PREFACE

Maya Angelou accomplishes the rare feat of laying her own life open to a reader’s scrutiny without the reflex-covering gesture of melodrama or shame. And as she reveals herself so does she reveal the black community, with a quite pride, a painful candor and a clean anger”.

-- Annie Gottlieb

Maya Angelou’s work will continue to influence future generations. Young people today can learn from her example, for her courage, her strength, pride and humility, her creativity, and the inspirational energy of her presence on this earth. They can learn from her example to be true to themselves, to have the courage to live out their dreams to persevere no matter what, and how to live a rich, joyous and fruitful life.

-- Wanda Phipps

Maya Angelou, internationally recognised author, poet, actress, singer, dancer, stage and screen director and producer, script-writer, playwright, historian, Civil Rights activist, and humanities lecturer, is one of America’s best known and most beloved public figures. Through her life and work, Maya Angelou has triumphantly created and re-created the self, endowing her life story with symbolic significance and raising it to mythic proportions. Much of the popularity of her work lies in her emphasis on the dignity, beauty, and potential of every individual human being. Drawing inspiration from her own adventurous life, from her deeply felt Southern roots, African and African American heritage, and extensive readings and travels, Angelou has emerged as a quintessential voice of America and of the human spirit. Angelou’s literary oeuvre is most recognised for the series of autobiographical works depicting, with disarming honesty, the trials and triumphs of her early life, adolescence, and maturity. As if in a rhythmic counterpoint to these narratives, Angelou has published several collections of poetry, essays, and children stories.

Born Marguerite, daughter of Bailey Johnson and Vivian (Baxter) Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928, Angelou grew in humble but profoundly nurturing circumstances in the rural town of Stamps, Arkansas. There, as a sensitive and
observant child, Angelou experienced first-hand not only the resilience and strength of the African-American community, but also America’s troubled legacy of racism, intolerance, and violence.

Maya Angelou’s literary significance rests upon her exceptional ability to tell her life story as both a human being and a black American woman in the twentieth century. Six autobiographical volumes have been published covering the period from 1928 to 2002. She asserts in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970): “The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance” (1985: 3). And yet, Angelou’s own autobiographies and vivid lectures about herself, ranging in tone from warmly humorous to bitterly satiric, have won a popular and critical following that is both respectful and enthusiastic.

As she adds successive volumes to her life story, she is performing for contemporary black American women – and men, too—many of the same functions that escaped slave Frederick Douglass performed for his nineteenth-century peers through his autobiographical writings and lectures. Both become articulators of the nature and validity of a collective heritage as they interpret the particulars of a culture for a wide audience of whites as well as blacks; as one critic said, Angelou illuminates “with the intensity of lightning the tragedy that was once this nation’s two-track culture” (1985: 4). As people who have lived varied and vigorous lives, they embody the quintessential experiences of their race and culture.

An account of the life and major writings of Maya Angelou is of necessity based largely on information that she herself has supplied in her autobiographies; where lacunae exist, they do so because Angelou herself has chosen not to discuss certain periods of time, events, or people. “I will say how old I am [53], I will say how tall I am [six feet], but I will not say how many times I have been married,” she told an interviewer in 1981: “It might frighten them off” (1985: 4).

Angelou has described the art of autobiography as a means for a writer to go back to the past and recover through imagination and invention what has been lost. She began producing her autobiographical works after friends, among them such
notable writers as James Baldwin and Jules Feiffer, suggested she write about her childhood spent between rural, segregated Stamps, Arkansas, where her pious grandmother ran a general store, and St. Louis, Missouri, where her wordly, glamorous mother lived. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, which became a great critical and commercial success, chronicles Angelou’s life up to age sixteen, providing a child’s perspective on a perplexing and repressive world of adults. This volume contains the gruesome account of how Angelou, at the age of eight, was raped by her mother’s lover. Angelou refused to speak for five years following the attack, believing that she had killed her assailant – who was murdered several days later – simply by speaking his name. Much critical discussion has focussed on the correlation between language, speech, and identity evidenced by Angelou’s suppression and eventual recovery of her own voice. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* concludes with Angelou’s attempts as a single, teen-aged mother to nurture and protect her newborn son. In addition to creating a trenchant account of a girl’s coming-of-age, this work also affords insights into the social and political tensions pervading the 1930s.

*Caged Bird* would become the first in an autobiographical series in which many challenges of life are seen through the lens of Angelou’s full gamut of experiences and structured in a storytelling style that has won her international acclaim.

