CHAPTER-IV
SINGIN’ AND SWINGIN’ AND GETTIN’ MERRY LIKE CHRISTMAS

Most Angelou-Philes will find (Singin’ and Swingin’) a pleasant sequel . . . of this fascinating woman . . . it is her perceptions of herself as a black, a woman, and a mother as well as her impressions of those she meets which distinguish this account. Her religious strength, personal courage, and her talent prevail.


Until I married at twenty-one. I had a Hollywood induced illusion that a husband . . . would come along and take the burden of my life from my shoulders. I dreamed that this fictional person would make every decision for me, from the most profound to the most frivolous. After I was married, I found that rather than being grateful to the decision maker, I resented intrusions into the privacy of my will. I have discovered that one probably learns more from one’s mistakes than from one’s triumphs, and I reserve the right as a human being to make my own mistakes.

-- Maya Angelou

What quickens my pulse now is the stretch ahead rather than the one behind, and it is mainly for some clue to where I am going that I search through where I have been, for some hint as to who I am becoming or failing to become that I delve into what used to be. I listen back to a time when nothing was much farther from my thoughts than God for an echo of the gutturals and sibilants and vowellessness by which I believe that even then God was addressing me out of my life as he addresses us all. And it is because I believe that, that I think of my life and the lives of everyone who has ever lived or will ever live, as not just journeys through time but as sacred journeys.

-- Frederick Buechner (1976) The Sacred Journey

Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas also marks an 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 the 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 volume, 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 an interview Angelou’s seemed very concerned that her serial autobiography did 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. Somethings, on the other hand, which seem to make the point again, if they are extended or if another colour is put in, are okay because that does drive the point (Icon, 1987).

Angelou’s third instalment reveals her good traits while also exposing her weaker ones, so that what emerges is the familiar narrator who has become more dynamic, more open. Her use of flashbacks and flash forwards 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.

Another bright title brings on book three of Maya Angelou’s journey through life. Although the title is more or less self-explanatory, Angelou expands upon its derivation in an interview. The title comes, she says, from

a time in the twenties and thirties when black people used to have rent parties. On Saturday night from around nine when they’d give these parties, through the next morning when they would go to church and have the Sunday meal, until early Sunday evening was the time when everyone was encouraged to sing and swing and get merry like Christmas so one would have some fuel with which to live the rest of the week (1989: 154-5).

Many of the features of women’s autobiography and of black autobiography canons are present in Singin’ and Swingin’ (1976). Angelou is now in her early twenties and many of her current concerns – apprehension about her son, a desire for a home, facing racial conflicts, and seeking a career identify with the canons and appear in the beginning chapters. Facing a broader world populated with an increased number of whites, Maya re-examines her lingering prejudices and re-evaluates her relationships.

This in-depth review of life in progress is often found in African-American narratives. As a traditional, structural device, it provides a point of retrospection from which changing views may be accommodated without guilt or explanation. It is a natural extension of growth and development. Interracial interaction can be better assessed individually in maturity.

The five years covered by Singin’ and Swingin’ include a wide geographical range, as has come to be expected in Angelou’s books. She tells about going from a rather pedestrian life in San Francisco to a beginning nightclub career there that propelled her to New York, to Montreal, and then to Italy, France, Yugoslavia, Spain, Israel and Egypt. She winds up in Hawaii, quietly contemplating her options as the book ends. She has circled back again to embrace motherhood and its importance to her life.

Angelou’s attempts at re-entering the legitimate employment market found her working at a small real-estate office and doubling at a dress shop to eke out a bare existence for herself and her son. She often visited a record shop run by a white woman, Louise Cox. Angelou still had trepidations regarding mingling with white people. Cox was impressed by Angelou’s musical knowledge and offered her a job in the record shop. Angelou accepted with reservations but soon learned that her suspicions about the motives of the white Louise Cox were unfounded, and a genuine friendship ensues.

