CHAPTER V
THE HEART OF A WOMAN

The Heart of a Woman is the most political segment of Angelou’s autobiographical statement.

--Selwin R. Cudjoe

The Heart of a Woman is an intensely truthful volume: Her writing here, describing her longings, doubts and shortcomings, is raw, bare honesty.

--Dolly A. McPherson.

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 fulfilment in her New York/Brooklyn environment – as an actress, a writer, and a political organiser.

The title of Angelou’s fourth autobiography, while less striking or oblique than titles of her preceding books, is taken from a poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson, a Harlem Renaissance writer. The poem is marvelously appropriate as it refers to a Caged Bird, thus proving linkage with Angelou’s initial volume series. This addition to the ongoing story of Maya Angelou looks into the heart of the maturing woman and focuses on relationships. The relationships with her son, with men, with her racial responsibilities, and with her writing are the heart of the narrative. These are the normal, everyday concerns, less venturesome and startling. Racial confrontations such as that of Angelou with white school authorities and that of the renowned Billie Holiday versus a nondescript white woman fulfil elements of the black canon of autobiography and therefore discount any drift from the interest of her people. Thus The Heart of a Woman is truly a story of an African-American female. It does not depart much from the factual
happenings except for dramatic effect. It is a far more sober assessment of her wide-ranging activities.

*The Heart of a Woman* is the fourth volume in Angelou’s continuing autobiography. Like the other volumes, it is narrated from the point of view of a mother/woman who tells much the same intimate story that she told in *Gather Together in My Name* and *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas* – but with an enormous difference. By the time, she was ready to present the fourth segment of her story, Angelou had accumulated a multilayered memory that affects not only what she remembers but 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 girl-friend. Enraged with a borrowed pistol in her purse, Angelou tells Jerry that if anything happens to Guy she will shoot him and his family, kill the grand mother, 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


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the 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 behaviour in handling Jerry may involve an unconscious effect 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 Koux 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” (128).

In addition to the multilayered point-of-view, another difference in point of view is determined by the narrator’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 personal 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 Lumumbo, of Zaire. She also does fund-raising and organisational 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, *Gather Together in My Name* and *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas*. *Singin’ and Swingin’* 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 Heart of a Woman*, 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 book that for the first time affirms the achievement of a personal and public maturity. Additionally, in *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 multi-volume narrative structure unsurpassed in American autobiography.

In presenting herself as a mature individual, Angelou approximates the perspective of classic American autobiography as described in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, 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 lovers and her son.

In the fourth segment of the five-part life story, *The Heart of a Woman* fulfils the mother/son narrative. Rich in theme and characterisation, 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.

Previous volumes of Angelou’s remarkable autobiography have dealt with her childhood, her experiences as a teenage mother, and her struggle to break into show business. This fourth instalment [*The Heart of a Woman*] carries the story into the early 1960s – a period that saw Angelou heavily involved in Civil Rights – her recollections of encounters with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and other black activists capture all the fire and idealism of the era. On a more personal level, she recounts the details of her romance with Vusumzi Make, a South African freedom fighter. If the story of Angelou’s adult life lacks some of the inherent drama or terrible poignancy of her childhood in the South it is nonetheless a stirring record of the complex fabric of a black woman’s life.

In *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou writes of her life in the late 1950s and 1960s. Angelou has seen much and done much – she has been in important places at important times. Her reminiscences of a visit from the failing Billie Holiday and meetings with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are well told and insightful; but it is Angelou’s
turbulent marriage to an African freedom fighter and her evolving relationship with her son that serve as the emotional centre of the book. Although at times too chatty and anecdotal, *The Heart of a Woman* is lively, revealing and well worth the reading.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou’s son Guy grows from an adolescent of twelve to a young man of eighteen while Angelou moves from California to New York to Egypt to Ghana, involved all the time with the fight for Black civil rights. As Ellen Miller has rightly put it,


Angelou stresses that her story is that of a black woman, and in faithfully recreating her own experience, she provides a viewed picture of a turbulent time. One does wish, however, that she were more self-reflective. As Ellen Miller has rightly put it, in *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou is wise about her son but stupid about men in general – as a woman she responds to the sexuality of men while disregarding their other traits; as a black she cannot believe that any white could possibly accept a strong black as an equal (1982: 376-77). One understands why Angelou judges and acts as she does, and one suspects that she recognises her limitations of twenty years ago. However, because she presents her perceptions and actions without judgement, her book, valuable and interesting though it is, raises more questions than answers.

*The Heart of a Woman* covers one of the most exciting periods in African and Afro-American history – the beginning of a new awareness of Africa on the part of Negroes. It is the period of the early Civil Rights marches, of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Egypt of Nasser and the Ghana of Nkrumah, and the murder of the Congo’s Patrice Lumumba. It is also the period when Maya tries her wings and
learns that she can fly, of her brief but important marriage to a South African freedom fighter, and the period when her *wunderkind* son, Guy Johnson, grows into manhood.

As with all her books, *The Heart of a Woman* can be mined for its riches: instruction, insight, humour, wry wit, lore, and fine writing. From this casebook on successful single parenting, we can see the perils a single mother, in this case a black one, faces in bringing up a black male child in the African-American society, where so many things seem bent on preventing him from reaching adulthood. Maya Angelou shows how one woman succeeds in skirting these dangers and comes out safely on the other side.

As befits a master storyteller, Maya Angelou’s book is rich with the tight sketch, the apt portrait, the pithy line. Like Thoreau, she builds from the sentence. Throughout her account of her many experiences, she uses just the right sentence to share some insight or fix some conclusion.

While Maya Angelou does many things in *The Heart of a Woman*, what she keeps constant throughout the book is that it is the account of a black W-O-M-A-N’s life. Her experiences with women, her love and respect for them and theirs for her, her delicacy in dealing with them; from her mother to her friends, even to mere acquaintances, these could provide a model of conduct for any woman to follow. As Spigner rightly remarks “Few will come away from this book into Maya Angelou’s heart without being moved” (1982: 49).

From a shy child in Stamps, Arkansas, who through emotional shock had lost the power of speech, Maya Angelou had the will and courage to become a uniquely dynamic, internationally known figure. Outstanding are several of her characterisations: of her mother, Vivian Baxter Jackson, depicted in a gem of a scene in Fresno’s Desert Hotel; of
[her husband] Make, with his strengths as a revolutionary and his idiosyncrasies, custom-tailored clothes, luxurious tastes, deceptions, feelings of male superiority and rigidities of conventional African behaviour. Picasso never distorted portraits of his son, and in the same way Guy, Angelou’s son, is treated with the utmost finesse and tenderness.

Like all 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 begins, 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 characterises the people with whom she lives for almost a year, even though “naming” has been an important process in Angelou’s writing, ever since Mrs.
Cullinan so angers Maya by calling her Mary in *Caged Bird* that “Mary” deliberately breaks the nasty white woman’s favourite casserole. As autobiographer, Angelou hastily bypasses the year on the house boat, giving the impression that it was, however, a necessary rite of passage in an era when the relationship between blacks and whites becomes 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: the displaced and humiliated child of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the guilty young mother of *Gather Together in My Name*, the lonely woman who sought refuge in music in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*. On the house boat she relaxes, becomes imaginative with her hairstyle and clothing. She particularly enjoys the experiment because her roommates neither ignore Maya’s and Guy’s skin colour nor do they romanticise it. Angelou’s brief story in a commune reveals her capacity for co-operation and anticipates her later group involvements with writers, actors 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 neighbourhood. 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 themes 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 dentist Lincoln refused to look into her mouth, or in Gather Together in My Name, when the salesman in Stamps insults her.

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 she 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 afterwards mother and son move to a mixed neighbourhood. 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. As luck has it, 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.

In the creative atmosphere of the East she starts to bloom, encouraged by talented African-American friends and associates. It is not until this volume that Angelou, for the first time in the autobiography series, begins to identify herself as a writer. Readers can actually envision in this volume the distinguished artist who becomes the Maya Angelou of the 1990s.

