CHAPTER-II
**I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS**

We are a tongued folk. A race of singers. Our lips shape words and rhythms which elevate our spirits and quicken our blood. I have spent over fifty years listening to my people.

--Maya Angelou (1983)

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has created for itself a unique place within black autobiographical tradition, not by being “better” than the formidable autobiographical landmarks that came earlier, but by its special universe, and by a form exploiting the full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity.

The title of Angelou’s first long book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), was suggested by Abbey Lincoln Roach. The appropriateness of this borrowed line is most apparent when it is considered in its original presentation. It is taken from a line in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy.” Asked by an interviewer why does the caged bird sing, Angelou replied,

I think it was a bit of naivete or braggadoccio. . . to say I know why the caged bird sings! I was copying a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem so it's all right. I believe that a free bird. . . floats down, eats the early worm, flies away, and mates. . . . But the bird that's in a cage stalks up and down, looking constantly out. . . and he sings about freedom. Mr. Paul Laurence Dunbar says,

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, --
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –
I know why the caged bird sings!

Reminding the possibility of losing control or being denied freedom, slaves and caged birds chirp their spirituals and flail against their constrictions.
Published in 1970, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was an immediate commercial and critical success. Hailed as a “contemporary classic,” it belongs in the “development genre,” – work in the tradition of *Bildungsroman* – a sub-category of literature that focuses on growth and psychological development of the central figure. Transformation is the work’s dominating theme, a metamorphosis of one who went from “being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware.” Throughout her writings, Angelou leaves a trail of overcoming parental and societal betrayal without espousing judgemental condemnations. Her maturation is shown by her responses to life’s challenging situations.

According to Ernece B. Kelley, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a “poetic counterpart of the more scholarly *Growing up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* by Charles S. Johnson. Ernece B. Kelley calls *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* an autobiographical novel rather than an autobiography for good reason: it reads like a novel. It has characters, plot, suspense, and denouement, although the form is episodic. Kelley believes, “On balance, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a gentle indictment of white American womanhood” (1995: 22). But Kelley’s interpretation is too narrow. The stories, anecdotes, and jokes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* do tell a dismaying story of white dominance, but *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in fact indicts nearly all of white society; American men, sheriffs, white con artists, white politicians, “crackers,” uppity white women, white-trash children, all are targets. Their collective actions precipitate an outpouring of resentment from the African-American perspective. This suggests a thesis for examining *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* through the lens of
folklore and humour. It identifies the far broader picture of black America than its depicted focus.

Reviews of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* praise its use of words. E.M. Guiney wrote that “Angelou is a skillful writer, her language ranges from beautifully lyrical prose to earthy metaphor, and her descriptions have power and sensitivity. This is one of the best autobiographies of its kind that I have read” (1970: 1018). And R.A. Gross writes that “Her autobiography regularly throws out rich, dazzling images which delight and surprise with their simplicity” (1970: 90). Angelou’s style demonstrates an obvious ease with vibrant language deployed for the most dramatic impact. A strong sense of the theatrical enriches the most pedestrian passages.

As of the mid 1980s, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* had gone through twenty hardback printings and thirty-two printings in paperback. Angelou's appearance at the 1993 Presidential Inauguration sent the book back to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller lists and resulted in another round of printings. In fact, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has never been out of print since first issued, nor it seems have any of her other books. That *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was once a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Ebony Book Club, and also nominated for the National Book Award testifies to its appeal and broad popularity. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* alone would assure Angelou a place amongst America's most popular authors.

Until Maya Angelou published the first volume of her autobiography, no one could have predicted that she would achieve such popular recognition, as distinct from the esteem which many Black writers had long enjoyed as in academic and literary circles, i.e., Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden and
Margaret Walker. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, broke ground in terms of critical acclaim, and large sales throughout the country presaged the success soon afterwards of such writers as Rosa Guy, Louise Meriwether, Verta Mae Grosvenor, and Alice Walker.