Angelou is seeking peace of soul and Cox encourages her to look at the Christian Science religion. Then the record store partner, David Rosenbaum, tells Angelou about a new Rabbi at his temple and Angelou checks out this avenue of solace. Through Jewish religious music she finds many parallels with her own black heritage, but does not find the sense of belonging she seeks from either of these faiths. Her fear of death,
precipitated by a concept of a frightening God in her native C.M.E. Church, remains a major concern to her but she is still strongly attracted to her familiar music and prayer. Her faith is never lost.

At the record shop, Angelou meets a young, white seaman who shares an interest in her popular music. They begin dating and the young man of Greek ancestry Tosh Angelou’s, soon proposes. Maya’s mother had warned her “that white folks had taken advantage of Black people for centuries” (1977: 22), and was amazed that Angelou could even consider marrying a white. But Tosh is a good man who treats Angelou well and she is sufficiently attracted to him to indeed marry him. He is a positive father figure for Guy and an intellectual partner for Maya. Vivian had told her that African-American women were not acceptable to their community if they married a white man and surely not welcomed by whites. Angelou experiences negative reactions to her and her husband:

“... people started, nudged each other, and frowned when we... walked in the parks or went to the movies” (29).

She felt guilty for having a white husband; she had betrayed her race by marrying one of the enemy. But whites should not believe that she had forgotten the past. She often slipped out to attend black church services and was still firmly tied to her own religious roots. She wrestled constantly with Tosh’s expressed lack of faith. One day, Tosh exhibits anger toward her and Guy and besides he is tired of marriage. Just before the break-up of their short marriage, Angelou expresses resentment of her recent treatment by Tosh in black and white terms. She demands,

Who the hell was he? A White-Sheeted Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan? I wouldn’t have a white man talk to me in that tone of voice... (36).
After the divorce, although Tosh leaves her with whatever little they had accumulated, she complains bitterly that,

Again a white man had taken a Black woman’s body and left her hopeless, helpless and alone (38).

Thus Angelou’s first marriage, became just another adventure and betrayal.

Angelou herself is the primary character of Singin’ and Swingin’. Her son Guy is the other person of prime importance. Their individual and mutual growth, development and diverse activities provide the movement in the narrative. Momma-Grandmother Henderson – is mentioned only briefly in this volume. She dies early in the period while Angelou is hospitalised for an appendectomy, and life moves on. Her immediate influence is now negligible, but her early inculcation of Angelou is always apparent. Quotes from Momma bind together all the books. Brother Bailey is also a minor player in this part of Angelou’s life. He reinforces Maya’s capabilities and offers reassurance, but drifts away into pursuits of his own. Mother Vivian Banter exerts more influence as Angelou moves toward greater independence. Her advice and maxims, always adroit and pithy, are sprinkled throughout the book and help Angelou function in her unfamiliar world of choice. A best friend, Vonne Broadnax, is a realist who serves as a confidante and frequent advisor for Maya. She provides stability of a sort. A large cast of people move throughout the book, exerting a force and variety of actions that propel Angelou ever forward. These strong, usually successful people, black and white, help Angelou find a degree of success and a self-assurance that carries her to yet another level of achievement.
In Angelou’s extended series, 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 Getting 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.

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, 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 Angelous. Maya meets her husband-to-be early in the third autobiography, when she is a salesgirl in a record store. 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 “poor white man” (24). Maya though, evades that problem by telling herself 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” (1990: 83), does little to challenge his authority.

The conflict between Maya and Tosh centres 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, which is one of the first great celebrations of African American culture in the series. The shouts, gospels, spirituals, “polyrhythmic” (28) clapping of hands all converge on Angelou “like sweet oil” (28) as she shakes with elation.

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 towards 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 in 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 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. 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 Boxter, takes on new dimensions in Singin’ and Swingin’. At the end of Gathu 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, after their 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 child with his grandmother in San Francisco. She is in effect echoing her own unhealthy child/mother experience, not because she wants to but 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 directly 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 cause 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, including her mother; her father; her husband Tosh; and in *Singin’ and Swingin’*, Momma Henderson.