Early on she mentions that she has begun to write sketches, songs and short stories. In a marvelous episode, Angelou describes attending a workshop of the Harlem
Writers Guild when she engages in a difficult procedure; a first reading of her only play, “One Love, One Life”, followed by a none too flattering critique by the authors who attended. John Kellens, trying to soften the blow to her writer’s ego, tells her that the next time will be easier.

Determined to succeed, Angelou turns writing into an act of mental discipline. She forces herself to concentrate on details and to understand the technical aspects of the craft. Through the eventual encouragement that she receives from the Harlem Writer’s Guild, she grows as a writer and as a person. She meshes her character with this group of African-American and Caribbean writers more experienced than she, people who, like her, would some day make meaningful contributions to African-American literature. John Kellens, the member of the group most connected to Angelou’s personal life, had at the time of their first meeting written Young Blood (1954), for which he was also writing the screenplay. Sarah Wright wrote the acclaimed novel This Child’s Gonna Live (1969) a potent testimony to black female survival. Angelou’s close friend, Rosa Guy, who protected her during stormy pre-marital clashes with Vus Make, 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 reading I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, readers know about Angelou’s devotion to writers since childhood. Her earliest literary idols were men – James Weldon Johnson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and William Shakespeare. Although she admired women writers – Anne Spencer, Jessie Fauset, Nello Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston – she
does not mention them in *Caged Bird*. 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 acknowledgement 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 acknowledgements 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” (19: 123). She then lists the names of twelve women whose friendships affected her sense of female identity, among them her friend of thirty years, Dolly A. McPherson; Ghanaian folklorest Efua Sutherland; and novelists Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall and Louise Merriwethes.

Asked whether *The Heart of a Woman* is the book in which she starts becoming 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 strength of character (“Icon” 1997).

In Harlem, Brooklyn and Manhattan, Angelou takes advantage of opportunities for artistic improvement. She enters an apprenticeship with the Harlem Writers Guild and joins other African American organisations that sought the words and methods for
creating a responsive, black identified community. Like her work with the Writers Guild, Angelou’s work in theatre increases her potential for knowledge and friendship. She had good feelings from singing Solo at Harlem’s famous Apollo Theatre and in other arenas attracting mainly black audiences. Her powerful renditions of Calypso music overjoy many of her listeners for whom Calypso and other types of folk songs are a neglected West Indian art form.

She is 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 1961 play The Blacks. Genet’s play is a satire on the absurdity of white racism. In the play, the black/white roles are reversed so that the formerly oppressed blocks become the aggressors and the formerly affluent whites become their pawns. Angelou loves playing the leading role, even though the idea of reversal of power does not appeal to her sense of democracy. She is 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 which, like The Blacks, is a drama based on role reversal.

Angelou and Cambridge, swayed by the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. collaborate on a fund-raising project at the Village Gate, a popular night club in Greenwich Village, to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Called Cabaret For Freedom, the Fund-raiser is created, directed and performed by Angelou and Cambridge, with help from comics, dancers and other theatre people. Yet despite the cabaret project and a developing personal friendship, Angelou and Cambridge never become lovers. Between them, Angelou says, they “ignited no passionate fires” (53).
A far more public person that she was in the earlier volumes, Angelou begins to identify with the emerging civil-rights movement after working on the fund-raiser. Eventually she becomes Northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She is also committed to a women’s organisation, the cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH).

Soon after meeting South African hero Vusumzi Make in 1961, Angelou and the women of CAWAH almost halt the operations of the UN General Assembly when they conduct a sit-in at the United Nations Building after the Prime Minister of Zaire, Patrice Lumumba is assassinated in 1961. To assist their cause, Angelou and her friend Rosa Guy seek out the support of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X. She and Rosa hope that he and his organization will affirm the actions of CAWAH and make use of the energy incited by the protest gathering. To the contrary, Malcolm X is very disapproving of the protest strategy: “Muslims do not demonstrate”, (168) he responded. Although he predicts that conservative African-American leaders, wanting to be loved by the white man, will quickly turn against the organisers, he does offer to tell the press that the protest means black people are angry. Angelou, although she is disappointed with Malcolm X’s response is nonetheless entranced by his good looks and his fire, traits that had also attracted her to South African rebel Vusumzi Make.

The second major change in Angelou’s character occurs when she meets Vusumzi Make, a freedom fighter recently released from a South African prison. They meet 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, Vus 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 Colour” who gives her “lavish satisfaction” (100). But Vus is electrifying, exciting, beautiful; if she marries Thomas 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).

But in London the couple soon begins to spend 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 sister’s stories about their struggles under colonialism, she enthralls them with heroic tales about their struggles under colonialism, she enthralls 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 make authority, as 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. Mayo’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, novelist 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 honour 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, persuade Maya 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” (55). She begins to realise – as she knew very well from his behaviour 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 favour 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 Angelou’s 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. While each book is a serial autobiography and must be read independently, the reading process is greatly enriched by recognising 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, 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 (157). Her racial consciousness becomes a major theme in *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* in which she explores her feelings of guilt about slavery and about being homeless, neither an African nor an African American. Her search does not 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 found him on the road and brought 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” (163). Angelou, although she rarely repeats the same episode in detail, does so in this instance, restating many of their 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 storyline, since it is Guy’s car crash that keeps Angelou in Ghana. Her retelling of the car accident, first in volume four and again in volume five, emphasises 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, 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 and her suffering over her injured son. As she faces these problems she continues the process of redefining herself. 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.

Like Gather Together in My Name, The Heart of a Woman opens with several paragraphs of historical reflection intended to locate the autobiographer in time and place. The book covers Maya’s life from 1957 to 1962. At the beginning blacks and whites are enveloped in contradictions. The highly regarded, tennis player, Althea Gibson, has become America’s first black women’s singles Champion. In the same America, President Eisenhower dispatches federal troops to Arkansas, where black children and their parents are hoping to integrate the Little Rock School system.

In the more personal opening sequence of The Heart of a Woman, Angelou and her son Guy are living communally on a house boat near San Francisco, trying to bridge the gap between black and white and living on the savings she has put aside while singing
in California and in Hawaii. Within a year, she and Guy move from the commune to a rented house near San Francisco, 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 organising, and her son. She becomes involved with Martin Luther King’s growing civil-rights organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), doing the job of a significant fund-raiser for King and becoming a key organiser in his group. These activities make *The Heart of a Woman* the most political segment of Angelou’s autobiographical statement”.

Her activities with SCLC cease shortly after Angelou meets Vusumzi Make, a handsome South African. After a wedding ceremony in London that is never legalised, 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 enroute, 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 Travelling Shoes*, begins.

*The Heart of a Woman*, the most political segment of Angelou’s autobiographical statement, is set against the political upsurge of Afro-Americans and Africans between 1957 and 1962. From being peripheral to the political life of her people, Angelou etches herself more centrally into the rising Civil Rights movement and the African liberation struggle. Through her participation in them she becomes more of a person in the Platonic sense. As a result, the theme of this segment of her autobiography can be taken from the
message that she heard Martin Luther King, the great Afro-American freedom fighter, deliver in Harlem:

We, the black people, the most displaced, the poorest, the most maligned and scourged, we had the glorious task of reclaiming the soul and saving the country. We, the most hated, must take hate into our hands and by the miracle of love, turn loathing into love. We, the most feared and apprehensive, must take fear and by love, change it into hope. We, who die daily in large and small ways, must take the demon death and turn it into life (1986: 56).

