

Death, Disillusionment and Despair in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

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*If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl,
being aware of her displacement is the rust on
the razor that threatens the throat.
It is an unnecessary insult. (Caged Bird 9)*

Death, A Major Theme

Death forms a major theme in Angelou's *Caged Bird*. Here, she conceives herself to be a cursed instrument of violent death. Death is viewed at various levels in the text. Angelou deals with a story of girl's growing up and surviving as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and early 1940s. This survival is a painful experience, for a young girl whose world is colored by disillusion and despair; aloneness, self-doubt and a diminished sense of self. Indeed Angelou underscores her diminished sense of self and ruthlessness of her early childhood years when she proclaims in the prologue: "What are you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay..." (*Caged*

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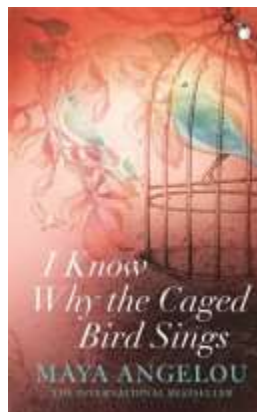
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Bird 7). In, “Initiation and Self Discovery” Dolly A. Mcpherson observes, “The words are painfully appropriate, for, the young Angelou, then Marguerite Johnson, is a shy, tensely self-conscious child who believes that her true beauty is obscured” (Order out of Chaos 34). As she struggles to remember her lines, she is conscious of her dual self, which is the constant subject of her fantasies. Beneath the ugly disguise—a lavender taffeta dress re-made from a white woman’s discard, broad feet and gap teeth—is the real Marguerite. Such fantasies are ephemeral and the time comes when the young girl must face the painful reality of her being.

An Anecdote

Angelou introduces *Caged Bird* with an anecdote. It is Easter Sunday at the colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Stamps. In celebration of the event, Momma had prepared a lavender taffeta dress for Angelou. Believing it to be the most beautiful dress she has ever seen, she attributes magical properties to it: when worn, the dress will transform Angelou into the lovely, blond and blue eyed sweet little white girl, she actually believes herself to be. But on Easter morning the dress reveals its depressing actuality: It is “a plain, ugly cut-down from a woman’s once-was-purple thrown away” (*Caged Bird* 8). Unlike Christ, whose resurrection from death the church is celebrating, Angelou cannot be reborn into another life.

White Fantasy



Overcome with the impossibility of her White fantasy, she escapes the church “peeing and crying” (*Caged Bird* 9) her way home. Angelou lives in a hostile world that defines beauty in terms of Whiteness and rejects her simply because she is a Black girl. At first Angelou wishes that she could become White, because the White people were considered as beautiful in the world, since growing up Black in White America is dangerous, later she sheds her self-loathing and embraces a strong racial identity. Angelou must, indeed, lose control of her body and feelings. “It would probably run right back to my head,” (*Caged Bird* 9) she believes, “and my poor head would burst like a dropped water melon, and all the brains and spit and tongue and eyes would roll over the place” (*Caged Bird* 9). By letting go of her bladder – Angelou will not

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die from a busted head. The scene recreates graphically the dynamics of how many young Black girls' disillusionment and imprisonment in American society thereby making her own autobiography a representative of her society.

Although she acknowledges the unnecessary insult of her White fantasy, Angelou nevertheless puts the rust on the razor by her awareness of its insidious presence. Immediately striking in the anecdote is Angelou's fantastic belief that "I was really White," (*Caged Bird* 8) that "a cruel fairy step mother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty" (*Caged Bird* 8) had tricked Angelou of her Caucasian birthright.