In writing about the 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.

Angelou’s farewell to her black grand-mother 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 getting’ Merry Like Christmas – 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 hides a major autobiographical relationship in 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 “lift 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 tells us he is in Sing Sing prison for “fencing stolen goods” (234). His name appears for the last time in the series in *The Heart of a Woman*. She does not talk to 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.

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 other, albeit important 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, described in *Gather Together*. 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 stripjoints 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, theatre, 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 pull 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 Maya’s return to her son. When she arrives hours 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 in 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 of 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 Getting’ Merry Like Christmas and, to a lesser extent, in Angelou’s other volumes.

In this volume, Angelou takes her first step in a career as a dancer and singer. Moving into the role of a professional entertainer is a turning point in Angelou’s life. She now enters another layer of society: the creative world of show business—of singers,
dancers, musicians, writers and producers. This is a group in which one’s place in determined by talent, not by colour or riches or happenstance of birth. As Angelou pursues her new career, she is often invited to parties given by the chic, sophisticated, and accomplished party, as alluded to in the title. The folklore old, so prominent in the prior books, does not fit with the glitz of show business. Angelou goes to work at a small unknown club and soon acquires a local following. She is discovered by a performer of some note who is impressed and quite taken with Angelou’s personality. Angelou’s sense of human and ingenuousness captivate the jaded sophisticates.

The first party of any importance in the story is one given by this chanteuse from the Purple Onion night club. The round of parties begins and this one is soon followed by a party on a boat owned by a painter who is part of an international San Francisco clique. Angelou becomes the current toy of this group and finds herself flattered and comfortable with the eclectic crowd. Much later, during the Porgy and Bess tour, there is a pre-Christmas party in a house in Yugoslavia—reminiscent of the multi-national San Francisco gatherings. Each of these parties, by exposing Angelou to a progression of intelligent, keen, vital people, increases her self-esteem and sophistication. Each masks a step forward in her growth and acceptance of a world of differences and similarities. Each demonstrates her propensity for worldly knowledge.

The biggest party by far of the book is the ongoing party that Angelou recounts about a lively, energetic, loving and talented group of sixty African Americans, including Angelou, who toured Europe and the Middle East performing the George Gershwin musical, *Porgy and Bess*. To call this tour a party is not stretching the term. The account of the antics of this entourage comprises the greater part of the book.
In every country Angelou visits on this tour—and later on other trips she takes—she buys a dictionary to help her learn the language of the country. She seeks out natives with whom she can practice speaking, and in a few years, she can proudly say that she is proficient in several languages. Language felicity seems to hold a special meaning to Angelou and is often mentioned by her as a point of achievement. It was once commonly held that African-American singers could not handle the language requirements for operatic roles. It took the tremendous talent of such as Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson to break the barrier against African-American concert singers.

As previously noted, in many women’s autobiographies the interest in career is usually given secondary importance. But in *Singin’ and Swingin’* Angelou seems to balance evenly the relating and the unfolding of her show business career with the recounting of the tension generated when a black female tries to function in a white dominated world of the 1950s. She admits the consequent constant modification of her perceptions of black-white relationship. A close reading of the narrative of *Singin’ and Swingin’* reveals over fifty references to black ideas and attitudes about whites that Angelou had absorbed from her background, from her “Momma”, and from her mother Vivian. This heavy concentration on the black perception of whites rather than the travel to exotic countries and the fun at parties is primarily what makes *Singin’ and Swingin’* worthy of serious consideration. In expressing her perceptions, Angelou continuous to avoid the temptation to be polemic, to be on a soap box. Instead, Angelou selects engaging stories and in telling them uses these stories as vehicles to weave in strong forceful statements that convey firmly her indignation and ire about black displacement.
But she is ambivalent in her expressed feelings at the time covered by this book. Yet, throughout this period, most of Angelou’s experiences with whites are positive.