_The Heart of a Woman_, then locates itself within the Afro-American and African struggle for liberation. It begins in Harlem in 1957 when Angelou joins the Harlem Writers Guild, and explores her involvement with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the “awakening summer of 1960”, when “the entire country was in labour. Something wonderful was about to be born, and we were all going to be good parents to welcome the child. Its name was Freedom” (HOW 71). The book traces Angelou’s growing consciousness as a woman (“I wanted to be a wife and to create a beautiful home to make my man happy, but there was more to life than being a diligent maid with a permanent pussy” (143) and takes us to Ghana, where Kwame Nkrumah, the African hero, “had wedded Marxism to the innate African socialism, and was loved by black people all over the world as he was hated and feared by whites in power” (260). She recounts her meeting with Billie Holiday, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Oliver Tambo, leader of the African National Congress, as well as her friendship with his wife, her move from California to Harlem, her marriage to Vus (Vusumzi Make), an African freedom fighter, her subsequent involvement with the African liberation struggle, her living in Egypt, her work with the _Arab Observer_, and her move to Ghana, where her son, Guy is admitted to University. While Angelou does not examine any of these concepts
that arise in her work, they allow us to chart her development against a wider spectrum of social behaviour and political practices.

In the process, two important intellectual reformulations occur in her statement. First, we observe the development of Angelou and her son and the subtle change of emphasis from a purely nationalist to an internationalist perspective of black people’s struggle. This changed dimension is emphasised when Guy comments to his mother on the meeting between Nikita Khrushchev, former general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and Fidel Castro, President of Cuba: “To me, a black man, the meeting of Cuba and the Soviet Union in Harlem, is the most important thing that could happen. It means that, in my time, I am seeing powerful forces get together to oppose Capitalism. I don’t know how it was in your time, the olden days, but in modern America this was something I had to see. It will influence my future” (97).

The second transformation occurs when Vus, in describing the significance of Jean Genet’s play, *The Blacks*, to Angelou, brings to her attention the fact that blacks could behave just as cruelly as whites if their struggle does not adopt the correct ideological safeguards. He notes that there is nothing innately different in blacks. “Black people are human. No more, no less. Our backgrounds, our history make us act differently . . . Most black revolutionaries, most black activists, do not really want change. They want exchange this play points to that likelihood. And our people need to face the temptation” (175). Such dangers, he observes, have to be fought against. The Pan-Africanist vision of the work, its sense of a shared history and destiny, and the persistence of memory that binds all Africans and Afro-Americans together differentiate *The Heart of a Woman* from all of the other segments of her autobiography.
In this text, whites are noticeably peripheral to the central concerns. Black people have come into time and place and are the subjects of their own history. For the first time, they begin to create their own social selves; this is the strength of the statement. Where Angelou recognised her Americanness in *Singin’ and Swingin*, in this work she discovers that her Afro-Americanness is shaped inextricably by the currents of African history and culture. This explains the sadness that enraptures her soul when she leaves Egypt to go to Ghana:

I had never felt that Egypt was really Africa, but now that our route had taken us across the Sahara, I could look down from my window seat and see trees, and bushes, rivers and dense forest. It all began here. The jumble of poverty–striken children sleeping in rat-infested tenements or abandoned cars. The terrifying moan of my grandmother, “Broad of Heaven, Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more”. The drugged days and alcoholic mights of men for whom hope had not been born. The loneliness of women who would never know appreciation or a mite’s share of honour. Here, there, along the banks of that river, someone was taken, tied with ropes, shackled with chains, forced to march for weeks carrying the double burden of neck irons and abysmal fear. In that large clump of trees, looking like wood moss from the Plane’s great height, boys and girls had been hunted like beasts, caught and tethered together. Sacrificial lambs on the altar of greed. America’s period of orgiastic lynchings had begun on younder broad Savannah (HOW 257).

In a way, the text ends where it began, with Afro-America (Harlem) reaching out to Africa (Ghana); from the urban disintegration of Harlem, to the promised beginnings of recently liberated Ghana, the first African country to be granted independence from the British colonial power. For many Afro-Americans, the independence of Ghana coincides with their rising nationalism and quest for liberation. Both of these concerns signify a new beginning and give Afro-Americans a new pride in themselves. Such freedom causes Angelou to cast her mind back to the plight of her brothers and sisters in America and wonder what will happen to the little black children who have to “walk between rows
of cursing, spitting white women and men, enroute to school (and) uniformed police (who) sicked dogs on them just because they wanted to get to class” (219).

For a moment, she would be protected by Africa. The entrance of Guy into the University of Ghana and his attempt to wrest control of his life from his mother point to a new social self. The movement of Africa suggests that inherent in the formulation of the Afro-American self is the related African dimension that cannot be ignored as Afro-Americans try to determine who they are and where they belong.

In many ways, Angelou meets her readers’s expectations as she follows her life forward chronologically in organising the newest segment in the series. Yet it is interesting to note that at the beginning of The Heart of a Woman, as she continues the account of her son’s youth, she returns to the story of her own childhood repeatedly. The references to her childhood serve partly to create a textual link for readers who might be unfamiliar with the earlier volumes and partly to emphasise the suggestive similarities between her own childhood and that of her son. Maya Angelou’s overwhelming sense of displacement and instability is, ironically, her son’s burden too.

The most significant similarity between their childhood years is the condition of displacement in a familial as well as a geographical sense. Both Angelou and Guy, her son, are displaced from their immediate families several times during their youth. They are placed in the care of relatives or family friends and are moved from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and state to state. In a brief flashback in the second chapter of The Heart of a Woman, the writer reminds us of the displacement which characterised her youth and links this aspect of her past with her son’s present attitude. When Guy is fourteen, Angelou decides to move to New York. She does not bring Guy to New York until she
has found a place for them to live, and when he arrives after a one-month separation, he initially resists her attempts to make a new home for them:

The air between us [Angelou and Guy] was burdened with his aloof scorn. I understood him too well.

When I was three my parents divorced in Long Beach, California and sent me and my four-year old brother, unescorted, to our paternal grandmother. We wore wrist tags which informed anyone concerned that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, enroute to Mrs. Annie Henderson in Stamps, Arkansas.

Except for disastrous and mercifully brief encounters with each of them when I was seven we didn’t see our parents again until I was thirteen (2002: 86).

From this and similar encounters with Guy, Angelou learns that the continual displacement of her own childhood is something she cannot prevent from recurring in her son’s life.

Rather than a unique cycle perpetuated only within her family, Angelou’s individual story presents a clear pattern commonly shared and passed along to new generations continually. In fact she identifies her own situation and the threat of displacement as a common condition among black families in America and acknowledges the special responsibility of the black mother: “She questions whether she loves her children enough – or more terribly, does she love them too much? . . . In the face of these contradictions, she must provide a blanket of stability, which warms but does not suffocate, and she must tell her children the truth about the power of white power without suggesting that it cannot be challenged” (37). Providing stability for children as the family disintegrates is a virtually impossible task, not only for Angelou but for many women in similar situations. After the dissolution of the family, the single parent is often left with an overwhelming sense of guilt and inadequacy; and, for
Angelou, the burden is all the more taxing, because she has been solely responsible for her son from the very beginning of his life.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou includes numerous anecdotes from Guy’s youth which mirror problems she has also faced. These compelling accounts suggest the recurring pattern of displacement and rejection in the relationship between mother and child. Many times Angelou feels that she and her son are skating dangerously “on thin ice!” as a child, Guy expects his mother to offer him constant attention and affection as well as the basic requirements of food and shelter, for which Angelou must often work along hours at more than one job. Her babysitting expenses alone often consume a substantial part of her meagre income.

Guy’s needs, however, are not simple, and in addition to love, companionship, and the basic necessities, he frequently intimates that his mother should be responsible for order and security on a universal level as well. “My son expected warmth, food, housing, clothes and stability. He could be certain that no matter which way my fortune turned he would receive most of the things he desired. Stability, however, was not possible in my world; consequently it couldn’t be possible in his” (123). Angelou’s sense of personal failure in caring adequately for Guy lingers for many years. Similarly his sense of disappointment and rejection is reinforced every time his mother brings a new man into their already tenuous relationship or suggests yet another relocation to enhance her professional or economic status.

