using foul language in front of some girls on the school bus. When Angelou questions him, she learns that Guy rather tactlessly told them where babies come from. When he informed the innocent girls

about their parents' role in making babies, they started to cry.  
Maya, who

visits the school to discuss the problem, is once again confronted with racist attitudes; she is told that "we do not allow Negro boys to use foul language in

front of our girls" (19). The teachers' attitudes were having a negative impact on her son.

Soon afterward mother and son move to a mixed neighborhood.  
Guy is

overjoyed to see black children playing in the street. Maya becomes more relaxed

in these circumstances. She begins to write sketches, songs, and stories. Luckily, she meets African American novelist John Killens, who is in California writing a

screenplay from one of his novels, *Youngblood*. Killens reads through her material, urging her to come to New York, where she will get feedback from other aspiring black writers.

The first dramatic change in Maya's character in *The Heart of a Woman* occurs when mother and son move to New York, where she and Guy live with John and

Grace Killens and their family in Brooklyn until they find an apartment of their

own. Guy is at first skeptical and disapproving, but they soon settle in—attending school, meeting neighbors, grappling with the differences they discover in leaving the West for the East. Angelou now seems confident in her lifestyle, her self-assurance deriving in part from the close relationships she is able to form with

black singers, actors, and writers. It is not until this volume that Angelou, for the first time in the autobiographical series, begins to identify herself as a writer.

Readers can actually envision the distinguished artist who will become Dr. Maya

Angelou of Wake Forest University.

Early in the volume she mentions that she has begun to write poetry and short

fiction. In a marvelous episode, Angelou describes attending a workshop of the

Harlem Writers Guild where she engages in a difficult procedure: a first reading

of her play, "One Love, One Life," followed by a not very flattering critique by

the authors who attended. John Killens, trying to soften the blow to her writer's

ego, tells her that the next time will be easier.

Determined to succeed, Angelou turned writing into an act of mental

discipline. She forced herself to concentrate on details and to understand the technical aspects of the craft. Through the eventual encouragement that she received from the Harlem Writer's Guild, she grew as a writer and as a person.

Angelou meshed her character with this group of African American and

Caribbean writers more experienced than she, people who, like her, would someday make meaningful contributions to literature. John Killens, the member

of the group most connected to Angelou's personal life, had at the time of their

first meeting written *Youngblood* (1954). Sarah Wright was the author of the acclaimed novel *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969), a potent testimony to black female survival. Rosa Guy, who protected Maya during stormy premarital clashes

with Vus Make, became her close friend in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*; Rosa Guy was the author of *A Measure in Time* (1983) and other works of fiction. The Caribbean writer Paule Marshall—one of the most successful at the Harlem Writers Guild and now considered a major American novelist—was delighted to

learn that her novel *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959) was being made into a movie for television.

From *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, readers know about Angelou's devotion to writers since childhood. Her earliest literary idols were men.

Although she admired women writers—Anne Spencer, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen,

Zora Neale Hurston—she does not mention them in *Caged Bird* (“Icon” 1997). It is not until *The Heart of a Woman* that Angelou fully identifies herself with a woman writer. By taking that title from a poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson, she

is including herself among a distinct tradition of women poets and novelists. Her

allusion in the title to a caged black woman poet of the past is an



acknowledgment to her legacy as a black woman writer, a legacy shared with Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall, and other sisters of African American and Caribbean

ancestry.

These affiliations are indicative of Angelou's emerging feminism, which can be

defined as a social and political response to the fact that women and men are treated unequally in society and that women are underrepresented in the arts, the

sciences, the economy, and elsewhere. Angelou, in the acknowledgments to *The*

*Heart of a Woman*, gives “Special thanks to a few of the many sister/friends whose love encourages me to spell my name: WOMAN.” She then lists the names

of twelve women whose friendships affected her sense of female identity, among

them her friend of thirty years, Dolly McPherson; Ghanaian folklorist Efuah Sutherland; and novelists Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall, and Louise Merriwether.

Asked whether *The Heart of a Woman* is the book in which she started to become strongly identified as a woman writer rather than as someone whose connections are with male writers like Shakespeare or Poe, Angelou responded with a chuckle, “That’s possible.” “You can say that [in your book]. You can say

anything you want,” she said, again with a chuckle, displaying her wit and her

strength of character (“Icon” 1997).

In Harlem, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, Angelou took advantage of opportunities

for artistic improvement. Besides her apprenticeship with the Harlem Writers Guild, she joined other African American organizations that sought the words and methods for creating a responsive, black-identified community. Like her work with the Writers Guild, Angelou’s work in theater increased her potential

for knowledge and friendship. She had good feelings from singing solo at Harlem’s famous Apollo Theater and in other arenas

attracting mainly black audiences. Her powerful renditions of Calypso music overjoyed many of her listeners for whom Calypso and other types of folk songs were a neglected West

Indian art form.

She was also successful in front of mixed or mainly white audiences, especially

in her off-Broadway performance as the White Queen in the 1961 production of Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*. Genet's infamous play is a vicious satire about the absurdity of white racism. In the play, the black/white roles are reversed so that the formerly oppressed blacks become the aggressors and the formerly affluent whites become their pawns. Angelou loved playing the leading role, even though

the idea of reversal of power did not appeal to her sense of democracy. She was

particularly fond of one of the actors in the cast, Godfrey Cambridge, who in 1970, the year *Caged Bird* was published, performed his memorable role as *Watermelon Man*, directed by Melvin Van Peebles. Like *The Blacks*, *The Watermelon Man* is a drama based on role reversal.

A far more public person than she was in the earlier volumes, Angelou began

to identify in the late 1950s with the civil rights movement. Eventually she became Northern Coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

(SCLC). She was also committed to a women's organization, the Cultural

Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH). Angelou and Godfrey

Cambridge, convinced by the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr., collaborated on a

fund-raising project at the Village Gate, a popular nightclub in Greenwich Village, to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Called Cabaret

for Freedom, the fund-raiser was created, directed, and performed by Angelou and Cambridge, with help from comics, dancers, and other theater people. Yet despite the cabaret project and a

developing personal friendship, Angelou and Cambridge never became lovers. Between them, Angelou says, they “ignited no passionate fires” ( *Heart of a Woman*, 53).

Soon after meeting South African hero Vusumzi Make in 1961, Angelou and the women of CAWAH almost halted the operations of the UN General

Assembly when they conducted a sit-in at the United Nations Building after the

prime Minister of Zaire, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated in 1961. To assist their cause, Angelou and her friend Rosa Guy sought the support of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X. She and

Rosa hoped that he and his organization would affirm the actions of CAWAH and make use of the energy incited by the

protest gathering. To the contrary, Malcolm X disapproved of the protest strategy: “Muslims do not demonstrate,” he responded (168). Although he

predicted that conservative African American leaders, wanting to be loved by the

white man, would quickly turn against the organizers, he did not offer to tell the

press that the protest meant that black people were angry. Angelou, although she was disappointed with Malcolm X’s response, was nonetheless entranced by his



good looks and by his fire, traits that had also attracted her to South African rebel Vusumzi Make.

Angelou's engagements with writing and with politics had a significant effect

on what she chose to reveal about herself in *The Heart of a Woman*. But there is a second major change in her character and in the outcome of her journey when

she meets Vusumzi Make, a freedom fighter recently released from a South African prison. They met at a party given by John Killens and his wife to protest

apartheid in South Africa, the systematic and total segregation of South African

people into two groups: the privileged whites and the disenfranchised blacks. In

her book of reflective essays, *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997), Angelou describes Vus Make as one of the most brilliant people she had ever met.

A handsome, dazzling intellectual, Vusumzi Make appears to be the perfect choice for a husband, given Maya's desire to be loved and her growing concern

for African liberation movements. Angelou is already engaged to a bailbondsman, Thomas Allen, a smooth man of "reddish-tan color" who gives her

“lavish satisfaction” (100). But Vus is electrifying, exciting, beautiful; if she marries Thomas, she tells herself, she would always regret her decision. Vus and

Maya go through the motions of marrying in England. Vus suggests as a

formality that in America they claim to have married in England, while in London they say their marriage took place in New York: “We never mentioned

the word marriage again” (133).

In London the couple soon begins to spend less time together. Through her husband, Maya starts to associate with a community

of middle-class African women who warn her that marriage to an African freedom fighter can often lead

to desertion. As Maya listens to her sisters' stories about their struggles under colonialism, she enthalls them with heroic tales about African American women.

With great pride Angelou tells of Harriet Tubman, who, though free, returned to

the South to bring slaves out of bondage, and of Sojourner Truth, who had the

courage to speak for the rights of enslaved blacks even though white leaders denied that she was a woman and a human being.

As Vus continues to neglect her, Angelou again proves herself vulnerable to male authority, as she was with Curly, L. D. Tolbrook, Tosh Angelos, and other

men in her past. In her role as Vus's wife, she is confronted for the second time with the struggle between being a homemaker and being a professional, as she

had struggled in earlier autobiographies between being a mother and being a professional. As an African who had been trained only to see women as

subservient, Vus Make is culturally insensitive to Angelou's needs as a working

woman.

In one hilarious sequence that occurs before they are a couple, Angelou accompanies Vus to a cocktail party in the Manhattan suite of a West African ambassador. Although she is wearing her most flattering dress and can speak fluently about international politics in several languages, the guests ignore her because she is an American woman. Maya's way out of this embarrassment is to

sit in the kitchen drinking gin with the black female cook. When Vus discovers

her, he is humiliated and furious: "No African lady would bring such disgrace on

her husband" (203). He chases the now-drunken Maya around the lobby of the classy building where she eludes him, grabs a cab

out from under the nose of a

waiting woman, and spends the night with her friend, Rosa Guy.

If Vus could be so uncompromising in New York, readers can imagine his attitude when they move to Cairo. He expects Angelou to honor the Egyptian custom of the husband providing for the wife. Nonetheless, Angelou accepts a position as associate editor with the *Arab Observer* without getting Vus's permission. In a torrent of fury, he reproaches her, suggesting that she is a man.

All is chaos until a mutual friend and American journalist, David DuBois, persuades Vus that her salary will help them serve the revolutionary cause.

Nor is the conflict between wife and freedom worker the only trouble in the

union. Years later, Angelou confided that her formerly passionate lover had a

“startling intellect and an impressive accumulation of information, but was shy a

mile from romance” ( *Stars* 55). She begins to realize—as she knew very well from his behavior while they were in America—that Vus Make is too friendly with other women and too irresponsible with money. Their irreconcilable positions toward fidelity and financial commitment require that they be examined in a palaver, an Egyptian debate conducted among peers from six countries and intended to clarify the opposing positions with regard to



separation. The tribunal decides in Maya's favor but asks her to stay with Vus for six more months. She

agrees, but when there is a job offer from Liberia in West Africa, she accepts it.

Angelou's disastrous relationship with Vusumzi Make evokes certain comparisons and contrasts to her marriage to Tosh Angelos in *Singin' and Swingin'*. Further retracing Angelou's steps, the first pages of *Caged Bird* recall the failed marriage between Bailey Johnson Sr. and Vivian Baxter, with its negative impact on Angelou's life as a child and a woman. In the course of her

life, Angelou introduces problems or conditions that echo other volumes, giving

them unity or offering points of contrast. This technique can be called connective repetition, a term Angelou seems to distrust, insisting that each book must stand

alone (“Icon”1997). Yet while each book in a serial autobiography must be read

independently, the reading process is greatly enriched by recognizing subtle references in and among the texts. The modifications in plot, character, and setting that are bound to occur in serial autobiographies benefit from being examined for their interrelated moments, and in Angelou’s case, from the emphasis on her diverging attitudes toward her autobiographical self.

The most valuable aspect of her relationship with Vus Make is its connection

to her growing romance with Africa. In the fourth and fifth volumes, Africa is the site of her growth—first in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, and then in Accra, the capital of Ghana. In these tightly interrelated volumes, Angelou initiates a search for her ancestral past. A developing writer, her continuing identification with language and character makes her sensitive to her African roots. She begins to articulate her connections to African slaves who had been “shackled with chains,”

and made to carry the weight of their fears with the weight of their irons (257).

Her racial consciousness becomes a major theme in the fifth volume, *All God's*

*Children Need Traveling Shoes* in which she explores her feelings of guilt about slavery and about being homeless, neither an African nor an African American.

Her search cannot culminate until the struggle of her dual ancestry is resolved.

Near the end of *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya meets her greatest challenge when Guy's car is hit by a truck outside of Accra. An old couple find him on the

road and bring him to the emergency ward. At the hospital, while her son lies on

a stretcher Maya contemplates his “rich golden skin” turned to “ash-grey” (263).

Angelou, although she rarely repeats the same episode in detail, does so in this

instance, restating many of the aspects of Guy’s accident at the beginning of her

next book, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

The deliberate repetition of her terror creates both an emotional link between

the two volumes and underscores the impact of Guy’s injuries on both character and story line, since it is Guy’s car crash that

keeps Angelou in Ghana. Her retelling of the car accident, first in volume 4 and again in volume 5, emphasizes the autobiographical experience and the use of the mother/ son theme as a transitional device. When asked about the repetition of the car crash, Angelou said she repeated the scene because she had to explain where she was and why,

so that each book would be read in its own right (“Icon” 1997). In terms of dramatic effect, the startling repetition gives the volumes an intensity not achieved anywhere else in the series.

*As in Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, so in *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou remains in a state of flux, continuously open to changes in her life, even when those changes involve her divorce from Vus Make or her suffering over her injured son. As she faces these problems she continues the

process of redefining her *self*. In *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou's more stable character derives from the self-assurance that comes from long years of living and mothering, her success with writing, and her engagement in theatre and politics. Angelou's self-assurance, hinted at in earlier volumes, is heightened in *The Heart of a Woman*, becoming a major aspect of her character.

## Setting

In the fourth volume the setting pivots from a Western to a distinctively Eastern environment. The volume has three primary settings—San Francisco,

New York, and Egypt. These disparate settings divide the book in three parts, with New York placed in the middle or central location. In San Francisco Maya

solidifies her relationship with Guy and lovingly ends her dependency on Vivian

Baxter. In New York she achieves greater self-awareness as a mother and, through the Harlem Writers Guild, explores her potential as a writer. In Cairo she introduces herself to the idea of what it means to be African as she struggles to

maintain her relationship with Vus Make. The primary locations in *The Heart of a Woman* affect Maya's growth in terms of motherhood, the black literary scene, and her African heritage.

Secondary settings, places visited for short durations, also have strong effects



on character development and plot. In the London sequence, for example, Maya

accompanies Vus to England, where they had planned to get married. Maya is intrigued by the cosmopolitan setting of London; she enjoys the contrasts—the bright costumes of African women reflected against the stony grayness of London. The city also connects her to a support group of women living in London

and married to African officials. London with Vus offers another type of newness

for Maya as she encounters the sensual ecstasy of making love with a dazzling,

delightful male.

Angelou's most dramatic use of setting occurs near the end of *The Heart of a*

*Woman*. In prose that creates the effect of cinemascope or Imax, she offers a panoramic view of North Africa when she flies from Cairo in the east to Ghana

in the west, reversing the earlier west/east movement from San Francisco to New

York. She gazes from the plane and sees the Sahara desert, then the rivers and forests where she imagines children had been hunted and "tethered" by slave traders. Her vision projects her to America, where she traces the black American

slave's unending "journey to misery" (257). Angelou registers some of the major

themes of *The Heart of a Woman* in this secondary setting as she is propelled across the continent: compassion, the journey, the identification with slavery.