In addition to the powerful literary achievement realised in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou has published five additional volumes of her life story in which, Sondra O’ Neale in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1983) claims, “No Black Women . . . are losers”: *Gather Together in My Name* (1974); *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting Merry like Christmas* (1976); *The Heart of a Woman* (1981); *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002). Evaluated against a long tradition of slave narrative and modern “success” stories, these autobiographies represent what has been called the cornerstone of African American literary traditions. However, Angelou’s literary universe encompasses an even larger canvas and speaks to a broader vision. The story of author James Baldwin’s urging her to accept a publisher’s challenge to write a literary autobiography has become part of the Angelou folklore. It was a
dare she says she could not refuse. The present thesis deals with Angelou’s incredible contributions to the genre, as she probes the broad deep canon of Western literature and American vernacular culture to render her life as art, clearly revealing her not only as a powerful writer who loves a mental challenge, but also as one who uses the opportunity to critique the genre and provide a gifted contribution, employing her genius to weave the primordial purity of black sacred music in a finely crafted carnival discursivity in which, as one critic comments, her “prose sings”.

The dissertation is in eight chapters. The introductory chapter traces the literary biography of the author, the various influences that worked upon her life and creative mind, the milieu, the moment, the American South, where she was born and brought up. Maya Angelou’s creative energies; in a life time filled with a staggering assortment of personal disasters, have proved equal to the creation of an oeuvre; a body of published work large enough to expose the full range of her thought and sensitivity. She has continually pursued a particular set of themes, but she has never repeated herself. Each work adds something essential to the whole. It is in the completeness of her work above all that she is unique among modern Black women writers. She alone has succeeded in travelling the full route and in closing the circle. For more than forty years, through all her tremendous odds and personal defeats, she has been stubbornly true to her vocation as a writer. Though she has been sometimes accused of betraying her race, the very existence of her oeuvre is proof that in her own highly personal and self-indulgent way, she has fulfilled the promise of her talent and delivered her full testimony as witness and artist. “I speak to the black experience”, Angelou once said, “but I am always talking about the human condition – about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and still survive.” In this sense, she faithfully depicts her home ground as a version of the universal human experience.

_I Know the Caged Bird Sings_, discussed in the second chapter of the thesis, distills the essence of her autobiographical impulse, turning it into lyric imagery touched by poignant realism. The title of this work taken from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” suggests the tone of Angelou’s autobiography, and her struggle to overcome the restrictions of a hostile environment. Angelou is in
“sympathy” with the bleeding bird behind the mask, and it seems likely that Dunbar would have been in sympathy with Angelou as well. Like the Dunbar poem and the spirituals sung by Southern Blacks, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* displays an impulse toward transcendence. Like the song of the caged bird, the autobiography represents a prayer sent from “the heart’s deep core”, from a depth of emotion. The author prays that the bird be released from its cage of oppression that it may fly free from the definitions and limitations imposed by a hostile world.

The work is perhaps the most aesthetically satisfying autobiography written by a black woman in the years immediately following the civil rights era. As a creative autobiographer – one who borrows techniques from fiction writes in the first person and asserts the truth – Angelou focuses entirely on the inner spaces of her emotional and personal life. The mature woman looks back on her bittersweet childhood, yet her authorial voice retains the power of the child’s vision. The child’s point of view governs Angelou’s principle of selection, and when the mature narrator steps in her tone is purely personal. Myra K. McMurry calls *Caged Bird* “an affirmation. . . . Maya Angelou’s answer to the question of how a Black girl can grow up in a repressive system without being maimed by it.” Angelou does not progress only from a state of semi-orphanedhood to one of motherhood; she develops through various stages of self-awareness.

The patterns established in *Caged Bird* continue in Angelou’s subsequent autobiographies. The narrator adapts herself to each new situation creatively, replenishing her sense of self in different circumstances, discovering the fullness of her sexuality, and learning to nurture and protect. *Gather Together in My Name* and *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas* are transitional volumes that cover the period from Angelou’s later years through her mid-twenties. Harold Bloom notes that in *Gather Together* Angelou’s bold headstrong self-assurance and confidence lead her to “bluff” her way into dangerous situations. Sometimes” she cannot learn quickly enough to escape” before becoming dependent on others who exploit her. At other times, Bloom suggests, it is Angelou who does the exploiting.