As Angelou narrates selected events that illustrate the periods of displacement in Guy’s life, she adapts elements from both fiction and fantasy. Although she is clearly working within the genre of autobiography, Angelou freely borrows from these two
traditionally more imaginative types of writing. On numerous occasions in her earlier volumes, she has employed what has become a rather personalised autobiographical style, a method which integrates ingredients from diverse modes of writing and gracefully crosses over traditionally static generic lines. One of the most memorable uses of fantasy in all of Angelou’s writing is found in *Caged Bird* and involves a visit to a racist dentist in Stamps. As a child, she imagines that her grandmother grows to gigantic height and instantly gains superhuman strength to retaliate against the bigoted dentist who refuses to treat Angelou. In *Heart of Woman*, she combines fiction and fantasy with the more standard biographical or historical mode to capture the subtleties of her relationship with her son and to emphasise the apparent similarities between their lives.

Examples of fictionalisation in *The Heart of a Woman* are quite varied. They range from rather common techniques such as representational detail in description and reconstructed accounts of actual dialogue, to more specialised devices used to create a sense of history beyond the individual life story and to include other narratives from folklore within her own narrative. Each fictional technique contributes to the overall completeness and credibility of the autobiographical text.

(i)

In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou deliberately strives to capture the individual conversational styles of her relatives and friends. In a sense, her friends and acquaintances become “characters” in the story of her life, and like any good writer of fiction, she attempts to make their conversations realistic and convincing. With some of the people who figure in her autobiography, there is no objective measure for credibility other than the reader’s critical appreciation for life itself. If the conversant in question is
not well-known beyond the scope of the autobiography, Angelou need only ensure that the dialogue attributed to the individual be consistent with his/her character as delineated in the text itself. Yet many of her friends and associates were either highly successful celebrities or popular political figures, and the conversations recorded in her life story have points of reference beyond the autobiographical text. In other words, readers can test the degree of verisimilitude in the recorded dialogues with either first hand knowledge or second hand sources of information about the celebrities lives.

It is highly probable, for example, that many of Angelou’s readers are already familiar with the rhetorical styles of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and the popular lyrics of Billie Holiday. In fact, the lives of these three people in such accounts as *Why We Can’t Wait*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *Lady Sings the Blues* have in many ways become part of American contemporary folk history. Angelou adds a personalised quality to her recollections of conversations with these individuals and many others. The record of their conversations in *Heart of a Woman* brings them to life again, because the autobiographer is sensitive to and even somewhat self-conscious about the accurate reconstruction of their individual styles.

Since memory is not infallible, fictionalisation comes into play whenever the autobiographer reconstructs or, perhaps more correctly, recreates conversation. While the autobiographer relies on invention, he or she creates the illusion of an infallible memory that records exactly the feel of a place and the words spoken there. Thus, when Angelou narrates visits with Billie Holiday in Laurel Canyon, she takes care to imitate her rather flamboyant verbal style:
... She [Billie Holiday] talked about Hawaii.

“People love ‘the islands.’ ‘Hell, all that shit is a bunch of water and a bunch of sand. So the sun shines all the time. What the hell else is the Sun supposed to do?”

“But didn’t you find it beautiful? The soft air, the flowers, the palm frees and the people? The Hawaiians are so pretty.’

“They just a bunch of niggers. Niggers running around with no clothes on. And that music shit they play. Uhn, Uhn.” She imitated the sound of a ukulele.

“No, I’d rather be in New York. Everybody in New York City is a son of a bitch, but atleast they don’t pretend they’re something else” (9).

As much as Angelou is shocked by the first words that tumble out of the famous entertainer’s mouth, she is moved by Holiday’s sensitivity in communicating with a precocious young boy who would be offended by any “off-colour” phrases:

“She carefully avoided profanity and each time she slipped, she’d excuse herself to Guy, Saying, ‘It’s just another bad habit I got’ (13).

Holiday and Guy soon develop a balanced rapport and thoroughly enjoy the little time they spend together. Guy exuberantly tells her about his adventures and the books he has read, while she in turn sings her sorrowful songs to him as she relaxes and finds solace in the company of the child. In a sense, the anecdotes about Billie Holiday in Heart of a Woman form a tribute to her, for as Angelou admits, “I would remember forever the advice of a lonely sick woman, with a waterfront mouth, who sang pretty songs to a twelve-year-old boy” (17).

In addition to using fictional techniques in the reconstruction of dialogue, Angelou turns to fictionalisation to create a sense of history larger than the story of her own life. In her description of her meeting with Malcolm X, for example Angelou combines the re-creation of credible dialogue with historical references that go beyond
her individual life. Again there are points of reference beyond the writer’s account that measure its accuracy.

In one scene, Angelou and her close friend Rosa Guy, both representatives of the Cultural Association of Women of African Heritage, decide to call on Malcolm X to ask for his help in controlling a potential riot situation brought about by their United Nations demonstration to protest the death of Lumumba. The following dialogue demonstrates her talent for remembering and recording their conversation as precisely as possible:

I joined the telling, and we distributed our story equally, like the patter of a long-time vaudeville duo.
“We-CAWAH...”
“Cultural Association of Women of African Heritage”.
“Wanted to protest the murder of Lumumba so we—“
“Planned a small demonstration.
We didn’t expect —“
“More than fifty people—“
“And thousands came”
“that told us that the people of Harlem are angry and that they are more for Africa and Africans”
“than they ever let on . . .” (167)

Face to face with Malcolm X, Angelou and her friend, both extremely articulate women, are reduced to a stammering “vaudeville duo.” The stichomythic rhythm in the reconstructed conversation suggests the degree of intimidation that the women experienced in the presence of Malcolm X. The power of his personality causes their initial uneasiness, which soon turns to disappointment as Malcolm X coolly refuses to involve his Muslim followers in public demonstration.

Angelou’s unsuccessful interview with the Harlem leader provides a clear contrast to her first meeting with Martin Luther King. The larger historical context of their exchange expands the personal perimeter of her life story. At the time of her first conversation with King, Angelou has been working as Northern Coordinator of the
Southern Christian Leadership Conference in New York. She has devoted the previous months to raising funds, boosting membership, and organising volunteer labour both in the office and in the neighbourhoods. When Dr. King pays his first visit to the New York office during her tenure, she does not have advance notice of his presence and rushes into her office one day after lunch to find him sitting at her desk. They begin to talk about her background and eventually focus their comments on her brother, Bailey:

Come on, take your seat back and tell me about yourself.”

. . . . When I mentioned my brother Bailey, he asked what he was doing now.

The question stopped me. He was friendly and understanding, but is I told him my brother was in prison, I couldn’t be sure how long his understanding would last. I could lose my job. Even more important, I might lose his respect. Birds of a feather and all that, but I took a chance and told him Bailey was in Sing Sing.

He dropped his head and looked at his hands . . . .

“I understand. Disappointment drives our young man to same desperate lengths.” Sympathy and sadness kept his voice low. “That’s why we must fight and win. We must save the Baileys of the world. And Maya, never stop loving him. Never give up on him. Never deny him. And remember, he is freer than those who hold him behind bars” (92-93).

Angelou appreciates King’s sympathy, and of course shares his hope that their work will make the world more fair and free. She recognises the undeniable effects of displacement on Bailey’s life and fervently hopes that her son, who has not escaped the pain of displacement, will be spared any further humiliation and rejection.

When Angelou extends her personal narrative to include anecdotes about well-known entertainers or political figures, or observations about significant historical events, she necessarily fictionalises the story of her past. Fictionalisation is clearly at play on both a conscious and an unconscious level in the act of remembering and transcribing key
events from her private life, but it becomes virtually inevitable in recording her subjective impressions about a public event or person. Whenever there is more than one account of an event, as there usually is in the public or historical context, comparisons reveal inconsistencies or discrepancies that are the product of varied individual response. Thus fictionalisation occurs when Angelou includes other narratives within the narrative of her life. Each borrowed story is usually a sampling of folklore, but is told in a slightly different context to achieve a special effect within the autobiography.