The fairy tale imagery employed to depict her creation is characteristic of the imaginative and impressionable girl, but the meaning of her tale cannot be overlooked. For, according to her schema, Angelou's identity hinges on the whims of this fairy step mother. If benevolent, she will transform Angelou back into a pretty White girl; if she remains cruel, her spell over Angelou will rest unbroken. When her dress does not produce the longed for results, Angelou is forced to contend with her Blackness. But if she acknowledges this Blackness, Angelou must also acknowledge the existence of an arbitrary and malevolent force beyond her control which dictates her personal and racial identity. As if mourning the death of the lovely White body beyond her possession, Angelou describes her dress as sounding, "like crepe paper on the back of hearses" (*Caged Bird* 7).

A Symbolic Hearse

In "Death as Metaphor of Self in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" Lilliane K. Arensberg observes, "Angelou's body indeed becomes a symbolic hearse, containing not only her dead dream, but also a life whose very existence is threatened by the whims of a murderous white culture" (107). Thus death image frequents throughout the early periods of her life.

Angelou and Bailey

In *Caged Bird* the reader meets two children, aged three and four, who are wearing wrist tags that identify them as Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, Jr. A note addressed 'To Whom it may Concern' states that they are travelling alone from Long beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas, to the care of Mrs. Annie Henderson. Angelou explains that he and her brother Bailey were shipped to the home of their paternal grandmother when their parents decided to end their calamitous marriage. Early on, when the young Angelou fantasizes that she is White, blond and beautiful; she does so because, in reality she sees herself as a child whom no one could possibly love certainly not her mother or father who has so totally rejected her. Angelou and Bailey reach their destination safely and gradually adjust to their new life in Stamps becoming integral parts of Grandmother's store religion, of Uncle Willie's life, and of the community itself, a community that closes around the children "as a real mother embraces a stranger's child.

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Warmly but not too familiarly” (*Caged Bird* 10). Angelou was all alone during her early life in Stamps. Here, Angelou shows the deep bonding inherent within the African American social set up that protects its own people from the hostile environment.

Image of the Death Mother

Angelou’s mother’s character deepens her sorrow in her life. Angelou’s image of her dead mother is deeply comforting to the child. The protecting and nurturing maternal love Angelou yearns for is symbolically created through her own tears they, “would fall down my cheeks like warm milk” (*Caged Bird* 430). Consider then, the shock, the affront to her tottering self image as well as to the image of her mother, when Angelou receives her mother’s first Christmas presents. Not only is her mother alive, but Angelou herself and her brother had been as good as dead during those early years of separation. Adding insult to injury are the “awful parents” sending them presents – “a tea set, four cups and saucers and tiny spoons- and a doll with blue eyes and rosy cheeks and yellow hair painted on her head” (*Caged Bird* 44).

Exotic and Alien Life of Mother

Symbols of a White world beyond Angelou’s reach or everyday experience, these toys not only evidence her mother’s exotic and alien life, but also intimate questions of guilt and banishment no five-year-old can answer. The doll, becomes especially, intolerable and Angelou and Bailey, “tore the stuffing out of the doll the day after Christmas” (*Caged Bird* 45).

Abandonment by a dead mother is forgivable, but abandonment by a living one evokes rage, which is so threatening that it must undergo massive repression. Thus, Angelou becomes passive, inhibiting her deep anger and hostility. The fear of abandonment even when living with her mother in St Louis never abates.

Daily Fear of Murder – Celebration of Death

In “Death as Metaphor of Self in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” Lilliane K. Arensberg observes, “The daily fear of murder at the hands of Whites leads the Southern Black community into the haven of religion and the belief of a blessed reward in the far off bye and bye” (95).