Angelou recalls reeling with delight and disbelief when the chic world of the Purple Onion club accepted her as a person. She confesses how immature her stance about whites had been: “My God. My world was spinning on its axis, and there was nothing to hold onto. Anger . . . and prejudice, my old back-up team would not serve me in this new predicament” (74). Her ideas about Africans are also modified. When the boat carrying the _Porgy and Bess_ cast approaches Alexandria, she is pleased to notice that the tall white buildings on the shore believed the old statement that “All Africans lived in trees like monkeys” (200). So when she lands on shore, she fully expects to see kinsmen Africans that were “Tall and dark-brown-skinned. Proud and handsome like (her) father. Or Bitter-chocolate black like (her) brother” (200). To her dismay, she finds the opposite is true. The first Africans she beheld did not at all look like her father, brother, or uncle. She is also distressed to see that the jobs in the hotel are distributed on the bases of colour. The doormen and bus boys were black and brown and the hotel manager and bartenders were white. She saw many street beggars and realized that Egypt still had much work to do taking care of its poor. Her first glimpse of African shores shows no utopia. Thus her arrival-joy is diluted, but it was not totally spoiled. While she sympathised with Egypt’s economic problems, she finds pride in the fact that she is an American and finds herself drawn more positively towards home. This gives a glimpse into her future relations with Africa.

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 is turning to the older lover, Troubadour Martin, in *Gather Together*. From a psychological perspective, she may be repeating her need for Bailey Johnson, the father who once abandoned her. Her technique is reinforced through repeating certain words such as “confront” (43), “the past” (129); and “the 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. 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. In this image, 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 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 also express her confusion through the use of a simile: “Disorientation hung in my mind like a dense fog” (232). The fog is contrasted with occasional moments of clarity: “clear as the clink of good crystal” (233), contrasting elements expressed in the images of clear confusion strong enough to make her hastily consult and then reject a prosperous looking white psychiatrist.

Finally, Angelou likes to use the simile to humorous effect, especially when she is exaggerating certain clichés concerning black culture. For example, the cast of *Porgy and Bess* run into Lionel Hampton’s band at a reception in Israel is the first Jazz artist to perform successfully on the vibraphone. Angelou writes that the cast jumped on Hampton’s band members “as if they were bowls of black-eyed peas” (216). The simile reveals the racial hunger that African Americans experienced during their white engagements. The hunger motif contends 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 little of the third volume is also based on a simile: *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas.*

Angelou’s use of fiction-writing techniques such as dialogue, characterisation, and thematic development has often led reviewers to categorise her books as autobiographical fiction Angelou stated in a 1989 interview, she was the only “serious” (1998: 30) writer to choose the genre to express herself. As Susan Gilbert has stated, “Angelou was reporting not one person’s story, but the collective experience” (1999: 104). Scholar Selwyn R. Cudjoe agreed, and viewed Angelou as representative of the convention in African American autobiography as a public gesture that spoke for an
entire group of people. Lupton insisted that all of Angelou’s autobiographies conform to the genre’s standard structure: they were written by a single author, they were chronological, and they contained elements of character, technique, and theme. In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Angelou called her books autobiographies. When speaking of her unique use of genre, Angelou acknowledged that she has followed the slave narrative tradition of “speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first person plural, always saying I meaning We” (2007: 10-25).

Angelou recognised that there were fictional aspects to all her books; she tended to “diverge from the conventional notion of autobiography as truth” (1998: 34). Her approach paralleled the conventions of many African American autobiographies written during the abolitionist period in the US, when truth was often censored for purposes of self-protection. Author Lyman B. Hagen has placed Angelou in the long tradition of African American autobiography but insisted that she has created a unique interpretation of the autobiographical form. In a 1998 interview with journalist George Plinpton, Angelou discussed her writing process, and “the sometimes slippery notion of truth in non-fiction” (2008: 8) and memoirs. When asked if she changed the truth to improve her story, she stated, “Sometimes I make a diameter from a composite of three or four people, because the essence in only one person is not sufficiently strong to be written about” (2008: 30). Although Angelou has never admitted to changing the facts in her stories, she has used these facts to make an impact with the reader. As Hagen stated, “One can assume that the essence of the data is present in Angelou’s work” (1997: 18). Hagen also stated that Angelou “fictionalises, to enhance interest” (1997: 18). Angelou’s long-time
editor, Robert Loomis, agreed, stating that she could rewrite any of her books by changing the order of her facts to make a different impact on the reader.