One example of adapting borrowed narratives to illuminate her own story involves the folktale of Brer Rabbit. Several months after Angelou marries the South African freedom fighter Vusumzi Make, they decide to move from their apartment in New York to Cairo to facilitate Make’s efforts to raise funds and political support for the cause. When they leave for Egypt with Guy, the family looks forward to a period untroubled by the abusive telephone threats that riddled the domestic peace of their lives together in New York. But although the threatening telephone calls end when they move to Cairo, Angelou finds a different restriction on her life that has little to do with political sanctions of the South African Government: the wife of a well-known activist, she ironically finds her own lifeless free and is not at liberty to find work for herself, because her husband prefers that she stay at home and devote her time fully to her responsibilities as housewife and mother.

After several months in Cairo, however, the Make family suffers financial restraints, and Angelou takes it upon herself to seek employment without her husband’s knowledge. Through the help of a family friend, she is offered the job of Editor of *The Arab Observer*, a Cairo-based news journal with an international scope. Although she
has not been trained professionally in journalism, Angelou accepts the position, partly to supplement the family income but more importantly to meet the challenge of the job. The challenge of being editor is a significant one, not only because of the demanding and diverse responsibilities but, more critically, because as a black American woman working with a male staff in a country deeply influenced by the Islamic faith, Angelou has to prove herself on more than one level.

The conditions in her office at first are less than friendly. When Angelou gives an account of the relief she experienced when moved from her centrally located desk into a rather secluded library, she borrows a popular tale from Joel Chandler Harris’ *Brer Rabbit*:

> Finally, when the farmer had the rabbit turning at a fast speed, he pointed him toward the briar patch and let go. Brer Rabbit landed on his feet. This eyes were dry and bright. His ears perked up and waved. Brer Rabbit grinned at the farmer, his teeth shining white as buttermilk. He said, “Home, at last. Home at last. Great God Almighty, I’m home at last.”

> I smiled sweetly as the men shoved and pulled my desk into the library. When they left, and I stood before the crowded book shelves, reading unfamiliar titles and the names of authors unknown to me, still I felt just like Brer Rabbit in the briar patch (233).

Angelou equates her delight in her move to the library with Brer Rabbit’s relief at being tossed into the briar patch by the farmer. Both are victims, in a sense, of their situations yet both use their native wit and resourcefulness to overcome debilitating odds. The books in the library are written in English and are just what Angelou needs to supplement her knowledge of international politics and *The Arab World*. Moreover, by borrowing the Brer Rabbit narrative, Angelou makes an implicit comparison between her own position as a black American woman in an African, Islamic, male-oriented world and the inhumane conditions of black Americans in slavery. Finally, by including one of
the earliest examples of folk literature about blacks in America, Angelou places her own narrative within the ranks of an established folk tradition.

Just as her experiences as a black American in Africa call to mind Brer Rabbit on occasion, so she recalls the stories of several slave heroines while attending an informal gathering of African women in London. All of the women present are the wives of political activists in the struggle to end apartheid and second-class citizenship for black Africans. Although their national backgrounds are quiet different, they share the same sense of frustration and ineffectualness in comparison with their husbands, who ironically enjoy more autonomy in the fight for freedom. To ease their sense of uselessness, they gather one day in the home of Mrs. Oliver Tambo, the wife of the leader of the African National congress. Here the women narrate traditional tales from African folklore. Although Angelou initially feels somewhat estranged from the spontaneous ceremony, she is soon moved to share folktales from the tradition of slave narratives concerning women who led the fight for freedom in America.

Her first story narrates the history of Harriet Tubman, a model of the strong black women at the heart of American history, a woman who fought against devastating odds and suffered extraordinary personal sacrifice to free many of her people. Tubman is, therefore, an appropriate figure to celebrate in an international group of black women. Tubman, Angelou tells then, “Stood on free ground, above a free sky, hundreds of miles from the chains and lashes of slavery and said, ‘I must go back. With the help of god I will bring others to freedom,’ and . . . although suffering brain damage from a slaver’s blow, she walked back and forth through the lands of bondage time after time and brought hundreds of her people to freedom” (137) pleased with the success of her first
tale, Angelou follows the inspiring story of Harriet Tubman with an even more dramatic presentation of the heroism of Sojourner Truth. Once again she selects the figure of a fearless black American woman who devoted her life to end slavery and to educate both northerners and southerners about the responsibilities of freedom. Sojourner Truth, like Harriet Tubman, is a fitting example of the essential strength of black American women celebrating the same heroic characteristics in their ancestors. The anecdote relates an equal rights meeting in the 1800s at which Truth addressed the group and was accused by a white man of being a man dressed as a woman:

“Ain’t I a woman? I have suckled your babes at this breast.”

Here she put her large hands on her bodice. Grabbing the cloth she pulled. The threads gave way, the blouse and her undergarments parted and her huge tits hung, pendulously free. She continued, her face unchanging and her voice never faltering, “And ain’t I a woman?”

When I finished the story, my hands tugging at the buttons of my blouse, the African women stood applauding, stamping their feet and crying proud of their sister whom they had not known a hundred years before (138).

The stories about Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, like the folktale of Brer Rabbit, enlarge the scope of Angelou’s autobiography and bring certain historical points of reference to the story of one person’s life. Readers come to understand Heart of a Woman not only through the avenues of her life opened in the text but through the samplings of folklore that are included as well. Fictionalisation comes into play as Angelou adapts these borrowed narratives and anecdotes to illustrate the theme of displacement in her life and her son’s.

Angelou, thus, adapts fictional techniques in Heart of a Woman to make her life story fully realistic and convincing, and to supplement the personal scope with the larger
historical context. In addition Angelou uses elements of fantasy to illustrate disappointments and defeats she has experienced in life and to reveal the complexity of her relationship with her son. Her use of fantasy can be divided into two types: the narration of a fantasy that ends in illusion and suggests the autobiographer’s somewhat ironic stance in examining her past and the narration of a fantasy that becomes reality and emphasizes her inability to protect her son and herself from harmful influences. With both types of fantasy, the writer stresses the importance of imagination when a situation does not measure up to one’s expectations.

One of the most important examples of the first type of fantasy concerns Angelou’s prospects for marriage at various times in her life. She includes her unrealistic hopes for her impending marriages to demonstrate how firmly she had believed in the American dream of stability through marriage and family. Even in the earlier *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou had accounted for her illusory belief that she had finally met the man of her dreams who would give her everything she had always loved—love, domestic tranquility, security, children, and an attractive house in the suburbs modelled after *Better Homes and Gardens*:

> At last I was a housewife, legally a member of that enviable tribe of consumers whom security made as fat as butter and who under no circumstances considered living by bread alone, because their husbands brought home the bacon. I had a son, a gather for him, a husband and a pretty home for us to live in. My life began to resemble a Good Housekeeping advertisement. I cooked well-balanced meals and molded fabulous jello desserts. My floors were dangerous with daily applications of wax and our furniture slick with polish.

When Angelou describes her fantasy about marriage and its power to bring normalcy and stability to her life, whether in *Singin’ and Swingin’* or *Heart of a Woman*,

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she uses an ironic point of view to suggest how much she had yet to learn about marriage. Her ironic stance, thereby, fosters understanding on the part of the reader.

In *Heart of a Woman*, Angelou stresses the irony in her present perspective of juxtaposing her fantasised notion of marriage with the way two relationships actually develop. She carefully exposes her illusory hopes and underscores her naïveté with the actual disappointment she experienced. While working in New York, Angelou meets Thomas Allen, a bail bondsman, whom she plans to marry in order to bring stability into her life and a father into Guy’s. For some years, she has looked for a strong, honest man who, ideally, would help her shoulder the responsibility of raising Guy. She privately imagines the assumed advantages of marrying Thomas until she has convinced herself of her dream:

> I was getting used to the idea and even liking it. We’d buy a nice house out on Long Island, where he had relatives. I would join a church and some local women’s volunteer organisations. Guy wouldn’t mind another move if he was assumed that it was definitely the last one. I would let my hair grow out and get it straightened and was pretty hats with flowers and gloves and look like a nice coloured woman from Sanfransisco (102).