The African setting continues in the volume that follows, *All God's Children*

*Need Traveling Shoes*.

Thematic Issues

Motherhood, so dominant a theme in each of the autobiographies, takes on a

new complexity in *The Heart of a Woman*, owing to the presence and absence of Maya's mother, Vivian Baxter. The complications of the motherhood theme can

be demonstrated by dividing it into several different issues: Maya mothering Guy; Vivian mothering Maya; and Maya mothering herself.

In the opening sequences of the book, Maya defends Guy on two different occasions when he is accused of misconduct at school. She also tries to protect him against the outrageous tirades of blues singer Billie Holiday. As she gets ready to leave for New York, Angelou observes that her son is changing, that he is, at the age of fourteen, "growing into a tall aloof stranger" (22).

Despite his aloofness, Guy and his mother remain close throughout *The Heart*

*of a Woman*. On one level, she improves in her ability to care for him and solicit his opinions; on another, she continues the persistent problem of separation begun in *Gather Together* and *Singin' and Swingin'* when she loses touch with his life and needs.

The best example in volume 4 of Angelou's conflict with motherhood occurs in

the episode involving the Brooklyn gang, the Savages. It is highlighted by the fact that when Guy gets in trouble with the gang Angelou is in Chicago on a singing

engagement. One night, John Killens, who is watching over Guy while she is away, phones from Brooklyn to inform her that “there’s been some trouble” (75).

In a moment of fear, Angelou imagines that Guy has been injured and that it has

somehow been her fault. She chastises herself for being a “capricious and too-often-absent mother” (106). She has not been responsible enough.

The motif of the responsible mother occurs frequently in the series. In *Gather Together*, she travels alone on a long bus ride to confront Big Mary Dalton, who had kidnapped Guy. In an early incident in *The Heart of a Woman* she looks three white

schoolteachers in the eye when they accuse Guy of upsetting some

little girls. The Brooklyn gang event is also the result of a girl accusing Guy: the gang-leader's girlfriend claims that Guy hit her. Knowing the passions of teenagers, Angelou takes extreme measures to protect her son. When she

confronts Jerry, the gang leader, she threatens to shoot his entire family if

anything happens to Guy. She has a gun in her purse to prove it.

The confrontation with Jerry reveals Angelou as a strong, aggressive, perhaps

too impulsive black mother who puts aside her guilt and self-doubt in order to

defend her son. She said, “I’ve always been adventurous or up to life. Even not

adventurous, but when life says ‘Here you are, deal with it,’ I have dealt with it, or tried to” (“Icon” 1997). Defiant, protective of Guy and his welfare, Angelou becomes in this episode a representation of maternal power. In her dealings with

the street gang, Angelou embodies a type of black woman whom Joanne M.

Braxton calls the “outraged mother” (1989, 21). This type, claims Braxton, is found frequently in slave narratives by women; she



represents the strength and  
dedication of the black mother.

With regard to her own mother, Vivian Baxter, Maya makes a special effort to

say “good bye” as she tries to end a long and complicated relationship. When she

knows that she is leaving California, Maya contacts her mother and requests a formal farewell. Vivian Baxter, always defiant, always ready for an adventure, tells her daughter to meet her for an overnight visit at the Desert Hotel in Fresno.

The Desert Hotel had been integrated for only a month, so when Maya meets Vivian in the lounge she feels as though she is about to be stabbed or at least lassoed. Vivian, cool as usual, flirts with the bartender; Maya stares at her mother and repeats the observation from *Caged Bird* that she was “the most beautiful woman I had ever seen” (25). When they get to their room Vivian shows her the

gun in her purse, the possible inspiration for Maya’s gun in her future confrontation with Jerry.

In this scene, Angelou reveals that she is still enthralled by the beautiful woman from St. Louis, the woman “too beautiful to have children” ( *Caged Bird*, 50). She has since come to appreciate her mother for her vibrant sexuality and her free spirit. Forty years after their rendezvous in Fresno, Vivian Baxter, no longer

“beautiful,” will be at Maya’s house in North Carolina, her arms stuck with tubes, spending her last days fighting cancer in her daughter’s care. “My mother raised

me, then freed me,” Angelou writes ( *Stars*, 48). It was now time to free her mother.

Toward the end of *The Heart of a Woman* a mature Maya Angelou finds herself increasingly alone. The relationship with Vus Make is over. Vivian is in

California. Guy, gradually recovering from his physical injuries, moves toward

greater autonomy. As the volume ends, he has moved into a university dormitory and she is alone. In the last two paragraphs,

Angelou is by herself testing her independence from Guy as she had earlier in the narrative tested her

independence from Vus Make. Despite Guy's absence or perhaps because of it, she recognizes an emerging new self, a woman liberated in heart and being. The

last word of *The Heart of a Woman* is "myself."

The narrator's singular aloneness in this final scene is superficially concerned

with what she is eating. No longer needing to compete with her son over who gets the best part of the chicken, she has the breast all to herself without having to share it. There is significant irony here. As Angelou has so often resorted to

humor when faced with a disturbing problem, in the conclusion of the fourth volume she offers the reader the half-serious picture of a greedy mother getting

what she has always wanted. Her keeping the breast represents both the

nurturing aspect of the mother and a weaning herself from Guy's demands. Life

for Angelou, whether she wants it or not, is about to offer a new freedom, a new

character, a new "myself." No longer the mother saved from drugs at the close of

*Gather Together* or the mother prone to making false promises in *Singin' and Swingin'*, the character at the end of *The Heart of a Woman* is, as the title states, a woman. Defined as neither mother nor wife, Maya Angelou is at this moment

simply her *self*.

### Style and Literary Devices

Of the many stylistic techniques that recur in *The Heart of a Woman*, two in particular give the volume its special power: the dynamic portrait and the literary allusion. Although Angelou uses the technique of portraiture in all of the volumes, it is not until the fourth autobiography that she perfects it. This device is also called a descriptive portrait or vignette.

The vignette in literature is a leisurely, ornamental description used to depict

character, a technique especially appropriate to autobiography, which lacks the plot-driven intensity of a novel. A realistic way to introduce character is through brief descriptive portraits and the more full-blown vignette. Exciting but short descriptions of celebrities include Angelou's references to musicians Max Roach

and Abbey Lincoln, writers James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry, Martin

Luther King Jr., and other prominent African Americans. These portraits

strengthen the development of Angelou's story by introducing figures of great interest who are subordinate to the main events of the narrative. Intertwined with the text, the characters mainly please readers because they are interesting

people.

The second, more complex portrait (or vignette) relies on compactness of style

in offering a condensed description designed to capture the subject's mannerisms

and quirks as well as leave a lasting impression on readers. At their most successful, Angelou's vignettes are character studies of famous African



Americans who emerge as intensely realized characters, people who, because of

her involvement in show business and politics, Angelou has had the chance to scrutinize. Men or women whom readers may have admired from afar—from a

platform, stage, or pulpit—are drawn so near that Angelou is able to expose their

wit, imperfections, nastiness, or benevolence.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, the two most notable vignettes are of Billie Holiday and Malcolm X. For a period of four days, Maya Angelou entertains blues singer

Billie Holiday in California. Their meeting occurs a few months before Holiday's

death in a New York hospital. Angelou harshly describes how drugs destroyed the singer's beautiful face: her eyes were blank, her skin rubbery. In her description of their four-day friendship, Angelou captures Lady Day's moody

anger, her vivid language, her unpredictable shifts of mood.

Guy is greatly disturbed by Billie's presence in the house. He constantly chatters at her, as if to fill the air. Each night she sings him a bedtime song. On her last night, as she is singing "Strange Fruit," a heartbreaking song about a lynching, Guy keeps interrupting her with questions. Enraged, Holiday tells Guy

that the crackers will cut off the balls of a “little nigger” like him (14).

Later that evening, Maya is singing at a club and realizes that Billie is in the

audience. After Maya announces her presence, Holiday takes an unsmiling bow

from her table. Then, as Maya starts singing a blues song, Lady Day screams:

“Stop that bitch. She sounds just like my goddam Momma” (15). Holiday’s actions, so disturbing to Maya and her son, are discussed further in the Psychological/Feminist Reading section at the end of this chapter.

The other vignette that stands out in *The Heart of a Woman* is the portrait of Malcolm X, whose brief but intense characterization tells us a great deal about Angelou's eroticism. She describes this remote Muslim leader in the language of

desire. Maya Angelou and Rosa Guy have made an appointment with Malcolm X

to request Muslim support for the CAWAH rally at the United Nations. When he

enters the meeting place it feels to Maya as if a "hot desert storm" is rushing at her. His "masculine force" overwhelms her; he was "a great arch through which

one could pass to eternity” (167). Angelou’s breathless seizure is almost like being physically invaded, and by a man whose political control and personal dignity do

nothing to encourage her fantasies of burning hair and blazing eyes.

Angelou handles the remainder of the vignette in a cooler manner. Malcolm X

describes at some length the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad on the need to separate from white men and their false Christianity, for they have

enslaved the African. He promises to offer the people of Harlem the Muslim religion. And he promises to make a statement to the

press saying that the protest at the UN building was a sign of the anger of black people. Angelou's dramatic

use of the vignette as a way of characterizing Malcolm X works well in this case,

for it is both a portrait and a sermon, a lesson from the great Muslim leader that helps teach her something about self-respect and self-control. Her use of Malcolm

X's portrait as a stylistic device continues into the fifth and sixth volumes, where he is again singled out in a vignette.

The second distinctive stylistic technique in *The Heart of a Woman* is the

literary allusion, which Meyer H. Abrams explains as a “reference, without explicit identification, to a person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage” (8). Angelou enriches her text by connecting it to significant people and places within African American traditions. This discussion focuses on one specific literary allusion—to the Georgia Douglas Johnson poem for which *The Heart of a Woman* is named.

At the heart of Johnson’s poem, “Heart of a Woman” (1918), there is a continuing metaphor that spans several volumes in the autobiographies: it is the

comparison between the first-person narrator and the caged bird.  
The bird/ poet

comparison begins when Angelou borrowed the title, *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

*Sings*, from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy." Dunbar's caged bird is generally associated with the condition of black people in America who are imprisoned by whites when they desire to be free. In her sketches of Uncle Willie, Bailey, and other characters, Angelou occasionally uses images of imprisonment,

suggesting, like Dunbar, that blacks survive being caged by turning to their culture for strength.

Johnson's "The Heart of a Woman" is an eight-line lyric poem in which a woman's heart is compared to a caged bird crashing against its bars. Johnson's



use of the symbol of the bird, however, is quite different from Dunbar's, for her

bird is a caged woman whose isolation seems to suggest sexual as well as racial

confinement. Like a bird, the heart of a woman flies away from home during the

day, returning at night to its cage.

Because both Georgia Douglas Johnson and Maya Angelou deal with the

theme of isolation and because both use the metaphor of the caged bird in their

writings, it is tempting to view Angelou's allusion to Johnson's trapped bird as a negative reference to Maya's character in *The Heart of a Woman*. James Robert Saunders (1991), for example, states that the "alien cage" of Johnson's poem represents Angelou's return to a place of torment following her failed marriage to Vus Make. It seems that Angelou, with her awareness of black history and literature, would have regarded Johnson's lonely bird in flight as only a stage in a woman's life cycle and in her history. The Johnson poem was written two years

before the passing of the Nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution (August

26, 1920), which finally granted women the right to vote. Angelou, while facing

barriers of race and gender, has flown beyond them, thanks to the very protest

movements described in the fourth autobiography. The broken creature of Johnson's 1918 poem is an image from the past, too forlorn to symbolize Angelou's failed marriage. Although she may indeed sympathize with the sad prisoner of Johnson's lyric, the Maya Angelou of *The Heart of a Woman* is too strong and too self-determined to be kept in a cage.

The fourth autobiography also contains other literary allusions. The opening reference to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* connects Angelou's theme of the journey to Kerouac's restlessness. Angelou makes reference to the black folk figure, Brer

Rabbit, in a story she recalls to herself in Cairo as she gathers courage for her new job on the *Arab Observer*. Her use of Brer Rabbit connects her to the oral traditions of Africa and America. But it is in the allusion to Johnson's title, to the repeated "WOMAN" of both poem and autobiography, where one discovers a

more woman-centered Maya Angelou—more centered in her literary ambitions,

more centered in her racial identity.

A Psychological/Feminist Reading

Psychological criticism is the application of the beliefs of Sigmund Freud, Otto

Rank, Karen Horney, and other psychological theorists to works of literature, in

the hopes of getting closer to their meaning. In a standard psychological reading

of *The Heart of a Woman*, theorists begin by investigating Guy's relationship to his mother or to a mother substitute. A number of incidents reveal Guy's sexual

desire for women his mother's age or older, the most prominent of whom is Billie

Holiday. The great blues singer, who seems to disgust Guy, also arouses him.

During her visit, Holiday sings intimately to Guy each night, giving Maya the impression that Holiday was “starved for sex and only the boy, looking at her out

of bored young eyes, could give her satisfaction” (13).

A Freudian analyst would argue that in order to free himself from his Oedipus

complex—the desire to dispose of the father and have sex with the mother—Guy

needed to deflect Holiday’s affections away from himself and his mother, just as

he needed to discourage Maya's affair with Vus Make. Not until Guy experienced

and recovered from his car accident could he begin to sever himself from his desirable mother, who, according to his friends, had "a prettier shape than Marilyn Monroe" (130). Some far-fetched analyst might even suggest that the accident was "intentional," that Guy desired it so he could be saved from his sexual desires for his mother.

In a psychological/feminist reading, it is not the boy's or the man's perspective

that one starts with but the woman's. Many feminists find the "Oedipus

complex,” the so-called cornerstone of Freudian thinking, to be utterly wrong-headed, since the theory assumes that the mother is of no consequence and that

she is subordinate to the father or the father substitute (Stanton in Wright 1992, 296). In the 1970s a number of feminist analysts, including Nancy Chodorov, Carol Gilligan, and Jean Baker Miller, challenged this male way of thinking. In

their revision of psychological theory they proposed a woman-oriented

perspective, focusing on the ideas that the mother is central to human



development; that mother/daughter relationships are at the core of development;

and that female friendships can be extensions of the mother/daughter dynamic to

the extent that they are nurturing, supportive, and maternal.

*The Heart of a Woman* offers a wealth of woman-centered insights. As a woman who loves men, Angelou is very open about her sexual feelings, making

almost no effort to conceal her inclinations. She craves sex, but she likes being satisfied. She is neither passive nor timid in approaching men. She is in her words a “healthy woman with a healthy appetite” (101).

Angelou also appears to be a woman who is enticed by women, although she

tends to deny this possibility, both in the autobiographies and in interviews. In

the crucial Billie Holiday sequence in *The Heart of a Woman*, Maya protests against the possibility of Holiday's lesbianism, working out a careful negative response so that if Billie wants to go to bed with her, Maya can say no without

hurting her feelings. A psychological feminist would help Angelou deal with her

conflicting attitudes toward lesbianism, suggesting a greater openness toward the

likelihood that she consciously or unconsciously desires women more than she is

willing to admit.

Moving to safer but surely related grounds, it was in the 1970s that

psychological feminists began to suggest that lesbianism was most likely

connected to the relationship between mother and daughter. The positive

treatment of the mother/daughter relationship was another area of analysis that

had been almost completely overlooked until the coming of the New Women's Movement. Looking to her childhood, it is likely that Angelou's complex range of

feelings toward women was based on the absence of her mother at the age of three, the age that so-called Oedipal feelings are considered to be most critical.