Travel is a common theme in American autobiography as a whole; as McPherson states, it is something of a national myth to Americans as a people. This is also the case for African American autobiography, which has its roots in the slave narrative. Like those narratives that focus on the writers’ search for freedom from bondage, modern African American autobiographers like Angelou seek to develop “an authentic self” (1998: 121) and the freedom to find it in their community. As McPherson states, “The journey to a distant goal, the return home, and the quest which involves the voyage out, achievement and return are typical patterns in Black autobiography” (1990: 121).

For Angelou, this quest takes her from her childhood and adolescence as described in her first two books, into the adult world. McPherson sees Singin’ and Swingin’ as “a sunny tour of Angelou’s twenties” (1990: 81), from early years marked by disappointments and humiliation, into the broader world, to the white world and to the international community. This period described as “years of joy” (1990: 81) was also the beginning of Angelou’s great success and fulfilment as an entertainer. Not all is “merry like Christmas”, however, the book is also marked by negative events: her painful marriage and divorce, the death of her grandmother, and her long separation from her son.

In Angelou’s first two volumes, the setting is limited to three places (Arkansas, Missouri and California), while in Singin’ and Swingin’, the “setting breaks open” (1998: 99) to include Europe as she travels with Porgy and Bess company. Lupton states that Angelou’s travel narrative, which takes up approximately 40 percent of the book, gives
the book its organized structure, especially compared to *Gather Together in My Name*, which is more chaotic. Angelou’s observations about race, gender and class serve to make the book more than a simple travel narrative. As a Black American, her travels around the world put her in contact with many nationalities and classes, expand her experiences beyond her familiar circle of community and family, and complicate her understandings of race relations.

In *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou continues an examination of her experiences with discrimination, begun in her first two volumes. Critics Selwyn R. Cudjoe refers to “the major problem of her works: what it means to be Black and female in America” (1984: 21). Cudjoe divides *Singin’ and Swingin’* into two parts; in the first part, Angelou works out her relationship with the white world, and in the second part, she evaluates her interactions with fellow Black cast members in *Porgy and Bess*, as well as her encounters with Europe and Africa.

Angelou comes into intimate contact with whites for the first time—whites very different than the racist people she encountered in her childhood. She discovers, as Cudjoe puts it, that her stereotypes of whites were developed to protect herself from their cruelty and indifference. As McPherson states, “conditioned by earlier experiences, Angelou distrusts everyone, especially whites. Nevertheless, she is repeatedly surprised by the kindness and goodwill of many whites she meets, and thus, her suspicions begin to soften into understanding” (1990: 82). Cudjoe states that in *Singin’ and Swingin’* the inviolability of the African American personhood” (1984: 8), as well as her own closely guarded defense of it. In order for her to have any positive relationships with whites and people of other races, however, McPherson insists that Angelou must re-examine her
lingering prejudices when faced with the broader world-full of whites. As Lyman also states, however, this is a complex process, since most of Angelou’s experiences with whites are positive during this time. Cudjoe states that as the book’s main protagonist Angelou moves between the white and Black worlds, both defining herself as a member of her community and encountering whites in “a much fuller, more sensuous manner” (1984: 21).