But even before the fantasy becomes an illusion, Angelou begins to distrust her dream-like wishes. Her friends and his family caution them not to marry, and she even feels a “twinge which tried to warn me that should stop and do some serious thinking” (103).

Angelou however, ignores this annoying suspicion as long as possible, until, one evening when Allen is at her home for dinner, she suddenly realises what her real future with him would be like:

> At home, Guy watched television and Thomas read the sports pages while I cooked dinner. I knew that but for my shocking plans, we were acting out the tableau of our future. Into Eternity, Guy would be in his room, laughing at *I Love Lucy* and Thomas would be evaluating the chances of
an athlete [sic] or a national baseball team, and I would be leaning over the store, preparing food for the “shining dinner hour,” Into Eternity (124).

In spite of this rather sobering premonition, Angelou does not make her decision to break her engagement with Thomas, until she meets Vus Make, who convinces her that she would be in a better position to offer her gift of humanism to others if she were married to a South African political figure rather than to a bail bondsman.

Although Vus Make’s goals are quite different from Thomas Allen’s, Angelou experiences the same belief in a perfect fantasy future with her prospective husband – and its dissolution. Part of her imagined future would provide her with the same domestic security she had hoped would develop from other relationships. “I was getting a husband, and a part of that gift was having someone to share responsibilities and guilt” (131). Yet her hopes are even more idealistic than usual, in as much as she imagines herself participating in the liberation of South Africa as Vus Make’s wife: “with my courage added to his own, he would succeed in bringing the ignominious white role in South Africa to an end. If I didn’t already have the qualities he needed, then I would just develop them. Infatuation made me believe in my ability to create myself into my lover’s desire” (123). In reality Angelou is only willing to go so far in recreating herself to meet her husband’s desires and is all too soon frustrated with her role as Make’s wife. He does not want her to work, but is unable to support his expensive tastes, as well as his family, on his own. The family is evicted from their New York apartment just before they leave for Egypt, and they soon face similar problems in Cairo, their marriage dissolves after some months despite Angelou’s efforts to hold her own as Editor of The Arab Observer. In her autobiography she underscores the illusory nature of her fantasy about marriage to show how her perspective has shifted over the years and how much understanding she
has gained about life in general. Fantasy, for Angelou, is a form of truth-telling and a way to present subtle truths about her life to her readers.

The second type of fantasy in *Heart of a Woman* is born out in reality rather than in illusion, as is the case with her expectations for marriage. One of the most important uses of the second kind of fantasy involves a sequence that demonstrates how much Angelou fears for Guy’s safety throughout his youth. Although her imagination is more sensitive than are the imaginations of most, the recurrent vision of one’s child meeting with unexpected danger is common to most parents. Angelou organises her repetitive fantasies about Guy into a pattern in her autobiography to explain the guilt and inadequacy she often felt in her role as mother.

Throughout her life, she strives to balance the responsibilities of motherhood and the demands of her career as a professional entertainer and writer. Since she has the primary responsibility for raising Guy without a husband and earning an income adequate to meet their basic needs, Angelou is often faced with an impossible situation. She cannot spend as much time with her son as she would like and hold a full-time job at the same time. Thus she is often caught in a situation for which no solution is satisfactory, and she cannot help but suffer from the paradox of being both a victim and a perpetrator of the cycle of displacement.

The first sample of a fantasy which involves a threat to Guy’s life relates to his mother’s career as a professional singer. Although Angelou has vowed to give up the life of an entertainer permanently, she cannot resist an invitation to perform at the opening of the Gate of Horn in Chicago. She naturally has second thoughts about leaving Guy on his own, but cannot turn down the opportunity to earn enough money in two weeks to pay
two months rent. Before leaving New York, she makes arrangements with her close
friend John Killens to watch over Guy, even though he is already quite independent and
often resents the implication that he needs care or guidance. She also hires an older black
woman to stay at her home and cook for Guy.

As she is checking out of her hotel in Chicago, Angelou is called to the phone to
hear Killens’ voice tell her that there has been trouble. His first words are enough to
awaken her deepest fears and replay an all-too-familiar scenario:

The dread, closer than a seer’s familiar, which lived sucking off
my life, was that something would happen to my only son. He would be
stolen, kidnapped by a lonely person who, seeing his perfection, would be
unable to resist. He would be struck by an Errant bus, hit by a car out of
control. He would walk a high balustrade, showing his beauty and
coordination to a girl who was pretending disinterest. His foot would slip,
his body would fold and crumble, he would fall fifty feet and someone
would find my phone number. I would be minding my own business and
a stranger would call me to the phone.

“Hello?”
A voice would say. “There’s been trouble.”
My nightmare never went further.
I never knew how serious the accident was, or my response. And
now real life pushed itself through the telephone (75).

“Real life,” in the form of Killens’ voice, assures her that Guy is now safe at his home but
does not tell her any related details on the telephone, thus allowing her fantasy to grow.
Back in New York, she learns that her son has received a threat from a local gang,
because the leader’s girlfriend has accused Guy of insulting her. As soon as she return
and has a chance to survey the circumstances, Angelou confronts the gang leader directly
and warns him against further contact with her son. Although Guy is never actually
harmed by the gang, his mother’s fantasised nightmare has been brought a step closer to
“real life”.

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A second segment in the pattern of fantasy concerning danger threatening Guy’s life relates to the telephone harassment the Make family experiences before their move to Cairo. Shortly after her marriage to Make, Angelou begins to receive threatening phone calls during the day when neither Vus nor Guy is at home. Most concern her husband and, according to him, are placed by people working for the South Africa government. Initially Angelou responds to all of the telephone calls as if they were true, but gradually learns to distance herself from the immediate shock and lingering fear. Even changing their telephone number does not put an end to the calls; and, occasionally, the unidentified voice informs her that her son has met with unexpected danger and will not be returning home. These calls, of course, nurture her recurrent fantasy about Guy’s safety and show the vulnerability she feels as a mother trying to protect her child from any form of danger:

One afternoon I answered the telephone and was thumped into a fear and subsequent rage so dense that I was made temporarily deaf.

“Hello, Maya make?” shreds of a southern accent still hung in the white woman’s voice.

“Yes? Maya make speaking.”

I thought the woman was probably a journalist or a theater critic, wanting an interview from Maya Angelou make, the actress.

“I’m calling about Guy.” My mind shifted quickly from a pleasant anticipation to apprehension.

“Are you from his school? What is the matter?”

“No, I’m at Mid-town Hospital. I’m sorry but there’s been a serious accident. We’d like you to come right away. Emergency ward.” (193).

Angelou does not stop to think about the recent telephone threats until she arrives at the emergency ward to discover that Guy is not there. A telephone call to his school soon
assures her that he is safe in his classroom and that she has been the victim of the South African threats and her own fear for her son’s life.

Yet not all threats to Guy’s life end as harmlessly as the challenge from the gang and the anonymous phone calls. In Accra, where Angelou and Guy go after her marriage with Vus Make deteriorates, she receives another shocking intrusion from “real life”. The difference between this warning of danger and all others in the pattern is that this threat brings fantasy to the level of reality. The threat is neither speculative nor alleged, but real.

Just a few days after their arrival in Ghana, some friends invite Angelou and Guy to a picnic. Although his mother declines, Guy immediately accepts the invitation in a show of independence. On the way home from the day’s outing, her son is seriously injured in an automobile accident. Even though he has had very little experience driving, Guy is asked to drive, because his host is too intoxicated to operate the car himself. At the time of the collision, the car is at a standstill.