When at age eight Maya is again reunited with Vivian Baxter, she is raped by her

mother's boyfriend, a rather obvious father figure. Unable to deal with the sexual life of her daughter, Vivian sends her back to her grandmother, not becoming close to Maya until the child/woman is sixteen. All of these circumstances generate conflicting attitudes toward being a woman.

In *The Heart of a Woman* the most passionate parts of the book have to do with Billie Holiday and Vivian Baxter. These relationships, as well as a number of others involving both men and women, depend on Maya's early experiences with

her mother, which include abandonment; feelings of rejection; feelings of being

ugly when compared to the beautiful Vivian; exposure to a rapist. Each of these

areas is open to feminist discourse. A committed and knowledgeable

psychological feminist reading could continue to expand on Angelou's feelings

about being a woman, analyzing them in *The Heart of a Woman* and in the entire autobiographical series.

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All God's Children Ne

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The fifth volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, tells the story of Angelou's four-year residency in Ghana from 1963 to 1966. When the narrative was published twenty years later, it was greeted

with praise and disappointment. Eugenia Collier, on the one hand, proclaimed the

book to be “the apex toward which the other autobiographies have pointed”

(1986, 24), while Russell Harris, in an interview in *Zelo*, claimed that the book was too “pedantic,” too academic. Except for the quest idea, there was not much

of a story line. Angelou replied: “I think you might need another reading, because there are other stories in the book” (1989, 168).

One major story found in *Traveling Shoes*, one that most critics overlook, is Angelou’s unconditional love for her son. The volume begins with a reiteration of

Guy’s car accident, the episode that concluded *The Heart of a Woman*. In *Traveling Shoes* Guy recovers from his injuries and



continues to mature. A student at the University of Ghana, he seeks independence from his mother as he

attempts to define his own separate goals.

Another major story is Angelou's investigation of her African and African American identities. She explores this conflict as it exists for the American expatriates living in Accra as well as for the groups of people—Bambara, Keta, Ahanta—who still observe the traditions of their ancestors. At the end of *Traveling Shoes* these issues are seemingly resolved when Angelou decides to return to the ways and culture of the United States. Surrounded by friends at the

Accra airport, she leaves Guy in Africa to finish his education. At the same time

she forsakes her newly embraced alliance with Mother Africa, claiming she is

“not sad” to be leaving Ghana (209).

### Narrative Point of View and Structure

The narrative point of view in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* is again sustained through the first-person autobiographer in motion. She moves from journey to journey, propelling the story from one place to another. It is not accidental that the word *traveling* appears in the title. The autobiography begins with Maya's and Guy's travel to Ghana and ends with her anticipated departure

to America in the concluding lines of the autobiography. Told from the first-person point of view, the fifth volume, like the others, is subjective. Owing perhaps to the dominance of the travel motif, it is at the same time more tightly

controlled.

In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, the African narrative is interrupted by a journey within a journey. Angelou accepts the offer to join a theatrical company in a revival of French writer Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*.

Three years earlier *The Blacks* shocked its off-Broadway audiences with the force of its racial commentary. In that performance, described in *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou triumphed in the sinister role of the White Queen. Now the play

was being revived, and Angelou was asked to repeat the role on a limited

tour, with performances in Berlin and Venice. The consequences of the Berlin journey are analyzed later in this chapter, in the sections on setting and character. In terms of point of view, the German sequence offers a glimpse of Angelou as traveler in an alien land with a history of racial prejudice quite different from what she experienced in America.

As in all her volumes, the title contributes to the plot and to the thematic impact. Angelou states that the title of the fifth volume comes from a spiritual about walking in heaven: “I’ve got shoes *you got shoes* All of God’s children got shoes” (“Icon” 1997). The traveling shoes that belong to the narrator and to all children of African descent restate the journey motif. As she told George

Plimpton, the book is about “trying to get home,” which for Jews would mean Israel and for black Americans would mean Africa (1990, rpt. 1994, 20).

On a much lighter note, the traveling shoes might also refer to the pair of feet

made famous by writer Langston Hughes in his *Best of Simple*: “These feet have walked ten thousand miles working for white folks and another ten thousand

keeping up with colored” (1989, 100). In his amusing way, in this story about Simple’s weary feet, Hughes suggests the long stretch of unwanted travel taken

by African Americans in the last century of so-called freedom. Angelou speaks passionately of Hughes in *Caged Bird* as an example of the “wit and humor” that he shares with Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay (and with Angelou herself) (“Icon” 1997).

## Setting

Setting or place, always an important element in Angelou’s writing, assumes

perhaps its greatest prominence in the fifth volume. Most of the action is set in

Accra, the capital of the West African nation of Ghana. The minute details of contemporary African life, contrasted against ancient customs, lend the volume

an exotic backdrop from which to view personal events like Guy's recovery from

the car crash or Maya's feelings of dislocation. The African setting plays an important, almost inseparable part in her character development.

Additionally, in presenting the African setting as a major component of the fifth autobiography, Angelou, like other writers before her, describes to an American readership her impressions of what white explorers once called the Dark Continent, *dark* suggesting to them Africa's quality of mystery as well as the dark

complexion of most of her people. In the first sentence of *Traveling Shoes* she describes the secret night breezes and how they vanish into the “utter blackness.” Angelou is often intrigued by blackness, and in one of the most passionate moments of a February 1996, interview on television, she begins to praise the dark skin of Mrs. Flowers, her mentor in *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

*Sings*, simultaneously stroking her own face in recognition of black pride. As described in *Traveling Shoes*, the dark skin colors of the Ghanaians remind her of peanut butter, caramel, and other treats from childhood. She admires Sheikhali,

her suitor from Mali, for the purple hues of his skin; her beautician, Comfort Adday, for being the color of “ancient bricks” (37); and her



roommate Alice Windom for her “dark, mahogany color” (30). The interaction of skin tones with

clothing and landscape contributes significantly to the unfolding of character and setting.

Further settings on the periphery of the African locale are Berlin and Venice,

the two cities she visits as the White Queen in the revival of *The Blacks*.

Although Angelou’s inclusion of the Berlin-Venice tour might be viewed as a digression that detracts from the African-based setting, the theater sequence helps contribute to her character development and, through use of contrast, to the profound

exploration of her feelings for a homeland. The Berlin setting offers Angelou an unusual perspective. She is remote enough from Africa to gain new

insights into the behavior of black Americans and the nature of white racism, both reflected against the German terrain. She gains a new respect for African Americans, missing them now because they seem more spirited than the Africans

she has encountered in Ghana. These interruptions in the Ghanaian setting are effective in giving *Traveling Shoes* a universal quality as the autobiographer reaches beyond her private life into a conflicting world.

Plot Development

In terms of plot development, *Traveling Shoes* is consistent with the earlier volumes. Each is designed to be a continuing journey of the self. The plot of *Traveling Shoes* begins in Ghana and terminates with Angelou's decision to return to America. She decides to leave for conscious reasons involving her heritage, her craft, and her private life, especially as it relates to her son.

Angelou's autobiographies receive their shape from personal and cultural

referents rather than from the necessities of plot, as in mystery novels or spy fiction. Whereas a novel is a kind of narrative that must be concluded, an autobiography is an unfinished narrative, told in the first person by the adult who recollects it years later. *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* cannot conclude the series because there is yet another autobiography to be written, from

images and actions that remain in the repository of memories that connect

her to the people around her.

Soon after volume 5 opens, the narrator, now thirty-three, relates the

horrifying event of Guy's car accident that results in a broken arm, leg, and neck.

When asked why she repeated the accident scene, which also ends *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou gave two reasons: first, each book must stand alone; and, second, it was necessary that she explain who she was and what she was doing in

Africa (“Icon” 1997).

In order to infuse the African setting with a credible plot, Angelou needed to

detail the causes for her lengthy stay. She intensifies the early pages by dramatizing her long wait for medical reports from a hospital totally foreign to

her. Many parents’ greatest fear is the death of a child; this is the most unspeakable of all catastrophes. Angelou universalizes this fear in *Traveling Shoes*, taking readers close to death but then reversing the expectation. Readers raised on popular melodrama expect Guy to die and Angelou to fall apart. But true to her point of view, Angelou elucidates the slow pain of Guy’s recovery.

There is no catastrophe. As time passes, he gradually moves out of danger and

regains his strength. Simultaneously, Maya demonstrates her increased maturity.

Like most people whose children grow up, she starts to appreciate her freedom

now that the burdens and responsibilities of motherhood are lessened. Aware

that she must respect Guy's choices, she consciously ceases to make him the center of her activities. She forms new friendships—with her roommates, with African poets and political leaders, with African American writers and artists living in Ghana.

At the same time, Angelou strengthens her ties with Mother Africa. In

traveling through eastern Ghana, she forms allegiances with people she meets and also becomes spiritually attached to her venerated ancestors. These intimate

racial, political, and sacred connections with Africans allow Angelou to recognize but not to resolve the dual nature of her heritage. By the end of *Traveling Shoes* she has explored her roots, has come to terms with much of her past, and has decided to return to America to begin a new phase of her life, one that assimilates the African and American elements of her character: “I think in *All God’s Children* I have written about some of the complexity of returning, at one, and being unable to return [to Africa] and yet being so grateful that I had made the

attempt” (“Icon” 1997).

The mother/son plot, like the African/African American plot, is dual in nature.

To develop the plot is to create a series of active/counteractive rhythms. The confrontations between love and desertion, between knowledge and

misunderstanding, are two examples of the shifting stories that shape the series.

For Angelou, though, the termination of plot seems less successful here than in



her other volumes, possibly because she forces her narrator/self to present too sharp a separation between herself and Africa. Four years earlier, African American novelist Alice Walker attempted in *The Color Purple* (1982) to unify similar geographical (Africa/America) and familial (Sister Celie/Sister Nettie) themes. At the end of the novel, Nettie arrives from Africa with her husband, Samuel, their two children, Olivia and Adam, and a young African woman, Tashi, who is Adam's wife. Everyone has come, united at last in one colossal family reunion. But Walker's finale is too perfect, too out of place in a novel that so consistently raised the troubling questions of race and gender in America.

Director Steven Spielberg, in his 1985 film version of *The Color Purple*, ignored many of the book's socioeconomic issues but retained Walker's joyous resolution,

visually amplified through the use of dazzling African costumes and children's clapping games.

Like Walker, Maya Angelou attempts to tie together the divergent strands that

inform the fifth autobiography. Thus, the final scene at the Accra airport is crowded with a farewell contingent of sages, poets, expatriates, dancers, dignitaries, college students, professors, and children. But as John C. Gruesser points out, the end of Angelou's journey is not convincing. The conflicts inherent in the book remain unresolved and the ending is "too easily manufactured at the

last minute to resolve the problem of the book" (1990, 18). Similarly, Deborah E.

McDowell (1986) finds the resolution of the plot to be stereotyped and

unconvincing.

As Angelou admits, her view of Africa is not completely authentic. At times

she romanticizes her experiences: “But whether I like it or not, I am also captured by the romance of history” (“Icon” 1997). In *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, she describes the illusion called Africa: “Despite a spate of nature commentaries, and despite endless shelves of travel books, Africa remains for most of us a hazy and

remote illusion” (65).

In Ghana, Angelou was to some degree, and quite reasonably so, caught up in

a vision of Africa similar to what a generation of black Americans experienced at

home in the 1960s: identification with the Pan-African Movement and with West

African hair styles, clothing, language, music, and other manifestations of African culture. In *Traveling Shoes* she embraced these styles, hair and dress in particular. In one revealing episode, Angelou is at first horrified when her beautician, Comfort Adday, styles her hair into ugly strands like the

“pickaninnies” in old photos (37). Comfort, apparently amused, goes on to reshape, tighten, and cut Angelou’s hair so that by the end of the session her customer looks just like a Ghanaian. Angelou self-consciously recalls this moment, knowing that to “look like” a Ghanaian meant only a cosmetic

transformation and not a genuine assimilation into West African attitudes and traditions. It seems that here and in other episodes of *Traveling Shoes*, the contradictions of race, culture, and nationality are too strong to disappear and too fragile to preserve.

The ambivalent conclusion of *Traveling Shoes* involves Angelou’s departure not only from Ghana but from Guy as well. Her journey in Africa over, she waits

at the Accra airport for the plane to return her to America. Using the phrase

“second leave-taking” (209), she suggests that her awaited voyage from Africa to

America is an ironic echo of the voyage long ago, when West African slaves were

chained and wrenched from their homeland and families. She parallels her departure from Africa with her departure from Guy, the emotional center of her

autobiographies, the son who in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* she had left in America with his grandmother so that she could tour Europe with *Porgy and Bess*.

In *Traveling Shoes*, though, she leaves Guy in Africa as she prepares to return to America.

The reversals at the end of *Traveling Shoes* suggest the apparent end of Angelou's mother/son plot. Guy stands apart from her, surrounded by his

African friends. In this, her last depiction of Guy in the fifth autobiography, Angelou roots him in the culture of Ghana, thus returning him to the place of his

ancestors. He is magically transformed from uncooperative son to newly born American African, free to continue his education at the University of Ghana while she is free to explore her potential as performer and writer.

In a metaphor that effectively captures the mother/son confrontation in this volume, Angelou compares her maternal role to an apron string, untied and in shreds. The same metaphor might apply to the plot design that ends the autobiography. She waits until the final pages to tie the unstrung narrative threads together, offering her readers a vision of Guy as a lord, perhaps a chief.

Angelou seems to create, in this departure scene, a sunny, almost regal atmosphere, as if to protect herself from acknowledging the reality of so absolute a separation. In giving her son back to Africa, to his ancestors, she appears to be constructing a perfect ending. Instead, it seems to fall short of the forthright self-assessment that readers have come to expect in her autobiographies. As in her dissolving romance with Africa, her



farewell address to Guy shows that the rough ends of the narrative are still unraveled.

As Maya Angelou brings the mother/son confrontation to its paradoxical

conclusion, readers observe that it is the mother who again forsakes the son, in

order to rediscover the special rhythms of her African American heritage. While

some critics praise Angelou for her show of independence, others question the willful cutting of the maternal ties that she had established throughout the series.

When asked about this paradox, Angelou emphatically stated that “if you are really a mother you can let go. It’s like love of any sort” (“Icon” 1997).

At the threshold of the New World, Maya Angelou readies herself for

departure, letting readers go now that the conflicting elements of point of view

and narrative structure have been settled. Ironically, though, the book ends not in departure but in stasis. Without her son, and without full acknowledgment of her

Ghanaian heritage, she stands at the edge of Africa, at the Accra airport, with the journey westward anticipated but not

accomplished, with the narrative actually unfinished.

### Character Development

Angelou's intense suffering over Guy's injury both sets the tone for this pensive fifth volume and greatly reinforces the strength of her character. She first describes herself negatively, in terms of darkness and shadows. She is a "dark spectre" who walks the sweltering white streets (4). A shadow, a ghost, Angelou

is reduced to silence. Readers need to interpret the silence not only as a present response but also as a duplication of the past. For her silence is reminiscent of her muteness following the rape by Mr. Freeman described in *I Know Why the Caged*

*Bird Sings*, and of her unspoken terror in *The Heart of a Woman* when friend and novelist John Killens telephones Maya in Chicago to warn her of a crisis between

Guy and a Brooklyn gang.