In her third autobiography, Angelou is placed in circumstances that force her to change her opinions about whites, not an easy change for her. Louise Cox, the Co-owner of the record store she frequents on Fillmore street, generously offers Angelou employment and friendship. Angelou marries a white man, whose appreciation of Black music breaks her stereotype of whites. This is a difficult decision for Angelou, and she must justify it by rationalizing that Tosh is Greek, and not an American white. She was not marrying “one of the enemy” (1976: 29), but she could not escape the embarrassment and shame when they encounter other Blacks. Later, she has a friendship among equals with her white co-orders, Jorie, Don, and Barrie, who assist her job quest at The Purple Onion. Cudjoe insists, “This free and equal relationship is significant to her in that it represents an important stage of her evolution toward adulthood” (1984: 23).

Angelou’s experiences with the *Porgy and Bess* tour expands her understanding of other races and race relations as she meets people of different nationalities during her travels. All these experiences are instrumental in Angelou’s “movement toward adulthood” (1990: 84) and serve as a basis for her later acceptance and tolerance of other races. *Porgy and Bess* has had a controversial history; many in the African American community consider it racist in its portrayal of Blacks.
As Mary Jane Lupton states, there is “no doubt in the reader’s mind about the importance of music” (1998: 109) in *Singin’ and Swingin’*. Angelou’s use of opposition and her doubling of plot lines is similar to the polyphonic rhythms in Jazz music. McPherson labels Angelou a “blues autobiographer”, someone who, likes a blues musician, includes the painful details and episodes from her life.

Music appears throughout Angelou’s third autobiography, starting with the title which evokes a blues song and references the beginnings of Angelou’s career in music and performances. She starts *Singin’ and Swingin’*, the same way she starts *Caged Bird*: with an epigraph to set the tone. Here, the epigraph is a quotation from an unidentified three-line stanza in classic blues form. After the epigraph, “music” is the first word in the book. As the story opens, a lonely Angelou finds solace in Black music, and is soon hired as a sales-girl in a record store at Fillmore Street in San Francisco. She meets and falls in love with her first husband after she discovers their shared appreciation of Black music. After learning of her grandmother’s death, her reaction, “a dazzling passage three paragraphs long” (1998: 85) according to Mary Jane Lupton, is musical; not only does it rely upon gospel tradition, but is also influenced by African American literary texts, especially James Weldon Johnson’s “Go Down Death-A Funeral Sermon” (1998: 105).

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—the obstacles of race and gender for women in the 1950s were in some cases insurmountable.
As Mary Jane Lupton, has observed, motherhood is a “prevailing theme” (1998: 108) throughout Angelou’s autobiographies. Lupton continues: “Angelou presents a rare kind of literary model, the working mother” (1998: 108). Beginning in *Cage Bird* when she gives birth to her son, the emphasis Angelou places on this theme increases in importance. Angelou finds herself in a situation “very familiar to mothers with careers” (1998: 7), and is forced to choose between “being a loving mother or a fully realized person” (1998: 108). As scholar Sandra O’ Neale puts it, in this book Angelou sheds the image of “unwed mother” (1984: 33) with “a dead-end destiny” (1984: 33) that had followed her throughout her previous autobiography.

Angelou feels a deep sense of guilt and regret when she has to leave her son to tour with *Porgy and Bess*, which prevents her from fully enjoying the experience. In spite of this, *Singin’ and Swingin’* has been called “a love song to Angelou’s son” (1990: 89). Just as she changes her name as the story progresses, so does Guy, who becomes an intelligent, sensitive boy in the pages of this book. As Guy grows, so does his mother; William Hagen stated that this growth moves Angelou’s story forward. When Angelou discovers how deeply their separation injures Guy, she leaves the *Porgy and Bess* tour before it ends, at great personal cost. By the end of the book, their bond is deepened and she promises never to leave him again. As Hagen states, Maya embraces the importance, just as she had done at the end of her previous autobiographies.