Thus, Southern Black religion celebrates death, since life itself is too precarious to pin one’s hopes on. Even at the revival meeting attended by members from a variety of Southern churches, death continually asserts its presence: the cardboard fans flourished by the worshippers advertise Texarkana’s largest Negro funeral parlor. “People whose history and future were threatened each day by extinction,” comments Angelou, “Considered that it was only by divine intervention that they were able to live at all” (*Caged Bird* 94). Balancing this image of a White world threatening her own and her people’s lives, is Angelou’s revenge fantasy of murdering the

offending Whites. When Dentist Lincoln refuses to treat her toothache, Angelou creates an elaborate reverie wherein a Herculean Momma has the cowering dentist pleading for this life: “Yes, ma’am. Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson” (*Caged Bird* 148). For and away the most dramatic instance of this revenge theme occurs the day of Angelou’s graduation from Lafayette County Training School. Unable to stand the invited White Speaker’s “dead words” which systematically destroy the dreams and aspirations of the Black children and their elders. Angelou wills them all dead.

Violence within the Family

Operating on a more personal level is the violence Angelou witnesses within the members of her own family. Angelou introduces her Uncle Willie by describing his method of pushing her and Bailey into the Store’s red heater if they neglect their lessons. Momma, too, does not spare the rod when she believes her grandchildren remiss in hygiene, schooling, manners or piety. But this corporal punishment-executed more in love than in rage- is small matter, indeed, when compared to the fundamental brutality of Angelou’s maternal relations in St. Louis. Her maternal grandfather and uncles revel in their own “meanness”: “They beat up Whites and Blacks with the same abandon” (*Caged Bird* 55). Even her mother is not immune from her family’s violent streak. Once, in retaliation for being cursed, Vivian Baxter, with the aid of her brothers, “Crashed the man’s head with a policemen’s billy enough to leave him just this side of death” (*Caged Bird* 55). Later Vivian Baxter, again in response to an insult, shoots the partner of her gambling casino.

Rape under the Threat of Death

As the climax of this familial violence, Mr. Freeman’s rape is performed under the threat of death: “If you scream, I’m gonna kill Bailey” (*Caged Bird* 63). But her family’s response to Angelou’s subsequent withdrawal into silent passivity is itself another form of violence: “For a while I was punished for being so uppity that I wouldn’t speak; and then came the thrashings, given by any relative who felt himself offended” (*Caged Bird* 70). The rape itself is the most flagrant example of her maternal family’s characteristic combination of aggression and neglect. Not only is Mr. Freeman her mother’s lover, but mother and children all live under his roof. Ruthless in her quest for material comfort, Vivian Baxter is not above taking full advantage of Freeman’s obvious adoration. Already at eight a sagacious observer, Angelou responds with mixed emotions to her mother’s relationship with Freeman.

Pitiable Flight of Young Angelou

Angelou’s sympathy for Freeman has another cause: She feels as neglected by Vivian Baxter as he does. And while Freeman’s motives in the earlier masturbatory episodes and even the rape itself probably stem as much from revenge against the mother as easy access to the

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daughter, Angelou's own need for attention and physical closeness cannot be overlooked. Angelou writes, "Then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last" (*Caged Bird* 60). These words underline the pitiable plight of young Angelou who is unable to distinguish lust from paternal love, Angelou projects into Freeman this physical warmth missing from all her relationships with adults. "I began to feel lonely for Mr. Freeman and the encasement of his big arms," Angelou recalls, "Before, my world had been Bailey, food, Momma, the Store, reading books and Uncle Willie. Now, for the first time, it included physical contact" (*Caged Bird* 61).

In "Learning to Live: When the Bird Breaks from the Cage," Opal Moore observes, "Angelou also reveals the manner by which an adult manipulates a child's desire for love as thin camouflage for his own crude motives"(75). Freeman's subsequent murder, after he is kicked to death by her uncles, evokes overwhelming guilt in Angelou. At Freeman's trial Angelou gives false testimony about their encounters, and now, "A man was dead because I lied" (*Caged Bird* 69). Associating her spoken word with death, Angelou stops talking. In "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," Christine Froula observes, "Taking his death as proof that her words have power to kill she descends into a silence that lasts for a year" (98).