Angelou again develops her self-portrait through a combination of present incidents and past recollections, in which events and responses are often meant to recall earlier moments. Thus, in *Traveling Shoes* she thinks warmly of her mother, Vivian Baxter, remembering how she had instructed Maya and Bailey in

the art of survival much as Maya has instructed Guy, and how Vivian was her

“doting mother” (151). On her journey through rural East Ghana she remembers

the compassion her grandmother, Annie Henderson, had shown to African

Americans traveling during segregation, when they were denied bed, board, food,

and decent toilets. When Maya and her roommates reluctantly hire a village boy

named Kojo to do housework, she associates his intense color and delicate hands

with her brother Bailey.

Kojo is also an obvious substitute for Guy, previously her in-house son, now

grown and at university, out of his mother's reach. Maya comments on her feelings for Kojo: "[T]he old became new and I was pinched back into those familiar contractions" (57). In this passage she uses birth images—"pinched" and

"contractions"—to describe the painful effect of Kojo's presence and of Guy's past on her own rebirth.

Sometimes the reference to a family member is barely perceptible, as in her recollection that African Americans who appear childlike might actually be acting bravely, like "humming a jazz tune while walking into a gathering of the

Ku Klux Klan” (76). The tactic of humming as a way to dissipate fear is an

unmistakable analogy to the scene in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* where Mama outlasts the three “powhitetrash” children by humming a hymn (23–27).

As in the four previous autobiographies, Maya’s character in *Traveling Shoes* is finally tested and determined through her actual and remembered confrontations

with her son Guy. She seems to vacillate between wanting to supervise him and

wanting to let him go. When she learns, for instance, that Guy is having an affair with a woman a year older than herself, she is so

angry that she threatens to strike him. Guy simply patronizes her, calling her his “little mother” and politely insisting on his autonomy ( *Traveling Shoes*, 149).

In another painful moment Guy cooks Maya a fried chicken dinner on her return from Germany and then announces that he has made plans for the

evening. Again she is “speechless,” unable to respond to Guy’s words (186). Alone

and unhappy, as she was at the conclusion of *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou analyzes her feelings toward her son and questions the strength of their love for



each other. So adept at expressing her sorrow over Guy's accident, she again verbalizes her pain, although in this case not in dread of her son's impending death but of his growing up, stretching beyond her ability to love or control him.

This fluctuation is apparent earlier, in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, where Angelou eloquently captures the feelings of guilt that a working mother experiences in slighting her child. Antithetically, in this fifth volume, she conveys her fear that it is the mother who will be slighted.

It is largely this ability to connect emotionally, as mother and woman, that makes Maya Angelou so popular an autobiographer. She has the ability to communicate her misfortunes and make them accessible to sensitive readers, whatever their race or gender. She has the verbal power, through her own self-portrait of

a black woman, to eradicate many of the surrounding stereotypes by

“demonstrating the trials, rejections, and endurances which so many Black women share” (O’Neale 1984, 26).

Through much of the fifth volume, Angelou’s time-consuming concern for her

son is paralleled by her efforts to form new relationships with black women. In

Ghana she shares a bungalow with two roommates, Vicki Garvin and Alice

Windom. Both Alice and Vicki were educated in America; Alice has a master's

degree from the University of Chicago and Vicki a master's in economics along

with a national reputation in labor organizing. Yet neither woman is able to get

the kind of work in Ghana that reflects their capabilities. Angelou considers herself lucky to have been hired by the University of Ghana as an administrative

assistant and lecturer. Although the job does not include tuition or other privileges, she confesses that she loves getting paid just to

be able to look at the currency, with its portrait of a black president.

Fortunately, Angelou finds an American enclave in Ghana where she can

express her shifting impressions of the country and of her place in it. Humorously dubbed the Revolutionist Returnees, the small group of African American

expatriates recognizes her struggles—the conflicting feelings of being “home” yet

simultaneously being “homeless,” cut off from America without tangible roots in

their adopted black nation. Of her various friendships with the African

Americans, she is closest to author and journalist Julian Mayfield. Like Angelou,

Mayfield and his wife, Ana Livia, are identified with a movement that would enable future African Americans to live again on African soil. Sadly, Mayfield did not “come home” to Africa. He died in the United States in 1984, where he

had accepted a position at Howard University, an historically black institution located in Washington, D.C., an ocean away from the promised land.

Angelou was also a friend of the revered American writer, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963). Du Bois was one of the twentieth century's most influential theorists of black thought and philosophy. Author, critic, editor, Du Bois was best known

for his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he described an American Negro culture rich in mythology, music, and spiritual traditions. He was also instrumental in promoting African American writers and artists during the Harlem Renaissance in his role as editor of the journal, the *Crisis*. Unlike the Mayfields and many other expatriates, Du Bois and his second wife, Shirley Graham (1896–1977), found sanctuary in Africa when, shortly after Ghana

claimed independence in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) offered

them permanent residency. Du Bois became a citizen of Ghana shortly before his

death. “To many of us,” exclaimed Angelou, “he was the first American Negro intellectual” ( *Traveling Shoes*, 124). An advocate of world peace, Du Bois joined the Communist Party in the early 1960s. With Du Bois as an accessible model, Angelou rekindled her own leadership qualities, which were at their height when

she had been Northern Coordinator of Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian

Leadership Conference, but which had understandably diminished following her

commitment to Vus Make and her anguish over Guy’s accident.

Angelou seemed resentful of Du Bois's wife, comparing her to Africa's tallest

mountain, Kilimanjaro, a comparison she also used in describing Vusumzi Make's

patronizing attitude toward her; Vus was "the Old Man of Kilimanjaro" and Maya a tiny shepherd (McPherson 1990, 98). The highest mountain in Africa—

majestic, remote, located in Tanzania—Kilimanjaro appears to be an appropriate

symbol for Maya's distaste of Shirley Graham's isolationist profile. Maya's hostility would create problems for her later in *Traveling Shoes*.



One must remember that Angelou had been absent from America during many

of the formative years of the civil rights movement, when Martin Luther King and others were organizing peaceful protests and sit-ins in their efforts to integrate the schools and other public institutions. She was still in Ghana during Freedom Summer (1964), when thousands of activists organized the Mississippi Freedom Party in an attempt to register disenfranchised black voters (“Freedom

Summer.” <http://www>). Geographically far from America and disillusioned by Dr. King’s nonviolent strategies, Angelou nonetheless made a commitment to his

1963 march on Washington. In a show of support for his internationally

publicized civil rights demonstration, she and a small group of African American

friends—Julian Mayfield, Alice Windom, Ana Livia, and others—organized a

parallel demonstration in Ghana. Noticeably shifting her perspective from “I” to

“we,” Angelou outlined their plans, which included writing a letter of protest against racism and conveying it to the American ambassador. Sadly, their enthusiasm for King’s historic project

was dampened by King's pacifist tactics; the expatriates hated their experiences in America of being harassed by whites,

then being told to be passive about it. As Angelou told Marney Rich, King's idea

of "redemptive suffering" seemed irresponsible; she had never seen a person redeemed through anguish (1989, 127). Despite her own limited participation in

the protest, Angelou renewed her tenuous bonds with King, a commitment that

helped prepare her psychologically for her later allegiance to Malcolm X.

For the African Americans in Ghana, Dr. King's march had grievous emotional

repercussions. On the night before the Ghanaian Solidarity Demonstration, as King was about to achieve his greatest public triumph, W.E.B. Du Bois, weak, ailing, and five years shy of one hundred years of age, died. When they learned

of his death, the Revolutionist Returnees transformed a politically restrained rally

into a wake to commemorate the spirit of a man who made immeasurable contributions to African American life and letters. One participant started to sing

“Oh, oh, Freedom” and was joined by the diverse crowd, which included farmers,

vacationers, teachers, students, even Guy, who had training in protest marches.

Angelou writes about this ceremony using the collective form: “We were singing

Dr. Du Bois’ spirit, for the invaluable contributions he made, for his shining intellect and his courage” (124). This great American editor and statesman had become a symbol to African Americans living in Ghana, for he had been

welcomed to the promised land, in life and in death.

The tone of the march suddenly shifted, however, from a tribute to Du Bois to

an unfounded sunrise tirade against two soldiers, one of them black, who were

raising the flag at the American embassy. The sequence concludes with

Angelou's invective against the government of the United States for its centuries

of exploitation of black people. At the same time that she chastises the United States, she still longs for full citizenship, which she cannot expect to acquire in Africa, where the African American community often felt unwelcome.

Angelou and her small group of African American colleagues were the people

most involved in the planning for Malcolm X's visit to Ghana in 1964. They helped arrange his itinerary and they introduced him to African leaders. When

Angelou first met Malcolm X, he had espoused the teachings of Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad, the prophet who claimed that white people were devils. In *The Heart of a Woman*, she vividly depicts Malcolm's initial impact on her: "I had never been so affected by a human presence" (167). In 1964, en route from a pilgrimage to the holy Islamic city of Mecca, the black Muslim leader experienced

a political transformation. Although he still believed that America was a racist country, he no longer held the conviction that whites were inherently evil.

For Malcolm X, the return visit from Mecca to Cairo to Ghana was intended to

garner support from black world leaders for his Organization of African Unity, a

nationalist group not directly governed by the Nation of Islam. He also wished to

contest racist tactics within the diaspora—those areas occupied by displaced peoples of African descent. In a complicated sequence in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou



cites several references to the slave trade from Malcolm X's speeches in Ghana. If racism in America ceased, he argued, then the civil rights movement would be as unnecessary as the public sale of slaves once was.

Malcolm X stressed the unity of all black people, encouraging Angelou to come home and organize his political alliance, as she had once coordinated Martin Luther King's.

His congenial manner dwindled, though, when Angelou, as she drove him to

the airport, made some injudicious remarks about middle-class black

organizations like the Urban League and the NAACP. He further admonished her

criticism of Shirley Graham, Du Bois's mourning widow, for failing to relate to

the African American protest movement. Once again Angelou expressed

bitterness at Shirley Graham's prestige among the Ghanaians, having earlier compared her to Kilimanjaro. Malcolm X bluntly labeled her comments "very childish, dangerously immature" (144). Stung by his scolding, she was in tears.

After his departure from Ghana, she avoided any personal analysis of Malcolm

X's chastisement, using the collective rather than the singular pronoun to describe the sadly altered state of the so-called Revolutionist Returnees.

Malcolm's parting reduced them to "a little group of Black folks, looking for a home" (146).

Angelou drew on vivid episodes like the visit of Malcolm X to create dynamic

characters. These confrontations, interspersed within her own larger narrative of

self-development, read like short stories or vignettes. Most of them are focused not on renowned world leaders but on the natives of Accra and its outskirts.

Angelou's interchange with the African houseboy, Kojo, is the most delightful of

these character sketches, since it entangles her once again in a reluctant maternal role. She is required to go to Kojo's school to discuss his grades with the headmaster. She, Vicki, and Alice are coaxed into supervising homework

assignments in math and mapmaking. Maya is forced into a dialogue with a mere

boy of fourteen, who insists on his right to debate personal issues such as whether she should or should not accept the gift of a refrigerator from her Malian suitor.

For two months Angelou assumes that the often-irritating houseboy is poor and that he is manipulating her. To her surprise, in the yard one morning she discovers a group of richly clad people who are Kojo's relatives, who have come

with container upon container of vegetables to thank Maya and her roommates

for helping educate him. "Auntie Maya" is so struck by the splendor of the gifting ceremony that she falls apart after the family leaves. She lies in bed drinking gin

and pitying the unwanted children of Africa.

Angelou's relationships with contemporary Africans have a positive effect on

her self-awareness and her personal growth. Seeing Maya's disintegration

following Guy's car crash, Julian Mayfield reproaches her for becoming a wreck:

"Hell, it's Guy whose neck is broken. Not yours" (10). Mayfield introduces her to

a prominent African woman, folklorist Efua Sutherland (1924–1996), director of

the National Theater of Ghana, a woman of compassion and sensitivity. Their friendship is spontaneous from the start. Through the solace of Brother Mayfield

and Sister Sutherland, Maya is able to cry for the first time since Guy's accident.

Sutherland retains a strong connection throughout the autobiography, offering advice and reinforcing Angelou's sense of belonging to the Ghanaian intellectual

community. Angelou strengthens their friendship by helping design costumes and train actors at Efua's National Theatre.

A less typical friendship involves Comfort Adday, neither a colleague nor an

intellectual but a stenographer/hairdresser. Comfort is lively and amusing; she loves to laugh and tease Maya about her age, her hair, her single child, and her

sex life. Regrettably, Comfort starts to lose weight and strength over a period of several months. She confesses to Maya that she is the victim of a spell put on her by her lover's wife and leaves for Sierra Leone to consult a woman who will cleanse her and remove the voodoo spell. Refusing Angelou's offer of money, she

requests only that her client be there when she returns. A few weeks later Maya

learns that Comfort has died in Sierra Leone.

Another short-lived friendship is with Grace Nuamah. Ghana's most esteemed

folk dancer, Nuamah had the responsibility of performing at major state



functions. She also taught dance at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, where Angelou held her job of administrative assistant. One

day Nuamah announced that her faculty pay was missing. Maya later recovers Grace's missing money, which she discovers in a brown envelope on the desk. In

thanks, Nuamah generously introduces Maya to an eligible male friend, Mr.

Abatanu.

Unfortunately, Abatanu dislikes Maya's directness and she his pretensions.

After the failed matchmaking, Grace expresses disappointment with Maya's

behavior, for she had offered the valuable male friend as a favor. A woman trained in African traditions, insists Grace, would have accepted the kind offer.

Angelou's insensitivity to African customs signals the end of their closeness. She mentions Grace Nuamah only one more time in the text, listing her among the

group of colleagues bidding her farewell at the Accra airport.

Angelou is not always so discouraging when approached by African men.

Recalling her affectionate portrayals of dancing partner R. L. Poole in *Gather Together in My Name* and of fiancé Thomas Allen and Allen's rival Vus Make in *The Heart of a Woman*, it is apparent that she enjoyed her physical intimacy with black men. The most romantically depicted male in *Traveling Shoes* is Sheikhal, a wealthy importer from Mali, a country southwest of Ghana. She describes him

as "sublimely handsome," very tall, with dark skin and elegant robes (66). She agrees to go to his apartment and soon afterward Sheikhal proposes marriage, but there is a hitch. As is customary among Muslim men in West Africa, he already has eight children from two women, only one of them his wife. He wants

Maya to be his second wife, willing to adapt to the marriage customs of Mali and

reject her “White woman way” of being impatient (94). As a strong and

independent woman, Maya finds his proposition unacceptable.

Many of the African men whom she admires are prominent in Ghanaian

politics. She is an ardent supporter of Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian president

who helped found the Pan-African movement in the 1940s and 1950s and the Organization of African Unity in 1963. His leadership was overthrown in 1966, a

few years after Angelou's departure. After he was deposed, Angelou stated that

her presence there would be unstable and that she would not return (Caruana 1989, 33).

The legendary tribal chief Nana Nketsia satisfied Angelou's yearning for a place within both cultures. He held impressive British degrees and was the first

African vice chancellor of the University of Ghana; at the same time he was a Ghanaian leader, paramount chief of the Ahanta people. One evening Nana

Nketsia sends his chauffeur to Maya's bungalow with instructions that she come

to his palace. She is impressed with the elegant sofas and spacious surroundings.