Like the two previous Angelou autobiographies, *Singin’ and Swingin’* was received with generous criticism, Kathryn Robinson predicted quite accurately that “This latest segment in Angelou’s continuing autobiography will be received with the same enthusiasm as earlier books . . . Angelou continually succeeds in sharing her vitality and
Singin’ and Swingin’ should find a wide audience” (1976: 144). And Linda Kuehl finds that Maya Angelou continues to invent herself: “Maya Angelou is a self-conceived picaresque heroine. She lives her life as though it were a story, which is one reason why it transcribes so naturally to the printed page.” (1976: 46). Kuehl, however, prefers the “Surging rhythm of Caged Bird, although Singin’ and Swingin’ is very professional, even toned, and . . . quite engaging” (1976: 46).

Singin’ and Swingin’ is labelled rather disappointing, however, by reviewer Margaret McFadden-Gerber, who feels it loses power by being more public and less introspective than the previous two volumes. In a time rife with political and social movements, the revelations of a strong, African-American female such as Angelou would have been sought out and welcomed, according to McFadden-Gurber. Her observations and opinions would have greatly enhanced the book’s importance. However, the reviewer appears to be judging Angelou’s stature from a current point of view, not from where she was at the time embraced by the book. Angelou was still finding herself and evolving as a person. Her status at that particular time did not attach any significant political importance to her utterances.

Angelou does briefly mention a discussion in which she defended the Brown Vs Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1954 that declared separate but equal school systems unconstitutional. Her single reference to the McCarthy virus which was weakening the body politic is in describing it as a “witch hunt” (99). She does not, however, describe her inner thoughts on the usual range of topics, personal or public. Thus Singin’ and Swingin’ is less weighty than it might have been. The last hundred pages of Singin’ and Swingin’ consist of show business anecdotes that occurred in
various places the Porgy and Bess company visits on its tour. Considering the age of the
heroine and the exhilaration of her experiences, the tone of the book is appropriate. Its
style is consistent with its predecessors and again depends heavily upon shared humour
and light entertainment. The impact of the breadth of her exposures completes the
youthful flings of Maya Angelou. The quiet ending re-affirming her responsibility as a
parent marks yet another stage of maturity. The autobiographical sequence is naturally
maintained. There is a proper use of words and pacing for the milieu of the adventures of
this phase of Angelou’s life. Her paragraphs find closure through appropriate proverbs
and insights: “Avarice cripples virtue and lies in ambush for honesty” (205).

Singin’ and Swingin’ is a journey of discovery and rebirth—as a Black Christian,
as Maya Angelou, and as a mother. It marks the emergence of Maya Angelou, a woman
born of the childhood experiences and adolescent explorations of Marguerite Johnson and
a woman whose talents have opened new doors and dictated new directions. This is also
a woman upon whom the yoke of motherhood has finally settled. The highs and lows of
the journey have forged a stronger person more aware of human frailties and more
attuned to her own. The quiet, positive ending leaves the audience anticipating the future
conquests of Maya as she forges her way through life. She has once more affirmed
survival, self-awareness, and devotion to learning as guideposts to living with style.

Singin’ and Swingin’ explores the adulthood of Maya Angelou, again the major
protagonist, as she moves back into and defines herself more centrally within the
mainstream of the Black experience. In this work, she encounters the white world in a
much fuller, more sensuous manner, seeking to answer, as she does, the major problem of
her works: what it means to be Black and female in America. We would see that this
quest, in the final analysis, reduces itself to what it means to be Black and female in America, the urgency of being Black and female collapses into what it means to be Black and person. In order to achieve this the book is divided into two parts; part one, in which the writer works out her relationship with the white American world, and part two, in which she makes a statement about her own development through her participation in the opera *Porgy and Bess*, and her encounter with Europe and with Africa.

*Singin’ and Swingin’* opens with a scene of displacement in which Angelou feels a sense of being “unanchored” (46), as the family bonds of her youth are torn as under the impact of urban life in California. Under these new circumstances, the author examines her feeling and her relationship with the larger white society as she encounters white people on an intimate personal level for the first time. As the reader will recall, Blacks and whites lived separately in Stamps and the occasion for shared and mutual relations did not exist. Before Angelou can enter into any relationship, though, she must dispense with all the stereotypical notions she has about white people many of which are punctured and discarded. Indeed it is no longer possible to argue: “It wasn’t nice to reveal one’s feelings to strangers. And nothing on earth was stranger to me than a friendly white woman” (27-28).