The third chapter discusses the second work in her autobiographical series. *Gather Together in My Name* finds Angelou as the young mother with infant Guy
living at home where she is weighing her options, subsequently choosing a rather shaky independence. Angelou presents the world through the consciousness of this young girl going through the excesses and lack of centeredness that characterise youth. Understandably, *Gather Together* has been regarded as without a moral centre. However, Dolly McPherson, in *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* (1990), observes that, in *Gather Together*, Angelou “explores . . . the state of the relation between the romantic imagination – innocence – and the objective reality to which it ultimately must be reconciled” (2002: 520). Surely this is the intention of the autobiographer who has made a deliberate attempt to speak in the narrative voice of a teenager being initiated into adulthood; Angelou encounters her “first love”, her first experiences with smoking marijuana, her humiliating return to Stamps and her classmates, scorn and derision, her beginnings in the performing arts and her bungling and naïve attempts as madam, prostitute, and fencer. The adolescent Maya finally understands that there is only the knowledge of the ceremony of innocence and the possibility of beginning anew again and again and again. A somewhat wiser Maya concludes: “I had no idea what I was going to make of my life, but I had . . . found my innocence”.

As a chronicle of youthful Maya’s growth from adolescence to adulthood, *Gather Together* announces its redemptive strategy within the story’s title. The safety net always within reach for the young heroine is Jesus’ promise in the book of Matthew that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (2002: 520). Yet, the chaos of World War II, forgotten in the aftermath described in the opening scene of the book, in many ways parallels the chaos felt by young Maya in the Church scene in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. In both instances, there is no one on whom to blame the chaos: in *Gather Together*, the war happened; in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, white supremacy in Stamps has its gothic horrors: little powhiterash girls who turn up their bare behinds to their elders; young black boys force to witness and participate in the discovery and retrieval of a now-bloated black murder victim; a licensed dentist who refuses to practice medicine on a small child; a law enforcement officer whose idea of justice is to have a cripple, seriously disabled man spend several hours in a wooden box hiding under the weight of white potatoes to evade the rampaging
inanity of white men covered in white sheets, terrorizing and murdering for often invisible wrongs. These are the gothic elements that pervade Angelou’s special little plot of Southern soil in Stamps.

The third book of the autobiographical series Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas, dealt with in the fourth chapter of the thesis, spans the years 1949 to 1955 and begins the unraveling of suppressed, unremembered beauty and pain in a forgotten African American discourse. As a cachet of the Angelou of world renown, the title itself serves as a paean to the triumph of both spirit and talent that it conveys. Angelou is finally hired to do that for which she was anointed—perform for people. She is discovered dancing in a strip club where she is not required to strip. The luminous quality of her dancing, however, creates a following and the reward: of her first big break, the opportunity to perform at San Francisco’s famous Purple Onion. With this, Angelous life takes on the quality of sacred oracular rhythms. Marguerite Johnson Angelou’s becomes Maya Angelou, accepts the friendship of white supporters and black opera singers, and is later invited to tour Canada, Europe, and Africans as a member of the Cast of the internationally acclaimed opera, Porgy and Bessy. Still the miracle of success in the world of show business is mitigated by Angelou’s ongoing challenge to reconcile her career and a need for income with her role as mother to Guy Johnson.

Illusive transcendence defines the struggles of Angelou’s fourth autobiography, The Heart of a Woman (1981) dealt within the fifth chapter. The text offers pivotal scenes between mother and son and details Angelou’s moves from a California suburb to New York’s Harlem Writers’ Guild; from the theatrical revue, Cabaret to Freedom, a successful benefit for the Civil rights struggle produced with Godfrey Cambridge in New York’s Village Gate, to her position as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s, northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership conference; and then from a powerful New York run of Genet’s The Blacks to a brief period of domesticity in Cairo, Egypt, as wife of South African Freedom fighter Vusumzi Make. The imagery suggested by the volume’s title, taken from a poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson, a black poet of the Harlem Renaissance, points to an anguished heart in an “alien cage” with “sheltering bars”, words clearly exposing a spiritual plight similar to that expressed in Caged Bird. As the text
concludes, the reader finds Angelou living in a small cottage in Ghana, West Africa, having spent three months in the agony of Guy’s recuperation from a serious neck injury, and now sending Guy off to enter his first year of study at the University of Ghana. This Ghanaian tableau is clearly, notwithstanding the lonely aching suggested by the eponymous poem of the book’s title, a scene of hope and completion.