He introduces her to nationally recognized poet Kwesi Brew. During the

conversation, Nana reveals his booming voice and his fierce pride at being an African, what Angelou ironically calls “the passion of self-appreciation” (110).

Kwesi Brew, more even-tempered, explains Ghanaian traditions and proposes a

toast in honor of the African character. Kwesi Brew becomes her special friend,

someone who protects her when they travel together. Angelou repeated to an interviewer what Brew said about her to a foreign authority: “She may not be a

Ghanaian, but she is a sister” (Randall-Tsuruta 1989, 106). The powerful “Nana”

or chief appears frequently in *Traveling Shoes* and, as I have argued, may have played an important role in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (Lupton 2003, 1–6). Both the Nana and Brew participate in her sendoff at the Accra airport.

Most of Angelou’s encounters with African women and men are positive ones

that contribute to her growing intoxication with Africa as she tries to learn about her heritage. Angelou's identification with the Mother Continent is personal and

patriotic. Her stature and skin color indicate her African ancestry, but so do the cultural contributions of American/African people, whose blues songs, shouts, and gospels echo the rhythms of West Africa. Le Roi Jones affirmed the connection between African and American Negro music in his book *Blues People*

(1963), when he wrote that the blues and other black forms "could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives" (17).

Maya Angelou, as both narrator and central character in her iconic story, is concerned with capturing the rhythms of Africa as they



affect her reinvigorated

ties with her ancestors. In her travels through West Africa she discovers certain

connections between her American traditions and those of her ancestors. She considers herself almost home when an African woman, Foriwa, identifies her as

one of the Bambara group on the basis of similarities in height, hair, and skin color. She connects with a number of African mother figures, among them Patience Aduah, who, like Momma Henderson, is generous in giving away food

to the people of her village.

When she first comes to Accra Angelou wants to nestle into Ghana “as a baby

nuzzles in a mother’s arms” (19). This fantasy subsides as she realizes that the Ghanaians are not always interested in extending the embrace. She notices that

the black Americans in her group share similar delusions of being loved by the

Ghanaians. The Revolutionist Returnees come to Africa full of desire, and hate being ignored or misunderstood in their new home. Always in search of home,

Angelou realizes that she must remain a while longer in Ghana if she is to uncover the fullness of spirit and depth of character

toward which she strives.

Her ambivalent attitude toward living in Ghana provides *Traveling Shoes* with its richness of texture and depth of analysis. Angelou invariably tries to make

connections to decrease the differences between the culture of the ancestors and the culture of the slaves.

When Angelou listens to one of Nana Nketsia's speeches, for instance, she notices that the chief's majestic voice captures the rhythms of black preachers and that the African experience is similar to her own background. She is caught

between identifying with things African and using African culture as a way to

acknowledge the abandoned country of her birth. Her need, here and elsewhere,

to underline Ghanaian associations with African American parallels

demonstrates what Dolly A. McPherson, echoing W.E.B. DuBois, calls Maya's

"double-consciousness"—a vision of her "self" that contains both African and American components (1990, 113). Through her identification with Africa,

Angelou finds the context in which to explore her selfhood and to reaffirm the

meaning of motherhood.

Angelou's self-discovery is augmented when she temporarily leaves the

African continent in the mid-1960s to tour Berlin and Venice in a limited number

of performances of Genet's *The Blacks* with the original cast. Her view of Berlin involves a meticulously drawn account of the German mentality, which is

balanced against the warm reunion with the original off-Broadway cast, among

them such familiar names as Cicely Tyson, the star of *Souther* (1972) and a costar in the 2011 film, *The Help*; Lou Gossett Jr., who has had numerous supporting or leading film roles, including *The Deep* (1977), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), and the BET television series *The Book of Negroes* (2015); and the beloved actor James Earl Jones, recognized for being the voice of Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* series (1977–1983) and for his outstanding performances in film and theater, including *The Great White Hope* (1970), *Matewan* (1987), and *The Best Man* (2012).

In the foreign, theatrical setting of Berlin, Angelou revives her passion for African American culture and values, putting them into perspective as she weighs them against Germany's history of military aggression. In 1914, in World

War I, Germany, in alliance with Austria-Hungary and several other nations, declared war on France and Russia. Twenty-five years later, in 1939, Germany occupied Czechoslovakia and then Poland. In World War II, more than six million Jews were exterminated because the leader of the Nazi party, Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), deemed Jews, as well as Negroes and Gypsies, to be racially inferior.

Angelou and the other actors angrily recalled the story of U.S. athlete Jesse Owens, the track star who won four gold medals in the Olympic games of 1936,

which were held in Berlin. Owens set several Olympic records during these games, as well as a world record with the United States 400-meter relay team. But

Hitler, then chancellor of Germany, refused to recognize Owens's triumphs because they invalidated his theory of a master race—a race of Aryans genetically

superior to other ethnic groups. On the argument that Jesse Owens was racially

inferior, Hitler denied the athlete his rightful claim to the medals.

One morning, fortified by the presence of an uninvited Israeli actor named Torvash, Maya accepts a breakfast invitation with a well-to-do German family whom she suspects shares similar notions of racial inferiority. At the gathering,

family members and guests take turns telling stories about race. Angelou relates



the Brer Rabbit story in which the threatened animal outwits the oppressor. The

German tells a parable in which a bird, symbolizing a Jew, is trampled in dung.

The verbal violence of the narratives escalates to such a point that Angelou becomes sick in the garden. Her disgust is by no means lessened when she learns

that the host, a collector of African art, has only invited her to his home because he hopes that she will get him some good buys in Ghanaian folk art.

Angelou says little about the performances in Venice, other than to mention the disturbing fact that angry protesters picketed *The*

*Blacks* for its sexual content, calling Genet's play "filth" (175). Despite the potential for confrontation, the cast manages to go onstage without major incident. The theater sequence ends and Angelou retraces her steps, reentering Africa by way of Egypt.

Although her character growth is primarily nurtured in a West African setting,

her encounters in Italy and especially in Germany help shape and broaden her constantly changing vision. The mixture of fascist surroundings, black

performances, and Jewish survival sharpens her perceptions of African

Americans at home and abroad. These perceptions contribute to her reclaiming

herself and to her evolution as a citizen of the world. The universality of experience in *Traveling Shoes* anticipates, to some degree, the acclaimed poem,

“On the Pulse of Morning,” read three decades later at the 1993 inauguration of

President Bill Clinton. In this powerful ode, Angelou addresses all the people of

the world, including the Germans. The evocative poem has a worldly wise maturity to it, a wisdom that must be attributed in part to her knowledge of the

countless places she has been.

As a character, Maya clearly demonstrates her maturity in *Traveling Shoes*.

She matures as a mother who, concerned for the well-being of her son, is apparently willing to let him go his own way, both in terms of his sexual options

and in his determination to reside in Ghana. She matures as a woman, no longer

the victim of good-looking men but one who can assess mutual motives and feelings. She matures as an African American, able to perceive the roots of her

identity and capable of cultivating those roots into a consciousness that affects her whole personality.

### Thematic Issues

The themes that Angelou develops most fully in her fifth volume are

motherhood, race, and the search for an African identity. As we have seen throughout this work, motherhood is Angelou's most uniform theme and in

*Traveling Shoes* it is consistently presented, from its beginning, where Maya awaits reports of her son's injuries, to its close, where she ends her conflict with her son, bidding him farewell. The theme of motherhood does not, however, consume the text,

as it does in *Gather Together in My Name* or *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*.

In *Traveling Shoes*, perhaps because she is a seasoned mother or perhaps because she is looking for a positive way to close the autobiography, Angelou develops a theme of motherhood which suggests liberation. Her initial response

to Guy's announced independence is to retreat quietly into the corners of his life, knowing that she can no longer keep him under her wing. These feelings are complicated by a mutual recognition that part of motherhood is letting go: they

both need to be free of one another. The narrator keeps confrontation at a minimum, with the mother/child opposition

dramatized only twice; first, when she challenges Guy with the news that he is having an affair; and second, when

he announces, following her return from the Genet tour, that Maya's mothering

is finished and that his life "belongs to me" (186).

It seems that by the time the fifth book ends, Guy has reached that stage of development where, as one of God's children, he has earned the right to wear traveling shoes. While these shoes will carry him away from his mother, they simultaneously confirm his autonomy, his independence. Yet it is not the end, for

as Angelou insists, motherhood is never over. From her account of Guy's car accident, to her affectionate remarks about her own

mother and grandmother, to

placing her son in an Africa from which she herself felt excluded, Angelou infuses her autobiographies with maternal consciousness. What is more, the theme of motherhood is reflected in numerous subthemes: Angelou's affection for

Kojo, the Ghanaian houseboy; her delight in being called by the African title

"Auntie" by Nana Nketsia's charming children and by other children from Cairo

or from the outskirts of Accra. The phrase has a maternal connotation that



pleases her.

In *Traveling Shoes*, the theme of motherhood parallels the theme of race, indicated on one level by Angelou's quest for acceptance by Mother Africa. The

paradoxical term Mother Africa, which she uses occasionally, is a popular one that has been articulated by numerous West African and American writers of the

twentieth century. The Senegalese poet David Diop, for example, uses the phrase

as both title and subject in "Africa (to my Mother)" (1961). From a more critical

perspective, race is a theme through which Angelou illustrates connections and

confrontations. She extends her awareness of racial antagonisms to include not only the struggles between Africans and Americans but also between Germans and Jews. The racial components of these cultures, interwoven and inseparable,

provide Angelou with rich opportunities for thematic development.

Finally, Angelou links racial matters to her relationship with Africa and to her

desire to be rooted. The Dark Continent calls so loudly that it becomes a desired

presence, embodied in the figures of a dancer, a chief, a laughing ancestor.

Lyman B. Hagen, in his 1997 book on Angelou, compares her quest for identity to

the one Alex Haley describes in *Roots* (1976), a book that heavily influenced African American attitudes toward Africa. However, becoming African is an unattainable goal that falls outside of her desire for assimilation: “Whether she likes it or not, she begins to discover that she is a Black American, and that in

Africa she is a Black American in exile” (McPherson 1990, 113).

Woven into her self-discovery are her feelings of guilt as a citizen of the United States of America, a country instrumental in

maintaining a slave trade for

almost 250 years. By extension, the theme of racial identity encompasses a variety of other motifs: ancestry, cultural differences, suffering, inequality, and homecoming. These thematic issues function simultaneously with plot to lend a

dynamic configuration to Angelou's autobiographical statements.

### Style and Literary Devices

In *Traveling Shoes* Angelou makes superb use of language in recording moments of emotional intensity. At the beginning of the narrative she describes

going back and forth from the hospital, emerging from the cool interior into the

bright sunlight as she herself drifts in and out of her son's pain, which is also her pain. During the summer of 1962 she feels "gobbled" down. The days remind her

of "fat men yawning after a sumptuous dinner" (4).

Later, she records the horrors of slavery as she travels through western Ghana,

known for Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle, former holding forts for slaves.

Angelou imaginatively captures the agony of being a slave. She observes the now-quiet forts and envisions bloodied people, silently enduring their chains:

“They lived in a mute territory, dead to feeling and protest” (97). The potency of the passage is reinforced through simple language and repeated images of silence,

an image Angelou has used in other volumes but most significantly in *Caged Bird*. Her use of the word *mute* emphasizes the silent misery of the slaves and Angelou’s personal connection to them and their agony. Her written words in this eulogy attempt to break the silence of that “mute territory” inhabited by the enslaved Africans, who were never free to respond to their assailants or to narrate the grim story of their captivity.

Angelou's language in capturing the final separation from the Africa of her ancestors has an awesome potency, a feeling of loss. But she does not allow the

book to end on a desolate note, choosing instead to create, in the last full paragraph, a praise song that stands apart from her softer, more subtle style. In

an extremely condensed history of slavery in America, she evokes the blues, the

dance, the gospel, as they were carried through the streets of Massachusetts and

Alabama, changed but still African; for Africa is still in the body and in the hips, in a "wide open laughter" (209). This passage,

which represents the author at her

most jubilant, is followed by one simple concluding statement: “I could nearly hear the old ones chuckling” (209). In a book that constantly alternates between

African and African American voices, Angelou gives the last words to the “old

ones,” to her Ghanaian ancestors, but filtered through her own experiences and

the rich traditions of the spiritual and cultural forms that are part of the oral folk



tradition. Yet her identification with the oral tradition of West Africa is not a permanent choice. For Angelou recognizes, at the end of *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, that if she is to become a contemporary writer, she must put on her traveling shoes for the long journey home.

Alternative Reading: Signifying and the Black

Tradition

In 1984 the influential critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. published an essay, "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign of the Signifying Monkey." This

essay, which became the foundation for Gates's 1988 book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary*

*Criticism*, is a crucial text in the development of black thought. His essay helped transform black studies into a sophisticated procedure for examining and categorizing African American literature.

Gates applies the term signifying or “signifyin(g),” to the functions of black speech patterns as well as to the process of echoing earlier African American traditions, motifs, or figures of speech within a particular text. The trickster, the Signifying Monkey, is a descendent of Esu-Elegbara, the West African figure who

“dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying

the ambiguities of language” (1984, 286). Signifying is a message system, a strategy of communication. As its emissary, the Signifying Monkey is the conveyer of multiple meanings and interpretations in the literature of the African diaspora—areas populated by black Africans as a result of the slave trade.

Angelou, who is familiar with the term signifying, uses it to describe the way

in which older black women—much like Gates’s African-born trickster monkey—

use words and speech patterns to assert their verbal power: “The process is called signifying, and has an African origin” ( *Stars* 137–38). One might attribute Angelou’s abundant verbal punning in the autobiographies to her signifying self:

to her verbal strength as she portrays the power and duality of her relationships.

Gates's sensitivity to signifying in African American literature allows him to

unveil the repeated black verbal patterns in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a book whose forerunners, he claims, are Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and W.E.B. Du Bois's novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Gates, who convincingly demonstrates the signifying connection between Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), believes that critics

of African American literature must read modern texts against earlier ones. He argues: “Our literary tradition exists, because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying” (1984, 290).

In the search for illustrations of signifying in the African American literary tradition, the slave narrative is a particularly fertile source. Although Gates does not refer to Maya Angelou in either “The Blackness of Blackness” or *The Signifying Monkey*, other critics discuss her echoing of the slave narrative. Dolly McPherson, for example, argues that the similarities between Angelou’s

autobiographies and slave narratives result from their sharing “a quest that will

encourage the development of an authentic self” (1990, 121). Selwyn R. Cudjoe stresses this connection by citing a quote from a slave narrative to introduce his 1984 essay on Angelou and autobiography. It is also relevant that Angelou confirmed these opinions when she told interviewer George Plimpton (1990; rpt.

1994) that she was “following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass—the

slave narrative” (16). [Chapter 2](#) discusses Angelou’s use of this form in relationship to slave narratives by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, whose pen name was Linda Brent. My alternative reading focuses

on Brent’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in an attempt to illustrate the process of signifying.

In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou reiterates certain familiar patterns of the African American slave narrative—the journey; the quest for freedom; empathy for the horrors suffered by slaves. Angelou's outrage against

slavery, expressed in the Cape Coast Castle passage and elsewhere, repeats the condemnation of the slave system recorded by articulate slave narrators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. The condemnation of slavery is

central to Brent's plot. In her chapter on local slaveholders she describes the kinds of punishment to which slaves were submitted: they were burned by being hung

in the air over a fire; clubbed or starved or mauled to death; tied to a tree in the freezing wind. A woman slave had no value other

than to reproduce. If she refused she was whipped or shot. Women, reports Brent, “are on a par with animals” (1861, 380).