As the autobiography gradually unfolds, she observes that most of the stereotypical pictures which she has of whites are designed to protect her feeling from the guilty of white hate and indifference. Yet as she grows into adulthood, these notions are punctured and eventually discarded, the biggest test coming when she is forced to make a decision to marry Tosh, a white man, who is courting her through her son. Part of the difficulty arises from Angelou’s awareness that whites had violated her people for
centuries and that “Anger and guilt decided before my birth that Black was Black and White was white and although the two might share sex, they must never exchange love” (27-28).

Angelou confronts the problem with a sort of evasion when she tells herself that, “Tosh was Greek not white American, therefore I needn’t feel that I had betrayed my race by marrying one of the enemy, nor could white Americans believe that I had so forgiven them the past that I was ready to love a member of their tribe” (35). She is not entirely satisfied by the truce she makes with her Blackness and for the rest of her marriage has to contend with the guilt created by her liaison with white male: “With the end of her marriage, the tears came and fright that she would be cast into ‘a maelstrom of rootlessness’ (44) momentarily embroiders her mind. Soon, however, it gave way to the knowledge that she would be reviled by her people in their belief that she was another victim of a “white man (who) had taken a Black woman’s body and left her hopeless, helpless and alone” (45). At the end of this encounter, however, she would be better prepared to deal with her own life, having gained a certain entrance to the white world and possessing, already, the stubborn realities of Black life.

One of the significant facets of the author’s relationship to Tosh revolves around the manner in which she effaces her own identity within the framework of the marriage. But the compromises which she makes to secure a stronger marriage cannot be seen only in the context of the subjection of wife to husband or Black female to white male. It can also be read as the subjection of the central values of the Black world to the dominant totality of white values.
In this context, it is to be noted that inspite of the fact that Angelou finds many aspects of white culture objectionable, most of the dominant images of perfection and beauty remain fashioned by the ethos of white society. Yet the tensions which keep the first section of the work together centre around the general tendency of her wanting to be absorbed into the larger ambit of American culture (i.e., white culture) and her struggle to maintain a sense of her Black identity.

As Angelou begins the second phase of her development (i.e., her evolution toward adulthood) her Southern origins become the necessary basis on which she begins to evaluate the major transformations which have taken place in her life thus far (145). The identification of her people’s sufferings in the minds of the ordinary European, their immediate identification of her with Joe Louis, the enthusiastic manner in which the Europeans welcomed the Porgy Cast and the spirituals of her people, led to some of the most revealing moments of her development. The recognition that “Europeans often made clear distinction between Black and White Americans as did the most confirmed Southern bigot . . . [in that] Blacks were liked, whereas white Americans were not” did much to raise her self-esteem and a recognition of her emergent place in the world (164-65).

It is, however, the success of Porgy which seemed paradigmatic of her evolution as an autonomous and fully liberated person. The pride which she takes in her company’s professionalism, their discipline onstage, and the well spring of spirituality that the opera emoted, all seem to conduce toward an organic harmony of her personal history as it intertwined with the social history of her people. The triumph of porgy, therefore, speaks not only to the dramatic success of a Black company, it speaks, also, to the personal
triumph of a remarkable Black woman. *Singin’ and Swingin’* is a celebration of that triumph.

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 *Singhin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry like Christmas*. Maya, now in her early twenties, displays sense of self-rejection that negates the ore positive ending of *Gather Together*. She is too tall, too skinny. Her teeth stick out. Her hair is “kinked” (1974: 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 deplores her ruffled purple dress. The description is also reminiscent of a negative self-image 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).

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 herself. 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 characterisation of herself as someone out of tune, someone whose confusion over priorities leads her to certain regrettable errors in judgement. In the final scene, set in Hawaii, these uncertainties are partially resolved.

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