A Bearer of Death and Violence

Angelou looks at herself as a bearer of death and violence, this is noticed when she claims that, "I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape" (*Caged Bird* 70). Angelou conceives herself to be the cursed instrument of violent death. This conviction is part of the pattern of self-rejection and inferiority, well-established within Angelou's psyche. It lies but one small step beyond a personal sense of inherent gross repulsiveness. Introjecting this repulsiveness- which she believes everyone except Bailey feels towards her- Angelou generalizes on her role in Freeman's death and perceive herself as death's tool.

As a vessel containing a death-inducing fluid, Angelou must control the physical force within her with all the strength and will she can muster. Thus, her resolve not to speak, and her consequent impassivity become outward manifestations of an inner struggle. This same struggle is the one which opens Angelou's autobiography. While trying to come to terms with death at a metaphoric level, she is terribly shocked to realize death- at the physical level. Angelou's fears come true; after her rape. She is again banished to Stamps. Upon her return to Stamps, after her violent physical abuse, Angelou projects her own death-like inertness on the whole town. It is described as, "Exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness...Entering Stamps, I had the feeling that I was stepping over the border lines of the map and would fall, without fear, right off the end of the world. Nothing more could happen, for in Stamps nothing happened" (*Caged Bird* 71).

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Focus on Self-Extinction, More Humour than Pathos

Angelou's second residence in Stamps includes episodes wherein Angelou considers her own death, but these are generally handled more with humor than pathos. At any rate, the very abundance of references to her own extinction, regardless of Angelou's tone, is evidence of this theme's powerful hold over both the actor's and the author's unconscious mind. Three examples out of many will suffice. When cautioned by Mrs. Flowers to handle her books well, Angelou can only imagine the most extreme punishment if she proves negligent: "Death would be too kind and brief" (*Caged Bird* 78). Later, having survived to see the day of her graduation,

Winning Reprieve and Recognition of Own Mortality

Angelou relates that "Somewhere in my fatalism I had expected to die, accidentally, and never have the chance to walk up the stairs in the auditorium and gracefully receive my hard-earned diploma. Out of God's merciful bosom I had won reprieve" (*Caged Bird* 136). Again, referring to the overwhelming sway books had over both her and Bailey's imaginations, Angelou writes that, "Ever since we read 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' we had made a pact that neither of us would allow the other to be buried without making 'absolutely, positively sure' that the person was dead" (*Caged Bird* 152). Included in this part of her experience is Angelou's first conscious cognizance of her own mortality. Angelou devotes an entire chapter to this crucial aspect of her identity.

Beneath the mock-Gothic melodrama of Mrs. Taylor's funeral and her posthumous nocturnal returns to visit her husband, exists Angelou's real and growing apprehension of her own mortal state: "I had never considered before that dying, death, dead, passed away, were words and phrases that might be even faintly connected with me" (*Caged Bird* 124). This drift towards death is arrested when Angelou moves to California. Just as Stamps reflects Angelou's impassivity, so does San Francisco evoke her resiliency; while Stamps projects the worst side of Angelou, so San Francisco affirms the best. In San Francisco, Angelou's own identity happily merges with her environs.

Death - Pivotal to Maya Angelou's Sense of Self

Death in its many manifestations is, indeed, pivotal to Maya Angelou's sense of self. The tension between Angelou's quest for a positive, life-affirming identity and her obsession with annihilation provide the unconscious dynamism affecting all aspects of her narrative, and endowing it with power and conviction. Thus, the ultimate challenge to death is Angelou's own active assertion of self and her willingness to her annihilation and overcome it. Angelou concludes her autobiography with the birth of her son which is the final evidence of the substantive power of death as metaphor of self in *Caged Bird*. Her body, which she had earlier described as not only ugly and awkward but also contaminated with a death-inducing power,

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brings forth a living child. Through the rape incident Angelou throws light on the level of vulnerability of the African American female, irrespective of their age. Through the incident at the Easter day and her High school graduation she showcases the horrible plight of every African American and their dream to die and end their agony in being an outcast in their own country.

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