The pair’s return delayed, Angelou, before long, is once again terrified by her recurrent nightmare concerning Guy’s safety. This time, however, the fantasy becomes reality:

Korle Bu’s emergency ward was painfully bright. I started down the corridor and found myself in a white tunnel, interrupted by a single looded gumey, resting against a distant wall. I walked up to the movable table and saw my son, stretched his full length under white sheets. His rich golden skin paled to ash-grey. His eyes dosed and his head at an unusual angle.

I took my arm away from Alice’s group and told katic to stop her stupid snuffling. When they backed away, I looked at my son, my real life. He was born to me when I was seventeen. I had taken him away from my mother’s house when he was two months old, and except for a year I spent in Europe without him, and a month. When he was stolen by
a deranged woman, we had sport our lives together. My grown life lay stretched before me, stiff as a pine board, in a strange country, blood caked on his face and clotted on his clothes (263).

Although Angelou has never been to Korle Bu Hospital, the emergency ward is painfully familiar. The crisis becomes all the more urgent because they are as yet unaccustomed to the language and have very little available money. Angelou captures the depth of her fear by calling her injured, immobile son, “my real life,” “my grown life.” In this sequence of fantasy moving to the level of reality, the autobiographer suggests the vulnerability she felt in her role as a mother with full responsibility for the well being of her only child. In a new country, estranged from her husband with no immediate prospects for employment, Angelou possesses very little control over her life or her son’s safety. After the accident in Ghana, Guy is not only striving for independence from his mother but for life itself.

The complex nature of her relationship with her son is at the heart of this most recent of Angelou’s autobiographical volumes. At the end, Guy is seventeen and has just passed the matriculation exams at the University of Ghana. The last scene pictures Guy driving off to his new dormitory room with several fellow University students. The conclusion of The Heart of a Woman announces a new beginning for Angelou and hope for her future relationship with Guy. In this sense, the newest volume in the series follows the pattern established by the conclusions of the earlier volumes. Caged Bird ends with the birth of Guy, Gather Together with the return to her mother’s home in San Francisco after regaining her innocence through the lessons of a drug addict, and Singin’ and Swingin’ with the reunion of mother and son in a paradisiacal setting of a Hawaiian resort. The final scene of The Heart of a Woman suggests that the future will bring more
balance between dependence and independence in their relationship and that both will have significant personal successes as their lives begin to take different courses. Although Guy has assumed that he has been fully “grown up” for years, they have at last reached a point where they can treat each other as adults and allow one another the chance to live independently. Many of Angelou’s victories are reflected in Guy in the last scene, for, although Guy is the same age she is at the end of *Caged Bird*, his young life promises many more opportunities and rewards as a result of his mother’s perseverance and her belief “that life loved the person who dared to live it.” Moreover, Angelou shares Guy’s fresh sense of liberation; she too is embarking on a new period of strength and independence as she begins her life yet again – on her own and in a new land. It is from this position of security that Maya Angelou looks back to record her life story and to compensate for the years of distance and displacement through the autobiographical act.

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 three different issues. Maya mothering Guy, Vivian mothering Maya, Vivian 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 school teachers 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, in an interview: “I’ve always been adventurous on 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 “goodbye” as she ends 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 has 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 further confrontation with Jerry.

In this scene, Angelou reveals that she is still enthralled by the beautiful woman, 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 struck 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 is 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 recognises an emerging new self, a woman liberated in heart and being. The last word of The Heart of Woman is “myself”.

The narrator’s singular aloneness in the 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 humour 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 as well as 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 herself.
The Heart of a Woman does not disappoint the Angelou readers who are accustomed to crisp, poetic prose interspersed with “down home” homilies. It is another professionally written work, exhibiting increasing literary competence. The appellation “poetic temperament” holds as true here as in her other books. The prose is captivating; it maintains the richness and texture of her style. The metaphors are still striking: “Time wrapped every word” (1982: 9). Angelou continues to use scatology to capture individual speech practices. The essence of Billie Holiday cannot be captured without quoting her colourful, uncensored responses. Angelou is proud of Billie Holiday’s friendship and would never demean it by scrubbing street-smart, Billie’s less than sanitary language. What you hear is what she is.

Critics responded favourably to the professional quality of The Heart of a Woman. Choice writes that “while (Angelou’s) first book remains her best . . . every book since has been very much worth the reading and pondering” (1982: 621). Caged Bird gains much of its strength from an extensive use of folklore, a significant omission in The Heart of a Woman. However, this and other books since Caged Bird are less general in scope. The reviews of all Angelou’s books are marked by a uniformity of, light praise but great admiration. No critic suggests that any of the works in the series is less than a delight to read. The courage of the author’s revelations is always applauded.

The Heart of a Woman, as Singin’ and Swingin’, entails constant movement. Angelou is still seeking to find an appropriate home for herself and her son. This is made more difficult by her ongoing efforts to define herself. This is another volume covering a lot of geography and growth. Angelou moves from San Francisco to a Sausalito houseboat commune trying out the beatnik lifestyle; thence to ultra conservative Laurel
Canyon in Los Angeles. Lack of acceptance and racial attacks send her off to the Harlem Writers Guild in New York. She restlessly follows her fate to London to Egypt to Ghana, where the book ends. Whenever the opportunity presents itself, Angelou inserts her rich descriptions to enhance the specific experiences recalled as well as the general credibility of the narrative and also shows an appreciation of the diversity of the world. This reflects Angelou’s growing familiarity with an enlarging sphere and her comfort within it.

*The Heart of a Woman* picks up Angelou’s story after she has left the East of the European travelling Company of *Porgy and Bess* and returned from Hawaii to the night club circuit in America. The book begins at the precise end of its predecessor. Angelou is still the unmarried Africa-American female with a rapidly growing, now adolescent son to support. She is principally concerned during the seven years covered by *The Heart of a Woman* with her relationship with her son – her love of him and her pride in his developing personality and character. Uppermost in her mind is his welfare and helping him cope as a black young man-child trying to mature in a generally unsympathetic white world. He has been taken care of on occasion by others, but Angelou continuously accepts motherhood and its attendant responsibility to monitor his development. This sense of duty incorporates a family relationship and Angelou is concerned with establishing a complete family, which includes a father figure for Guy.

This quest for family brings Angelou to describe her encounters with a number of lovers and potential fathers. In the time-frame of the book, she reports on relationships with several men, the last of which is her ill-fated common law marriage to her second “husband”, Vusumzi Make, a coloured African radical. This is the liaison that carried her
to London, Egypt and Ghana. She eventually finds Make to be a less than desirable role-model for Guy and a trying mate for herself. They part after a few years.

A large portion of the book concerns involvement with the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. Here, she seizes the opportunity to express her pride in her race and in its struggle for equality and acceptance. Like Norman Mailer in his *Armies in the Night*, Angelou serves as an informed personal historian of the moral crisis of the period – racial injustice – that was of popular concern. She is an enthusiastic participant in the movement and not just an outside observer. Daisy Aldan’s previously quoted concern regarding the book’s “... hostility ... toward all white people” (1982: 697) is an outgrowth of the barrage of negative racial experiences Angelou relates. Every possible slur, slight, and affront is visited upon Angelou and her son solely because of their colour. This emphasis also seems to be a justification of the motivations of the black activists who people the book. The more moderate views of Martin Luther King are reported too, and with great admiration. When Angelou chooses to work with an organised group, it is the Southern Leadership followers of Dr. King.

In the early books, Angelou’s mother and grandmother command a considerable amount of attention. Grandmother Henderson has died and is now rarely mentioned, but Angelou still calls on her mother when she needs reinforcement. Vivian provides her with pragmatic advice in the form of proverbs derived from Mother Wit: “Ask for what you want and be prepared to pay for what you get” (29), a statement that encourages Angelou to be self-reliant and not to expect handouts. This and a lengthy Br’er Rabbit story are the few touches of folklore in *The Heart of a Woman*. This type of imbedded preaching covertly conveys its message.
Angelou accepts the demands of womanhood and is fiercely independent, but is grateful for her mother’s support, be it financial or moral. This does not diminish her strength or independence, but rather increases them by knowing that there is a safety net in the person of Vivian Baxter. Angelou does take her son and move away from Vivian’s immediate vigilance. Overcoming racial discrimination, she seeks greater independence and middle-class respectability in Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles.