The sixth chapter, dealing with Angelou’s sixth autobiographical volume, *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), covers Angelou’s three-year stay in the newly liberated Republic of Ghana, which had been, originally, a stop-over during which a critical injury to Guy turned into a healing lovefist for both Angelou and her son. Both are welcomed by the University of Ghana, she as an administrative assistant; he as a student. These critical years include the death of W.E.B. DuBois, a visit by Malcom X and a confrontation with the reality that although the very soul of African American vernacular culture is African, Africans and their descendants in the United States are treated in Ghana as Americans, foreigners. Still, Angelou is able to offer the reader valuable insights into Africa. The communal esteem for children is evidenced when a local family travels by lorry from deep inland to honour Angelou and her housemates for tutoring their son in the Brioni (Whiteman’s) education. The elders, after presenting the household a bountiful harvest, an indication of familial wealth, inform Angelou: “Kojo and not come from the ground like grass. He has risen like a banyan tree. He has roots. And we, his roots, thank you”.

Angelou’s sixth and last published autobiographical work, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) discussed in the seventh chapter of the thesis, begins in 1964 with Angelou returning to the United States from Ghana in order to help with the Civil Rights movement, specifically to write and organize for Malcolm X. Shortly after she lands in California, he is assassinated before her work with him can begin. Her brother takes his grief – stricken sister to Hawaii, where she sings in nightclubs, with no notable success. Returning to California, she works as a door-to-door surveyor in the Watts District of Los Angeles, thus getting to know the people’s poverty and anger. Therefore, she is not surprised by the outbreak of violence and senses the riots before she learns of them.
After a stormy encounter with her former lover, Angelou returns to New York, where she meets Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and agrees to promote the movement. However, history repeats itself. Before she can go south for the movement, King also is assassinated. Again devastated, Angelou becomes a recluse until writer James Baldwin invites her to a dinner with glittering New York literati that reawakens her passion for writing. Friends encourage her to write and to begin by writing her life. Eventually, Angelou moves back to California and, in an effort to make spiritual sense of and triumph over her experiences, begins to write. *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* ends with her wiring the first few times of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, opening the gate to her most important career and yet circling back nicely to her first, most beloved book.

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* engrosses the reader with its portrait of a sensitive woman caught up in some of the most important events of the twentieth century. It is also compelling because of its simple yet poetic and intimate style. Angelou recounts her story as if confiding to a friend. She intersperses narration with heart-rending scenes, such as when a phone-caller indirectly reveals Malcolm X’s assassination by remarking that New York blacks are crazy because they murdered one of their own kind. for Soup? By the time the book ends, the reader is touched and sad, yet inspired. *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* somehow suggests that if Angelou can transcend such dire circumstances, perhaps others can too.

Maya Angelou has emerged in her mature years not only with a solid reputation in poetry, prose, and a host of other expressive forms, but as a national matriarch who speaks to the world with a depth of wisdom that could only have forged in the crucible of the American South. This renaissance woman, whose remarkable life of traumas and triumphs has made her the very emblem of America’s tortuous conflict with its own soul, brings forth in the easy, sometimes oblique and artful indirection of incisive Southern discourse, typified by William Faulkner, Mark Twain, and most notably Zora Neale Hurston, a maternal voice that quells fear and celebrates every human being’s legacy of high achievements. Angelou transcends the binary divisions and oppositions that have become so characteristic of Western ideology: white/black, male/female, north/south, good/bad, us/them. For Angelou, everyone is “we”, and the only question worth pondering is
what “we” make of our gift of shared life. It is this vision in the new millennium that will finally allow critics to appreciate fully the true place of this southern genius in the shaping of literary creativity.

Estimating the value of Maya Angelou’s contribution to contemporary times, the last chapter of the thesis also offers an overview of her thematic concerns in as much as they affirm a view of life. Underpinning all her work is a concern with the authenticity of woman’s existence and the importance and the possibility of choices. She is much more than an autobiographer. Her work is less a manifesto of emancipation than a multifaceted exposition of quests for enduring relationships. Reflecting the tensions between insiders and outsiders, between individual and society, Maya anatomizes relationships in order to foreground the importance of the relational – as we read her, we discover a world that speaks powerfully to us not about only the difficulties of ever finding “selfness” but also of the abiding need to establish it and to discover ourselves in or relation to others.

Her autobiography is clearly and specifically grounded in conditions and events that were then making news. Although thus associated with the Civil Rights movement that so stirred the American public for a social cause as to have had measurable impact, her work will continue to be read, not as piece of literary and social history but with a sense of emotional involvement and aesthetic discovery. She has been able to create a “well-made” and emotionally compelling autobiography out of materials which in most other hands have resulted in sentimental propaganda. The result is an exact and topical realism, given a timeless quality by its presentation of human suffering and human dignity that shines through her best work.

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