Brent’s focus, like Angelou’s a century later, is on motherhood—on the need to

preserve one’s offspring. Despite escaping, Brent is unable to desert her children.

For seven years in her journey to freedom Linda Brent is immobile, concealed in

a windowless garret, unable to touch the children who play below her gaze.



Brent's greatest source of anguish, greater than the threat of being raped and beaten by her master, Dr. Flint, is her fear of losing her children.

The slave mother's misery throughout the garret narrative is mental and

physical. Mentally, she doubts that she will be reunited with her family; physically, her cramped body, pinned in the attic and exposed to wind and rain,

duplicates her constricted mental state—as it duplicates the anguish of any African bound by the shackles of the slave system. In a section titled “The Children Sold” Brent depicts the torment of separation: “I bit my lips till the blood came to keep from crying out. Were my children with their grandmother,

or had the speculator carried them off? The suspense was dreadful” (111). She compares this moment to “the darkest cloud that hung over my life” (112).

In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Maya Angelou, like Linda Brent before her, occupies a restricted geographical space. Confined to Ghana because

of Guy's car accident, her solitary visits to his hospital room echo Brent's lonely contemplation over the loss of her daughter, Ellen, sold as a child to another master. Admittedly, Angelou is more privileged than the slave women who

endured the atrocities of the plantation system. But her roots in that system, rediscovered during her journey through eastern Ghana, are vivid reminders of

being descended from slavery.

Other critics have touched on the similarities and differences between Linda Brent and Maya Angelou, particularly in the related themes of rape, separation,

confinement, and black womanhood. Mary Vermillion, for example, argues that

both autobiographers challenge the racial stereotypes inherent in white literature by celebrating the black female and transforming personal suffering into a symbol for the confinement of African Americans in general (1992, 250).

It is also important, in a discussion of signifying, to mention Angelou's debt to

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel filled with dramatic episodes and dominated by the themes of travel, female strength, male/female relationships, and the quest for a home. In a panoramic sweep, Hurston had created a unique vision of black life in Florida; like Hurston, but especially in *Heart of a Woman* and *Traveling Shoes*, Angelou offers a wide-lens view of Africa and central Europe, recorded by an African American woman. At

the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford, the central character,

uses the metaphor of the fish-net to illustrate how she must gather together the memories of her world: "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder" (184). Maya

Angelou, at the edge of the airport in West Africa, on the eastern shore of the Great Atlantic, waits, like her foremother, to drape her memories over her writer's shoulder and bear them home.

In the last several pages of *Traveling Shoes*, Maya Angelou signifies the slave within herself as she narrates her effect on certain Africans, descended from a plundered people, who recognized her as a relative. At the same time, she praises

the African American culture born of that history and senses that as an artist and writer, she has a designated place within it, that she “signifies” it.

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.

Angelou shows a deep identification with the victims of mid-passage. Remnants

of that journey burn in her memory, shaping her identity with her ancestors and

the structure of the autobiography itself.

Part of her narrative mission is to take the stories of Africans back with her to

the United States, to those whose ancestors survived the horrendous

transportation of slaves from West Africa to the Americas. In returning from Accra, as Malcolm X had advised, Angelou is able to bring to her country a firsthand account of a continent that most African Americans have deeply felt but rarely visited. Her memorable search for roots has reverberated in her countless interviews on television, in periodicals, and in the popular press. As one of the best known of all contemporary autobiographers, Maya Angelou extended

a tradition initiated by slaves and continually reimaged by popular writers of

African descent.

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Narrative Point of View

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* is the end of the story—the end of the journey; the end of the line. The sixth book of the



autobiographical series is the briefest. It begins in 1965 with Maya on a Pan Am jet flying from Ghana to New York City.

On her arrival in New York she phones her friend El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X). Shabazz relays a dreadful experience in the Lincoln Tunnel, where,

fearing that he was the target of a gunman, he had been rescued by a sympathetic

white man. He asks Angelou to stay over, but she is anxious to return to California. As in past experiences, for instance, when John Killens had called her in Chicago to tell her that Guy was in danger ( *Heart of a Woman*, 75), the narrative is conveyed through the useful device of a phone call.

There are other momentous phone calls in *Song*. Shortly after her arrival in San Francisco, in February 1965, Maya was visiting an aunt when she got a call

from a friend telling her that Malcolm X had been assassinated. Three years later, on her fortieth birthday, April 4, 1968, she was cooking party food when her close friend Dolly McPherson telephoned with terrible news, so awful that she insisted

on delivering it in person: Martin Luther King had been murdered in Memphis.

When a lover known as the “African” telephoned from Ghana, asking Maya to

give him and his entourage a party before he began a guest lectureship at Yale,

she wrote: “His voice was so loud, he hardly needed a telephone” (159). A final

phone call is from Robert Loomis, an editor at Random House, who asked her if

she was interested in writing an autobiography.

Such phone calls transmit essential information and generate painful or

pleasant reactions. Through this traditional way of providing details, the autobiographer is able to bring tension to a situation

as he or she enlarges the perspective of the absent “I.” The use of phone messages and other devices—

letters, personal recollections, thoughts—enables her to narrate events that occurred in America during her long tenure in West Africa. The phone call from

Ghana to Manhattan reveals her dissatisfaction with her African lover. The call

from Robert Loomis indicates a major shift in her prospects and announces her

career as a writer.

In the sixth and final autobiography, home at last, she also offers her

impressions of the race riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965 and of the 1968 uprisings in Harlem following the death of Martin Luther King. A witness to the rebellion in the Watts section of Los Angeles during six hellish days in August 1965, Angelou narrates the political events in *Song* with the objectivity of a news reporter: “Three police vans were filled and driven away as

I stood at the corner of 125th and Vermont. I headed back to my car with an equal mixture of disappointment and relief” (77). One notices the passivity of the narrator (“she *stood*”). The major verb is rendered in passive voice: (“police vans *were filled*”). Her general detachment as a narrator is inconsistent with the reality of Watts—with its raging fires and its looting, with curfews enforced

by the National Guard, with thousands of black people being arrested and dragged through the streets.

Maya is only slightly more impassioned in describing the riots in Harlem following the assassination of Martin Luther King. She generalizes that in Watts

there had been rage but in Harlem there was lamentation. As in the Watts episode, she is a reluctant observer, expressing shock when she sees a shirtless man leave a building with a conga drum, “shouting, not singing, unintelligible words” (190). Her distressing experience in Harlem leads to a lengthy discourse

on “the death of a beloved” (192–93) in which she commemorates the widows of

Martin Luther King and of John F. Kennedy. Overcome by depression, she goes to

Dolly McPherson's apartment to recuperate. Jimmy Baldwin rescues her, taking

her to a dinner party at the home of cartoonist Jules Feiffer and his wife Judy.

The conversation is light. Maya tells stories about Stamps, Arkansas, indications

that she may be contemplating a recollection of her childhood.

The bulk of *Song* is low-key. It concerns Angelou's continued contact with her mother, her brother, and her son: her friendship

with novelists James Baldwin and Rosa Guy; her growing attachment to Dolly McPherson; her ambivalent

relationship with an unnamed lover called simply the “African;” and her personal

development as a poet. By the end of the sixth volume she has made a full commitment to writing. The last line of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* becomes the first line of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. “What you looking at me for. I didn’t come to stay.”

Although both the first and the last texts are conjoined, it is important to notice the huge time gap between them. *Caged Bird* was published in 1970, when



its author was forty-two years old; *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* was published in 2002, when Angelou was seventy-four and writing about a forty-year-old

woman. Thirty-two years had passed between the publication of the first and the

sixth autobiographies, years in which the author had aged and her economic prospects had radically changed. As a serial autobiographer, Angelou was trying

to re-create the mature adult who recorded her post-Ghanaian life in 2002 and,

through recollection and memories, call up the same *persona* who had suffered from five years of muteness when she was a little

girl. Angelou was gifted, not

only with a remarkable memory but with the imagination to reinvent a very distant past.

### Structure

Throughout *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self*, structure has been defined as an arrangement of the story based on the motif of travel, featuring the movement from one geographical location to another. Maya Angelou's story began on a train with her brother, Bailey, to Stamps, Arkansas; it ends in Stockton, California, at her mother's house, as she prepares to return to New York City.

Despite Angelou's travels throughout Europe and West Africa, hers is an

American chronicle, the saga of a black woman born in the United States who grew out of poverty to become a writer.

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* is the final installment in Angelou's fictionalized life story. Its movement is limited. There are no dramatic train rides, no uncharted destinations. She depends on airplanes to transport her from Ghana to

places in America—from New York to San Francisco to Hawaii to Los Angeles to

Stockton and finally to the anticipated return to New York City, with its publishers, its writers, and its celebrities, so many of them her friends. The reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* objected to the name-dropping in *Song*: "At times the name-dropping overwhelms ('Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach had moved

from Columbus Avenue to Central Park West "" ([PW.com](#)). I see Angelou's observations not so much as name-dropping (she really did know those people)

but as a sad comment on the general ennui of the sixth autobiography. After the

initial return from Ghana, movement is less of an adventure from continent to continent as it is a shifting from one party or one bar or one apartment to another.

One effective structural device in *Song*, as the earlier volumes, is Angelou's use of repetition. Although she emphasizes her close African connections in the final

three autobiographies, the reader familiar with all six of the books will be impressed by the way she weaves in so many of the earlier events: her journey

with Bailey to Stamps, Arkansas; her being raped by her mother's boyfriend; her

struggles as a single mother; her role as the White Queen in Genet's *The Blacks*.

By mentioning these and other key narrative moments in the series, she is able to

connect the major dots, from beginning to end, a technique that helps *Song* to stand on its own as a separate volume yet remain very much related to the

others.

To assure the continuity between the last and the first volumes, she provides

both *Caged Bird* and *Song* with an epigram or short citation to introduce each of them. *Caged Bird* opens with a fragment from a childhood poem: “What you looking at me for? / I didn’t come to stay.” This same fragment is repeated in the conclusion of the last autobiography, thus linking it inextricably to the first. The epigram at the beginning of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* reiterates the concept of movement:

The old ark’s a-movering

a-movering

a-movering

the old ark's a-movering

and I'm going home.

—*Nineteenth-century American spiritual*

This epigram marks a notable revision of the original manuscript, which reads:

“The year was 1964, and the old ark was a Pan Am jet which originated in Johannesburg and stopped in Accra, Ghana to pick up passengers” (“Maya

Angelou Papers,” Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, folder # 4, January 10, 2001. The prosaic original version,

although it invokes Noah's ark, lacks the force of the cited spiritual, whose themes affect the entire

autobiographical series—song, movement, the journey, and going home.

Although there are several variations to this gospel song, Angelou's seems personalized in stressing the idea of homecoming, of landing finally on solid ground.

Finally, the titles for both autobiographies are taken from the same poem, Paul

Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" (1899). In the third stanza of Dunbar's famous lyric, the caged bird sends "a plea that upward to Heaven he flings—/ I know why



the caged bird sings” (Norton 1997, 900). By the end of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* Maya Angelou was gaining considerable recognition for her poetry (she includes a poem about Watts in the autobiography, 69–70). Through her allusion

to Dunbar and through printing her own poem, she is establishing herself as a poet and placing her work within the historic African American literary

tradition.

### Plot Development and Character Development

Because there are so many characters and so minimal a plot in the concluding

autobiography, I have combined these two categories instead of treating them separately. Plot gives way to characterization; movement subsides to stasis.

Finally, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* becomes a collection of portraits and clichés, entertaining but lacking in substance. It is significant that as her mother, Vivian Baxter, and her brother, Bailey Johnson, had been at the emotional core of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, so in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* they are the first characters to be substantially developed. These familial connections are not accidental; they again reveal Angelou's clear intention to link the first book with the last, to have *Song* circle back to *Caged Bird*, to have the end become the beginning. This is not a new literary technique. Many Native American folk tales

and many contemporary Native American novels are “cyclical in nature, moving

the participant not from the beginning to the end but from the beginning back to

the beginning” (Lupton 2004, 22). Irish writer James Joyce ended his famous novel

*Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) with a sentence fragment that compels the reader to return to the beginning to finish its meaning. Angelou achieves her own brand of

circularity—partly through structural repetitions and partly through widening or

altering the relationships among already familiar characters.

One will recall that in *Caged Bird* Vivian Baxter and her husband had abandoned responsibility for their daughter and son, sending them to Arkansas to

live with their paternal grandmother. Maya's feelings for her mother are mixed;

it was Vivian's boyfriend who raped Maya, but it was also Vivian who cared for

Guy during his mother's many absences. Angelou's ambivalence toward her

mother continues in *Song*. They have strong political differences. Vivian, who considers Malcolm X to be a “rabble-rouser” (14), urges her daughter to work for

Martin Luther King Jr. Instead Bailey, sensing her alarm at their mother’s attitude, signals Maya to keep quiet. She writes: “Although less than two years

older than I and barely five feet four, my brother had been my counselor and protector for as long as I could remember” (14). Bailey takes her to Hawaii, where she stays in an aunt’s house and gets a job singing in a nightclub. Her mother and her brother frequently enter and leave the story, important persons in her life but,

after the first few chapters, not the major players.

Nor does Maya's son, now nineteen years old, continue to be the center of his

mother's attention. Left alone in Accra to finish his undergraduate degree at the

University of Ghana, he remains a source for guilt: "Leaving Guy in Africa had

become a hair shirt that I could not dislodge. I worried that his newly found and

desperate hold on his mannishness might cause him to say or do something to irritate the Ghanaian authorities" (48). Distant from her son both emotionally and geographically, Angelou by necessity minimalizes Guy's role as a character.

When Guy returns to California, he experiences another near-fatal car

accident. Similar to the situation in Ghana, he had been sitting in a parked car

when he was hit by a runaway truck. Bailey comes from San Francisco to Los Angeles to inform Maya that Guy is in the hospital, in serious condition. Angelou

philosophizes: "Surprise, whether good or bad, can have a profound effect on the

body. Some people faint, some cry aloud. Bailey caught me as my knees buckled.

He helped me back in the room to a chair” (118). Although in the two preceding

autobiographies the narrator had eloquently described her reactions to Guy’s car

accident, in *Song* she relies on abstractions to convey her feelings of surprise, responsibility, and guilt. In a particularly wooden passage she writes: “When something goes wrong with offspring, inevitably the parent feels guilty. As if some stone that needed turning had been left unturned. In the case of a physical

handicap, the mother feels that when her body was building the infant, it shirked



its responsibility somewhere” (119–20). By disguising her feelings about her son’s physical condition and by expressing herself in abstractions and clichés, she allows the reader to question the truth about the second car accident—or at least

to wonder if repetition is an appropriate narrative device in this instance.

After Guy finally recovers, Angelou observes him “sitting up like a golden prince and being served like a king in my mother’s house” (121). This

romanticized glimpse of Guy recapitulates the conclusion of *Traveling Shoes*, when she had envisioned her son as a young lord of Africa. Assured that Guy will continue to be treated royally

by Vivian Baxter, Angelou decides to leave San Francisco for the more challenging opportunities of New York City, although

mother and son are to meet once again in Manhattan, where they exchange angry words over Maya's rudeness to a white female guest (183–84).