Angelou’s love for her son and involvement in his upbringing cause her to realise the special problems faced by African-American mothers when raising their children. Authority, she notes, is “in the hands of people who do not look or think like the (black mother) and her children. Teachers, doctors, sales clerks, librarians, policemen, welfare workers are white and exert control over her family’s moods, conditions and personality” (37). The African-American parent of that time is obliged to adhere to the existing white societal coda. The red tape and restrictions may chafe as reported by Angelou, but they maintain order of sorts for all persons.

In spite of the problems articulated in The Heart of a Woman, Angelou succeeds in raising a son who turns out well. She does not fail him, and others in her position can thus hope for the same. One particular problem faced by a single parent Angelou is that Guy has been hurt by the brief but frequent family separations. Having endured her own feelings of betrayal when passed to different relatives, Angelou knows she must compensate so Guy does not harbour resentment to her and turn to outsiders for guidance. She realises how much Guy feels the need of a father. It was also painful for him to be a young man “who had lived with the certainty of white insolence and the unsureness of moving from school to school, coast to coast, and . . . made to find his way through
another continent and new cultures” (267). Therefore the determined search for family and father is so much a part of *The Heart of a Woman* that it cannot be isolated from the situational responses.

This search allows the introduction of a variety of male characters and allows Angelou to express normal sexual interests. This is an accepted topic of the culture of the time. Angelou reports on a series of lovers associated with her search for a suitable husband and father. Most fall short of her requirements. Angelou does try throughout the book to balance an honest appreciation of ordinary sexual adventures with the wholesome and desirable goal of stability. This is another message of hope for those young women disturbed by their sexuality and unable to come to terms with desires and expectations.

Angelou writes in this book much more graphically about her own sexual activities than in any of the preceding volumes. She is at an age and stage where this is natural and acceptable. One may tend to wonder how much of this detailed interest is real or romanticised. Her admission for shouting in the bedroom and such personal pleasure seems to be atypical material. In previous books Angelou appears to contradict any extreme preoccupations with base pleasures. For example, in *Gather Together in My Name*, she imagines that the ideal husband made desultory love a few times and never asked for more and this was acceptable. In another instance, she said physical sex only once a month was satisfactory. Her stance was quite Victorian. This expectation may be closer to her real feelings than her “liberated” statements (1986: 149). Each of the contradictory positions may, however, merely reflect thinking of a particular time or circumstance. At the time of her writing *The Heart of a Woman*, more liberal and open
talk of human interactions was developing. African-American female writers were not only taking pride in their race but also in themselves as women. The “liberated” (1986:149) modern woman was free to proclaim that she too had sexual urges. Sometimes women seemed inclined to outdo each other for sheer shock value. Frank talk about sex seemed to be almost requisite for a commercially successful book of that era. Despite relating various affairs, Angelou always advocates monogamy and stresses fidelity in relationships. She honours commitment.

Angelou and Guy move from Los Angeles to New York. It was here that she met many of the men she discusses. Several friends had encouraged Angelou to pursue a writing career. She was accepted by the Harlem Writers Guild which was composed of black writers both neophyte and established. Angelou’s work was roundly criticised, but the tough lessons provided needed direction. Her night club background supplied a living. Being in the cauldron of New York allows much of *The Heart of a Woman* to be devoted to the major and minor players of the Civil Rights Movement and political activism of that period. Angelou’s role as personal historian covers both the Civil Rights Movements and the Black Literary Movement. She meets and writes about such national figures as Bayard Rustin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and other prominent African Americans caught up in the push for equal treatment for their race. The inclusion of these prominent familiar figures allows for their lessons and messages to be passed along unobtrusively. When Angelou is a coordinator of the SCLC, she is totally involved in the cause. She is an excellent organiser and coordinates volunteer efforts, raises funds, keeps the office running, and names. All this is for the purpose of furthering the advancement and recognition of black people throughout the world. She has been faulted by some for
not being sufficiently involved in the “cause.” This is not true; she just chose to be less strident. Her efforts were eminently successful, and her contributions to civil rights causes were effective. Together with Godfrey Cambridge she wrote and directed a well-received musical revue, *Cabaret for Freedom*, which was intended to raise funds and consciousness.

Angelou’s sure ear allows her to recreate fictionally scenes of encounters with people with an uncanny touch of reality. She mimics dialogues with notable personages with ease. According to several informed friends, her descriptions of exchanges with Martin Luther King or Malcolm X capture the very essence of the responses they would live, although they are not quoted directly. Angelou is attuned to the intent of a message as well as its delivery.

Many Civil Rights advocates were not shy about acknowledging their African heritage. It is quite natural for them to mingle with and offer their support to Cuban and African Freedom Fighters. These foreign activists solicited assistance and appeared at many related functions. It is therefore not surprising that Maya Angelou aligns herself emotionally as a helpmate to one of these, Vusumzi Make, and fantasizes that together they can free all of Africa from white oppression. This is an unusual lapse from reality for Angelou. She is quite taken with Make and he steps into the role of the strong male she has been seeking. He relates well with Guy, relieving Angelou of her sole concern. This largely influences her acceptance of him.

Throughout *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou continues her indictment of the white power structure and her protests against racial injustice. She again recreates scenes wherein the dialogue allows comment about shoddy white behaviour. She sometimes
utilises flashback to youthful indignities endured and sometimes she relates experiences of friends and colleagues. The sketch of a scene involving Mother Vivian at the Desert Hotel in Fresno, California, is a classic example. Vivian’s every move and word is calculated to instruct Maya and deflate the ignorant whites they encounter. Vivian Baxter displays the ultimate in panache and carries off a put down of her antagonists with dignity and distinction. Public negative treatment of African-American people validates their sometimes radical responses. The references to earlier affronts and reactions serve to provide continuity to the series.

Not all attitudes expressed regarding whites are negative. Angelou learns from Martin Luther King that he feels that there are many “White people who love right” (94). Dr. King was optimistic. He had travelled to and from jails across the South and marched and preached throughout the United States, frequently with whites at his side or in his audience. He felt both white and black people were changing. Angelou herself was surprised by the white volunteers at the SCLC New York office. Although Angelou harboured a suspicion of white liberals, she was impressed by the honesty of actress Shelly Winters who ardently wanted only a peaceful future for her daughter in a mixed society. This idealism was somewhat misplaced; inequality and turmoil are extant today.

In relating experiences with whites, Angelou never offers solutions to the problems exposed. She simply reports, reacts or dramatises events. The closest she comes to an analysis or solution for racial problems is the time when she repeats Vivian Baxter’s statement that “Black folks can’t change because white folks won’t change” (29). Nevertheless the times were exciting and hopes ran high for progress toward equality.
Angelou’s continuing role as a literary historian for the time of the book provides an opportunity to report on some African-American literature that is being published, despite her observation that it is difficult to get black literature accepted and printed. This is a somewhat inaccurate assessment, as many African-American writers were beginning to be published and publicised. Actually it was a time when book sales were in decline and all writers were encountering difficulties. There was a vast amount of publishable material and competition was keen. Talent, like seeping water, found some place to go and various movements enjoyed the efforts of the best and the brightest.

*The Heart of a Woman* follows Angelou’s established pattern of ending on a strong note of hope. Angelou and her son Guy have advanced to the point where each of them can move toward a divergent, independent path. Angelou can relish her sense of achievement as Guy looks forward eagerly to his future. She can anticipate a future for herself centred on herself. Again closure brings the cycle to a place that portends a new life for both Guy and Maya, a re-birth: a closing door and an opening door. Both characters are now citizens of a large world. Faithful to the ongoing themes of survival, sense of self, and continuing education, *The Heart of a Woman* moves its central figures to a point of full personhood. Its light humour and bantering carries a message of achievement.

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