For at least half of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* the narrator shifts her focus to

characters she encounters while living in New York, the two most important being her friend Dolly McPherson (1929–2011) and an unidentified lover known

only as the “African.” We learn from Dr. McPherson's obituary that before joining the English Department at Wake Forest University

she had been a senior

administrator at the Institute of International Education, in charge of programs for Asia and Africa. The African falsely describes her to Maya as “a very powerful old woman. She is an official at the Institute of International Education”

( *Song*, 101). He is dissembling for sexual advantages. In 1968 Dolly McPherson was neither “old” nor “powerful.” She was a thirty-nine year old administrator for the IIE, a not-for-profit service and educational organization founded in 1919.

Dolly’s two major functions as a character in *Song* are, first, to help expose the deceitful intentions of a shared Ghanaian lover, and second, to emphasize the theme of female bonding.

Critics have tried to identify Angelou's elusive lover. Some have guessed him

to be Gus Make, the husband so prominent in *The Heart of a Woman*. However, she divorced Make in the same volume, which makes this identification seem unlikely. He could also have been Mr. Sheikhali, a handsome Muslim

businessman who took Maya dancing and then to his apartment. Sheikhali

bought her a refrigerator, which she refused. She also refused his marriage proposal because he already had another wife and eight children ( *Traveling Shoes*, 94). Critic Wanda Coleman regrets that the "intriguing" African in *Song* is

“undeveloped” ( *Salon* 2002, 3). My own guess is that the unnamed African is not

“undeveloped” but deliberately disguised in order to avoid some rather nasty political repercussions from Ghana, Angelou’s adopted African nation.

In an essay published in *The Middle-Atlantic Writers Association Review* I speculated that the African lover was Nana Nketsia IV, the tribal chief or king of the Ahanta people and the first African vice chancellor of the University of Ghana (Lupton 2003, 1–6). In *Traveling Shoes* Angelou is chauffeured, at “the Nana’s” request, to his *Ahenenfie* or dwelling, where she meets his children and is introduced to the poet Kwesi Brew, Nana Nketsia’s constant companion. (In *Song* the African announces his intention to visit Kwesi and Molly Brew in Mexico City, 108–09). *All God’s Children*

*Need Traveling Shoes* makes it clear that Maya's reactions to Nana Nketsia are mixed. He is strong, dark, and attractive, but he is also self-righteous and boisterous, characteristics that she

ascribes to her African lover in the sixth autobiography. They would quarrel frequently. When Angelou is at the airport, "the Nana" arrives ceremoniously in

his official automobile to see her off. They appear to have been lovers.

In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* there are a number of clues that further establish his identity. She recalls that she and the unnamed African had tried unsuccessfully to establish a lasting relationship in Ghana. "He was astonishingly handsome, and his upbringing as a young royal gave him an assurance that I had

found irresistible” (94). She claims that they weren’t married but ‘had done a little homemade ritual in the presence of a few friends” (Song, 103). Although he had

been brought up as a “royal” (or future chief), she, an independent American woman, refused to worship him as he had wanted. On his way to teach at one of

America’s “important universities,” the “African” unexpectedly telephones

Angelou from Ghana and asks her to throw a party for him and his diplomats.

She reacts with sarcasm to his booming voice (159). Yet when he appears at her

door, she is overcome: “He was as beautiful as ever and as black as ever. His skin shone as if it had been polished, and his teeth were as white as long-grained rice”

(163).

The most spirited episode in *Song* is an extended prank that originates in the New York City apartment of Rosa Guy, where Maya Angelou and Dolly

McPherson meet for the first time. They eventually discover that “the African,”

who had been having an affair with both women at the same time, had described



each of them as elderly and unattractive. They are stunned to realize that they

had “been had by the same man, in more ways than one” (128). Deciding that they would teach him a lesson, the two women arrange a confrontation.

The revenge plot, which reads more like the script for a stage play than a segment from an autobiography, culminates in Maya’s apartment. Accompanied

by an entourage of people dressed in rich robes and speaking different languages,

“the African” takes center stage in the conversation. Angelou interrupts, asking

her guest to compare the fidelity of the African male to the European male. At a

pre-arranged time Dolly arrives on the scene and touches his shoulder. Exposed

and personally humiliated, he gets ready to leave, but not before he privately warns Maya that she is “in danger,” that she has ‘become someone else in New

York. Someone I don’t know” (168).

I sent two copies of my published essay to Dolly A. McPherson, whom I had

met on several occasions and whose book on Angelou, *Order Out of Chaos*, I had reviewed favorably. Dolly had befriended me in the past by helping to arrange

my interview with Angelou and by sending me an invaluable video of the 1963

Inaugural reading. I asked her what she thought of my speculations, but I never

received an answer. Since the two principals are now deceased, it is unlikely that the truth of “the African’s” identity will ever be known.

Another central character is Rosa Guy (1922–2012), who was born in Trinidad

but who came with her family to New York when she was a child.  
A successful

novelist, playwright, and author of children's books, she and Angelou had developed a close friendship through their commitment to the Harlem Writers Guild. Rosa Guy figures prominently in *Song*. She offers to share her apartment with Maya in New York; she makes it possible for Maya and Dolly McPherson to

meet; she is with Maya in California when Bailey informs her of her son's car accident; she appears at the conclusion of the final autobiography, when she, Dolly, and Maya laugh, drink, and dine with Vivian Baxter in Stockton,

California. Thinking affectionately about these four black women—Rosa, Dolly, Maya, and her mother—leads the author to contemplate on the nature of female

bonding. She cites Vivian Baxter’s observation that “black women are so special.

Few men of any color and even fewer white women can deal with how fabulous

we are” (208). Angelou then writes the first line of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

She also explores her friendships with men: her brother; her mystery lover; her

patron; her political allies; her fellow writers. But the most beloved and lovable male character in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* is James (Jimmy) Baldwin (1924–

1987). Angelou knew him in the 1960s after her return to Ghana. Baldwin was a

recognized civil rights activist and the author of a controversial novel about homosexuality, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). In a particularly touching scene he takes Maya to meet his mother, Berdis Baldwin, a “little lady with an extremely soft

voice” (145). Maya and Jimmy generally agree on political and literary matters,

but Maya objects to the way in which Black Nationalist leader Eldridge Cleaver

(1935–1998) had attacked Baldwin’s homosexuality in the 1968 prison memoir, *Soul on Ice*. Maya urges her friend to refuse to go to California to support Cleaver’s work for the Black Panthers, a black political organization that Cleaver had helped to organize. Although Angelou approved of the Panthers, who were

well respected in the black community, she thought that Cleaver was “an opportunist and a batterer” (148). While he never participates in the action of *Song*, Eldridge Cleaver seems to lurk in the background, creating division between Jimmy and Maya.

Still deeply involved in their argument about the Panthers, Baldwin takes Maya to a sleazy bar in Manhattan. When he

disappears to make a phone call,

Maya is approached by a huge guy named Buck, who insinuates that her

companion is “one of those.” Jimmy returns, calling the intruder a “son of a bitch”

(152). Buck backs away. That argument settled, they return to the question of Eldridge Cleaver. Baldwin tells Maya to “grow up,” for, regardless of her opinion, he is going to California. Like the confrontation scene among Angelou, Dolly, and “the African,” this episode involving Maya, Jimmy, and Buck seems staged,

an interlude from a drama rather than a slice from an autobiography. In each instance the action takes place in crowded



quarters under mounting tension.

Clearly, Angelou is using her emerging skills as a dramatist in creating these and other effective moments in *Song*.

Maya Angelou and James Baldwin continued to remain close friends. She

credits Baldwin with having been partly responsible for getting her in touch with

Robert Loomis, her future editor at Random House ( *Song*, 206). Baldwin did a blurb when *Caged Bird* was published.

Setting

Setting indicates those locations where specific events take place. *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* ended in Ghana amid great fanfare at the Accra airport in 1964, as Angelou got ready to depart for America. The opening scene of

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* takes place on a Pan Am airplane originating in Johannesburg, South Africa, which had stopped in Accra to pick up passengers traveling to New York City. Angelou, usually so vivid in describing her settings,

has only one basic observation to make: the passengers are white. Wearing

“traditional West African dress,” she confesses to a “presentiment of unease” (1).

As she moves to her seat at the back of the plane, she realizes that her discomfort stems from being “among more white people than I had seen in four years” (1).

Of course, she admits to herself, she had worked with many white members of

the faculty at the University of Ghana. “So my upset did not come from seeing

the white complexion, but rather, from seeing so much of it at one time” (2).

For the first eight pages Angelou sits in the rear of the packed plane, thinking

about her errant son, so “rambunctious” that only God seemed able to control him; thinking about the Ghanaian expatriates; recalling her obstinate African lover; remembering President Kwame Nkrumah; thinking about her “latest

husband” and other members of the Pan-African Congress—  
Oliver Tambo,

Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela.

Anticipating her return to an America caught in racial tension, she silently reaffirms her commitment to Malcolm X, going so far as to reprint in its entirety

a letter he had once written to her ( *Song*, 4–5). This now-famous letter and several copies are available in a folder at the Maya

Angelou Archives, the New

York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The two-

page letter shows that although Angelou had quoted it accurately, she had changed the original date of composition (January 15, 1965) so that she could cite it more dramatically on the 1964 plane ride from Accra to New York City.

The reader sits in the cramped and uncomfortable space with her. Perhaps the

reader is white. Perhaps the reader feels a “distaste, if not downright disgust” (2) for the blacks he or she had seen at the airport. Perhaps not. Perhaps Angelou is

mistaken in her judgment. But like the author, the reader is feeling the constraint

of the setting and wishes that the ride were over.

Other settings, more open and generous, reveal the narrator engaged in

conversation rather than in addressing an imagined reader. After Malcolm X is

assassinated, Bailey takes Maya to Jack's Tavern, a bar that Vivian also frequented. Brother and sister are "inside," mourning the fallen leader but staying away from the action. In the bar scene with James Baldwin one can almost smell

the smoke and the stench of urine in the background as they argue over expansive issues such as political allegiance and homosexual identity. In her small New York apartment, so packed with dignitaries, one senses her African lover's confinement, his feeling of being trapped. Dolly's and Maya's exposure of

their two-timing lover is dramatically heightened because the space is so limited.

This huge and powerful male is literally encircled so that he cannot move. The

cramped quarters intensify the dramatic underpinnings of the action.

**Thematic Issues**

Angelou introduces the theme of *home* in the opening citation of the nineteenth-century spiritual. Like Noah, she had been struggling for a place to land, a place called “home” which she had hoped to find in Ghana. With Guy no

longer needing her and with her Ghanaian relationships strained, she decides to

return home to America to work for Malcolm X. But home is a nebulous

destination for the child who hadn’t come to stay. As she wrote so passionately

in *Letter to My Daughter* (2008): “I believe that one can never leave home. I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams,



the fears and dragons of home

under one's skin, at the extreme corners of one's eyes and possibly in the gristle of the earlobe" (6).

A second theme, *rising*, dominates the final pages of *Song*. The author sits at her mother's kitchen table, pen and yellow legal pad in hand, jotting down phrases for the book she plans to write. "I thought if I wrote a book, I would have to examine the quality in the human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (210). The allusion to *Hamlet* puts her in good company; Shakespeare, one of her favorite writers when she was a child, foretells

Angelou's reconstruction of her youngest self. The verb *rise*, which appears four times in the concluding paragraphs, indicates

that, like Noah, she and her people

are “headed for higher ground.” They will “(r)ise and be prepared to move on and

ever on” (210). The repetition of the word *rise* reiterates the title and the theme of one of her most popular poems, “And Still I Rise” (1978), published more than two

decades before *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*.

There is yet another strong undercurrent in the final autobiography, one that

has been virtually ignored by reviewers: the theme of *sexuality*. From her first to her final autobiography, Angelou had been open

about her sexual relationships.

One will recall the rape and the pregnancy in *Caged Bird*, and her hesitations in the second volume when she revealed to her family that she had been a prostitute. She introduces the sexual motif in the early pages of *Song* when she compares her lover to a hurricane: “He was a powerful West African who had swept into my life with the urgency of a Southern hurricane” (6). She feels

“uprooted” in the presence of “the African,” who “blew down all of my firmly

held beliefs about decorum” ( *Song*, 6). A similar metaphor of being swept off her feet recurs in her description of Jimmy Baldwin, who was “a whirlwind who stirred everything and

everybody. He lived at a dizzying pace and I loved spinning with him” (145).

Other sexual moments spin, percolate, and spill over. After Maya and Dolly regret their attempt to get even with their cheating lover, Angelou describes their misgivings in two sexually charged passages. Noticing the African’s

embarrassment, she confesses: “I had meant to prick him, not pierce him.”

Switching verbs, she continues: “Well, sister, we couldn’t swallow the big cat easily. He seems to have stuck in our throats” (171).

*Prick, pierce, swallow, throats*: these words have sexual innuendos.

In a more philosophical section of *Song* Angelou presents a serious discussion of sexuality (157–60), developing her concept of “frictional electricity.” She explains “frictional electricity” as a source of sexual energy that runs between people, sending “luscious thoughts” from one body to another by way of the hands, the mouth, and the eyes. Although she does not identify her source for this concept, she is possibly referring to the theories of Wilhelm Reich, the Austrian psychoanalyst (1897–1957) who had argued that sexual experience was

a “bioelectric” phenomenon, a type of energy that “moved through and outside

the organism” (Bakhtunin, “The Art of Making Love,” January 15, 2014. Web.

February 5, 2015). Angelou claims that her quotient of “frictional electricity” is low. The evidence in *Song* suggests otherwise.

Near the end of *Song*, on her way to Harlem after Martin Luther King’s assassination, she “turned [her] thoughts over as one turns pages in a book.”

Suddenly, her writer-thoughts are interrupted by a rather sexual moment, when

she hears an eruption of noise, “followed by thuds like the sound of buffaloes running into each other at rutting time” (188–89). Her comparison of African American protesters to rutting beasts baffles the mind. Buffalo bulls usually “rut”

or “herd” or attack another bull when they are in pursuit of a female (“Yellowstone National Park: Bison in August,” Web. February, 3, 2015). Yet there

is no sexual competition implied in this simile; the raucous rutting seems to exist only in the ears of the narrator.

Putting Angelou’s life in perspective, she wrote *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* at the age of seventy-four to describe a woman who had just celebrated her fortieth

birthday and was experiencing a new burst of sexual freedom. She had said farewell to her son, who was no longer her major responsibility. She had left Ghana and its restrictions on women to reestablish her roots in America, where

she was able to immerse herself in a new freedom of self-expression. She never

mentions female orgasm or contraception or the menopause, topics being widely

explored during the late 1960s, during what has been called the Sexual

Revolution. Yet *Song* makes it clear that Angelou and her good friend Dolly McPherson enjoyed sex, joked about their shared African lover, and were able, as

liberated women, to challenge his arrogance and his duplicity.



Possibly Maya Angelou had read several of the influential articles and books

being published in the 1960s by Masters and Johnson, Anne Koedt, Mary Jane Sherfey, and other theorists. However, rarely did chroniclers of the so-called Sexual Revolution address the particular needs of the black female. Betty Friedan, for example, virtually ignored black women in her book, *The Feminine Mystique*

(1963), directing her arguments toward the bored white housewives of the American middle and upper classes (see Ashley Fetters, “4 Big Problems with

‘The Feminine Mystique,’” 2013. Web. February 13, 2015). In an article published

in the black-oriented magazine *Ebony* in August 1966, Kermit Mehlinger observed that the civil rights chant, “Freedom Now,” also signaled “more freedom

for the Negro woman to enjoy and understand the sexual aspects of her being”

(rpt. Escoffier 2003, 45). It seems that several factors contributed to Angelou’s confident sexuality: first, the emotional and financial support she received from

her family when she was pregnant teenager; second, her open relationships with

men of different classes and ethnicities; third, her enormous range of independent work and life experiences in America, Europe, and

Africa; and finally, her keen

sense of self, as articulated in the six autobiographies.

### Style and Literary Devices

Of the many stylistic techniques that recur in *Song*, the dynamic portrait or vignette has received the most positive response from the critics. According to Margaret Busby, *Song* is “a series of beautifully crafted vignettes” (2002, 2).

Angelou had used the technique of portraiture in all of the volumes, from the nurturing Mrs. Flowers of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to the endearing houseboy, Kojo, in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. In the sixth autobiography the technique of portraiture occasionally dominates the action, three

major exceptions being the depictions of Dolly McPherson, of their African

lover, and of James Baldwin.

A few of Angelou's vignettes in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* are mini-studies of famous African Americans, characters who appear offstage but who give the illusion of being fully realized participants in the action. Thus the reader meets Malcolm X, but mainly in a phone call and in a fully quoted letter. The reader

briefly encounters Martin Luther King Jr. but only for a fleeting instant following a speech he had given in New York City. The reader becomes acquainted with the Black Panthers, but only in Maya's conversations with James Baldwin.

Angelou's genuine gifts for characterization and for heightened dramatic

effects are at times overshadowed by her tendency to philosophize. It must be remembered that *Song* was written in 2002, a number of years after the publication of her highly successful books of musings, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993) and *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997). Both of these books combine autobiographical recollections and moral observations, a mixture

that works well enough in a collection of essays but that does not provide the more direct emotional contact of customary autobiographical form.

The narrative is frequently interrupted by her ruminations on motherhood; by

her lengthy discourse on “curiosity” (69–70); and by the speculations on

“frictional electricity.” Nowhere is this problem more evident than in the concluding chapter of *Song*, where almost every sentence is prefaced by the clause “I thought about.” She thinks about black women, about the history of

“human beings,” about “naturally bellicose creatures,” about “the singing of angels,” about the “music of the spheres,” and finally about writing a book. This

almost-endless series of abstractions closely resembles the airplane-thoughts with which *S ong* begins.

Surpassing her inclination toward moralizing is Angelou's questionable use of

metaphor, a literary technique that has brought her praise as well as severe criticism. Shortly after the publication of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, black poet Wanda Coleman (1946–2013) wrote a book review for the *Los Angeles Times*, accusing Angelou of “dead metaphors,” “sweeping generalities,” “empty phrases,”

and “clumsy similes.” The review was vitriolic, with no kind words for the famous autobiographer. Coleman, winner of a 1984 Guggenheim Fellowship for

Poetry, claimed that “extravagant statements come without explication, and schmooze substitutes for action”; retold disasters—the car accidents, the rape—are

“milked for residual drama” (rpt. *Salon*, 3, October 21, 2002).

The review was so controversial that Eso Won, a black-operated bookstore in

Los Angeles, canceled Coleman from its lineup of speakers. Although many Angelou fans were infuriated by Coleman’s attack, other found her criticism to

be justified. Thulani Davis of the *Village Voice*, for example, defended Coleman’s position, regretting that there was no suitable



outlet for black reviewers to express negative responses to other black writers (September 4–10, 2002, 1–6).

Coleman sheepishly admitted that “to this date I have received more attention for

my review of Maya Angelou’s *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* than anything else I have ever written” (“Black on Black,” 2002, 12).

### Alternative Reading: Reader-Response Criticism

Reader-response critics may have different approaches to literature (feminist, psychological, deconstructive), but they share the conviction that a literary text has no definitive meaning in itself and that the presence of a reader is a necessary aspect of any literary evaluation (Peter J. Rabinowitz, in *The Johns Hopkins*

*Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 1994, 606–9). Reader-response criticism, which attained the height of its popularity in the 1970s and the 1980s, presumes

that a literary text cannot exist as a separate entity. This form of inquiry marks the disappearance of “the expert,” the one who promises the only possible interpretation. Each person makes his or her own judgments based on his or her

experience as the “reader.” According to Jane Tompkins, “Reader-response critics

argue against locating meaning in the text, against seeing the text as a fixed object, and in favor of a criticism that recognizes the reader’s role in making meaning” (1980, 225).

Stanley Fish (1938–), the author of *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), helped to establish reader-response as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Other practitioners who incorporated students into their theoretical assumptions

include David Bleich (“Motives and Truth in Classroom Communication,” 1975)

and John Clifford (“Transactional Teaching and the Literary Experience,” 1979).

In practicing and illustrating their theories, reader-response critics have relied heavily on a student audience. While students have traditionally been limited to

the classroom in expressing their responses to a designated piece of literature, an increasing number are trying to change this teacher-student dynamic by self-publishing their opinions on the Internet, in the form of blogs or essays or chats or mini-books.

The Internet can also be a refuge for retired professors who no longer have classrooms but who believe in the democratic assumptions of reader-oriented criticism. By examining readers' comments from three different websites

accessed

in

January

2015

([amazon.com](http://amazon.com),

[goodreads.com](http://goodreads.com),

and

[barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com)), it is possible to measure readers' responses to *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, with no professor present to react in disfavor on matters of spelling, grammar, or other lapses. The readers who comment on their reading

experience are all volunteers, free agents who operate outside of the classroom and beyond the authority of judgmental academic communities. All readers—

ordinary, informed, or otherwise—have at their disposal brief customer reviews,

overall ratings, a statistical overview, and, in the case of Good Reads, occasional photographs of the reviewers.

The fifty-one readers who wrote reviews for [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) gave *Song* 4.3 out of 5 stars. Only two of the reviews were negative. The ones voted “most helpful”

applauded Maya’s “strength to rise again” or admired *Song* as the “continuation of a rich and full life.” One reviewer, responding negatively, found the sixth autobiography to be “disappointingly thin.” The Amazon site allows the reader to

closely examine all fifty-one reviews and to write a customer review, if so desired.

Twenty readers responded to *Song* on the Barnes and Noble site, awarding it a rating of 4.5 out of 5—a slightly higher percentage than Amazon readers but based on a fewer number of responders. Three gave the book 3 stars or below, while fourteen loved it. Reviewers had the options of creating a pen name or of submitting their evaluations anonymously. Opinions were mainly positive:

*“excellent,” “great,” “incredible,” “outstanding.”* Because there was no classroom, there was no need to receive a grade, as would the reader who wrote in Angelou’s favor: “People who criticise Maya

for her endeavor obviously are the reason why the quality of humans continues to decline.”

The “Community Reviews” section of Good Reads boasted a total of 1,041

ratings, with eighty-four full reviews. The overall approval for the sixth autobiography earned the lowest percentage of the three sites: 4. 13 out of 5.

Evaluations such as “*beautiful*,” “*a page-turner*,” “*easy reading*,” and “*refreshing in its beauty*” were typical. Natalie thought that *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* would be “more meaningful and enjoyable for people if they’ve read all of her previous autobiographies in the series.” Another reviewer particularly



appreciated the “social commentary.” Still another confused Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with Harper Lee’s 1960 novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is interesting that at least three readers preferred the audio version of *Song* to the written version.

These readers appear to share similar assumptions. They prefer to purchase their books online rather than in college bookstores. Almost all of them have read

at least one of Angelou’s earlier autobiographies. Almost all of them are drawn to literature that is either “black” or “feminist” or both. Almost all of them seem to derive pleasure from the act of reading. It would be challenging to learn their opinions on the identity of “the African,” or to ask them if they thought the book was sexual in nature, or to seek their reactions to the first eight or

to the last three pages. But such questions would take a classroom or, if provided, perhaps a

chat room.

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for two years; in terms of reader-response, it would surely merit a very high rating. In 2002 Angelou won a spectacular third Grammy, in the nonfiction category, for her recording of the sixth autobiography. An investigation of the “closed” fan mail at the Schomburg Center would also shed further light on the reader-response approach. What seems pertinent is that reviewers and other judges were

possibly more impressed by Angelou’s delivery than they were by the text which

she had written. Her extraordinary voice and her dramatic rendition turned many of her readers into *listeners*. For in her recording of the final autobiography she evoked memories of her 1963 Grammy winner, “On the Pulse of Morning,”

and allowed us to experience once again the swelling cadences of her dramatic

reading.

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[In Memoriam](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

During our 1997 interview I remarked that there was already a significant body

of scholarship about Angelou's work available in school libraries. I asked her:

“Could you give me any special message to students as they read the

autobiographies and the criticism?” She replied, “Somebody needs to tell young

people, listen, I did this and I did that. You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated” (“Icon” 1997).

Death did finally defeat Dr. Maya Angelou, who died at her home in Winston-

Salem, North Carolina, on the morning of May 24, 2014. She was eighty-six years

old. On June 7, Wake Forest University held a funeral in her memory entitled “A

Celebration of Rising ‘Joy’”! The entire ceremony was televised by Wake Forest

University and is still available on the Internet, as is the funeral program (Wake Forest University Funeral.

<http://new.livestream.com/wfu/angelou>. Web. May 5, 2015).

The elaborate preparations for the funeral were overshadowed by threats from

the Westboro Baptist Church, a notorious right-wing organization. Wake Forest

University wisely closed its campus to the public on June 7, permitting entry only to the designated guests and to selected media. According to *Old Gold & Black*, Wake Forest's student newspaper, The Secret Service and other agencies assisted

the university in its efforts to prevent disruptions from unwanted protesters

(<http://oldgoldandblack.com/?p=40652>).

Speaking at the service were former president William Clinton; First Lady Michelle Obama; Angelou's close friend Oprah Winfrey; her son Guy Johnson; her grandson, Colin; actress Cicely Tyson; singer Lee Ann Womack; Ambassador

Andrew Young; and other members of the family and of the artistic and political

community. A string quartet composed of members of The Cincinnati Symphony

Orchestra played the prelude. Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy," the poem which had inspired *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, appeared at the beginning of the program and was followed by a photograph of Dr. Angelou along with one of her famous sayings: "I've learned

that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people

will never forget how you made them feel.”

The highlight of the homecoming was First Lady Michelle Obama’s passionate

speech about Maya Angelou’s influence on her life, about how her words were

“so powerful that they carried a little girl from the South Side of Chicago all the way to the White House.” She had first met Angelou in 2008 at a rally. “At that



point she was in a wheelchair, hooked up to an oxygen tank to help her breathe.... And I was so completely awed and overwhelmed by her presence I could barely concentrate on what she was saying to me.”

Another major memorial service, this one at New York City’s Riverside

Church, was held several months later. Like the Wake Forest tribute, it was aired

simultaneously on video and is still available on several sites. As the Wake Forest memorial had featured Michelle Obama, so the service in New York City featured

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who had been a friend of the poet since the 1993 inauguration of her husband. The Riverside tribute was hosted by the Schomburg Center, by Random House, by Medgar Evers College, and by

Angelou's family. Speakers included authors Toni Morrison and Nikki Giovanni;

Maya's son, Guy Johnson; and statesperson Hillary Clinton. "God surely outdid

himself the day he molded Maya Angelou," Clinton said. "Being in a room with

her was like being in the room with the Mona Lisa" (cited by Yolanda Sangweni,

<http://www.essence.com/2014/09/12/watch-maya-angelous-memorial-riverside-church-live>. Web. May 12, 2015).

Immediately following Angelou's death, a rush of books—most of them

eighteen pages long, all of them self-published—were available on the Internet, with titles such as *Maya Angelou Biography* by Shelton Arena; *Still I Rise: The Story of Maya Angelou*, by Jeff Bigger; and *291 Maya Angelou Quotes*, compiled by Jeff Napier. There was also a *Maya Angelou Quiz Book* and a collection of *Inspirational Quotes*. This proliferation of short publications about Angelou were, like so many of the blogs written in her honor, timely testimonies from her fans.

Other testimonies included a superb memorial collection of photographs and short articles from the editors of *Essence* magazine (2014). In November 2014

Smooch Music, Inc., released a posthumous audio CD, *Caged Bird Songs*, consisting of thirteen of Angelou's lyrics, musical versions of poems such as

"Harlem Hopscotch," "The Thirteens," and "Sepia Fashion Show." The recording

ends with "Still I Rise," which the poet renders as a blues ballad. It is a stunning

memorial tape, one that harkens back to the island rhythms of *Miss Calypso*, the album that Angelou recorded in 1957 when she

was twenty-seven years old. In

the autobiographies Maya had underplayed her role as Miss Calypso, perhaps because she was embarrassed by the cover of the album, which showed her in a

red slit skirt and bare feet dancing over a glaring fire in what approximated a jungle setting (Rev-Ola label 1957, 2003, 2009, 2014).

In February 2014 Angelou was honored by the Academy of Arts and Sciences

in the “In Memoriam” segment of the 2014 Academy Awards for her

achievements in acting and directing. This honor was followed in 2014 when the

*College Language Association Journal*, an African American publication with a more than seventy-five-year history, produced a special issue celebrating

Angelou's contributions to arts and letters. The issue, guest-edited by Cheryl Wall of Rutgers University, covers a broad range of topics, including Elinor Traylor's discussion of the wonders of narrative; Robert Evans's pluralist close reading of *Caged Bird*; Lorraine Henry's article on music and healing in Angelou's narratives; Patricia Lespinasse's study on jazz influences on Angelou's

work; Terrence Tucker's investigation of Angelou's return to the South in her film *Down on the Delta*; Tosha Sampson-Choma's essay on Angelou's cookbooks; and my essay on Angelou's poetry.

A year after her death, talk show host Tavis Smiley published *My Journey with*

*Maya*, a memoir that attests to their friendship over the years. The two reportedly met in 1986, when he was twenty-one and Angelou was fifty-eight. Funded by columnist Julianne Malveaux, Tavis traveled to Ghana to help transport

Angelou's luggage. She told him stories about her grandmother, about Guy's accident, and about how blessings can sometimes emerge from tragedy (2015, 3,

31–32, with David Ritz). Over the years Angelou appeared on Smiley's talk show

on PBS. He is currently working on a play about his African journey, to be coproduced

with

Tony

award-winner

Kenny

Leon



[http://allhiphop.com/2015/04/02/tavis-smiley-is-working-on-a-maya-angelou-](http://allhiphop.com/2015/04/02/tavis-smiley-is-working-on-a-maya-angelou-play)

[play. Web. April 23, 2015\).](#)

In the first stanza of her poem “When Great Trees Fall,” published at the end of

her memorable volume *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), Angelou presented a romanticized vision of Africa, where lions and elephants sought safety amid the

thunder caused by falling trees. How much greater, then, is the sound of falling

souls? “When great souls die, *the air around us becomes* light, rare, sterile,” she wrote. Bereft of our loved ones, our minds and senses are diminished. Maya Angelou may perhaps be remembering the great souls of Malcolm X and of Martin Luther King Jr., who perished in 1965 and 1968, respectively. She may be

eulogizing her mother, Vivian Baxter, who died one year after this poem was published. I prefer to think, however, that Dr. Maya Angelou was also imagining

her own home-going, foreseeing the vast, empty space that she would leave behind.

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- [8. A Song Flung Up to Heaven \(2002\)](#)
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