Maya Angelou started writing relatively late in life and was forty-one when *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published. Her adult life up to then had been a dizzying succession of mini-careers, many of which are described in the six volumes of the autobiography. For Angelou, however, the autobiographical mode was to become the means to an enduring public career. Written at the urging of friends who were overwhelmed and fascinated by the stories she told about her childhood, her grandmother in Arkansas, and her mother in California, Angelou recalls that she was “roped” into writing this first volume:

> At the time, I was really only concerned with poetry, though I had written a television series. James Baldwin took me to a party at Jules and Judy Feiffer’s home. We enjoyed each other immensely and sat up until three or four o’clock in the morning drinking scotch and telling tales. The next morning Judy Feiffer called a friend of hers at Random House and said, “You know the poet Maya Angelou? If you can get her to write a book . . .” When Robert Loomis, Judy’s friend and an editor at Random House called, I told him that I was not interested. Then I went to California to produce a series for WNET. Loomis called me two or three times, but I continued to say that I was not interested. Then, I am sure, he talked to Baldwin because he used a ploy which I am not proud to say I haven’t gained control of yet. He called and said, “Miss Angelou, it’s been nice talking to you. But I’m rather glad that you decided not to write an autobiography because to write an autobiography as literature is a most difficult task.” I said, “Then I'll do it.” Now that’s an area I don’t have control of yet at this age. The minute someone says I can’t, all of my energy goes up and I say, “Yes I can.” I believe all things are possible for a human being, and I don't think there is anything in the world I can’t do (1990: 21).

On February 12, 1970, the date on which *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was launched publicly, critics had no reason to think that a first book by an entertainment
personality would be of particular importance, although on that day the book received a noteworthy review in *The New York Times*. Shortly thereafter, in the March 2, 1970 edition of *Newsweek*, critic Robert A. Gross praised *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, noting that it

was more than a *tour de force* of language or the story of childhood suffering because it quietly and gracefully portrays and pays tribute to the courage, dignity and endurance of the small, rural Southern Black community in which [Angelou] spent most of her early years in the 1930s (1990: 23).

At about the same time, Edmund Fuller observed, in his *Wall Street Journal* review that

Only the early signs of artistry and intellectual range are in this story, but their fulfillment are as evident in the writing as in the accomplishments of Maya Angelou’s varied career (1990: 23).

Before the end of the year, other critics were heralding *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as marking the beginning of a new era in the consciousness of Black men and women and creating a distinctive place in Black autobiographical tradition.

Angelou takes her title from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy”

Dunbar’s caged bird sings from the frustration of imprisonment; its song is a prayer. Angelou’s caged bird sings also from frustration, but in doing so, discovers that the song transforms the cage from a prison that denies selfhood to a vehicle for self-realisation. The cage is a metaphor for roles which, because they have become institutionalised and static, do not facilitate inter-relationship, but impose patterns of behaviour which deny true identity:

When I wrote *I know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn’t thinking so much about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking what about that time. What were the people around young Maya doing? I used the central figure myself as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times (1991: 134).
Memory plus distance equals true autobiography, the cliché reads. Benvenuto Cellini recommended that “all men of every sort should set forth their lives with their own hand; . . . But they should not commence so noble an undertaking before they have reached the age of forty years.” Since Angelou was almost forty when she undertook writing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she conforms to Cellini’s caveat. According to Marcel Proust, memory can be a powerful weapon against mortality; for Angelou it is also a powerful weapon against bigotry.

With a mind filled with memories, Angelou recaptures her childhood. She demonstrates an impressive recall of what it is like to be a child while diligently striving to maintain a perspective. Some critics have questioned the point of view as being overly influenced by adult perception. Angelou has publicly addressed this difficulty and feels confident about her presentation. She structures her story into three parts: arrival, sojourn, and departure, geographically and psychologically. The narrative opens with a flashback to an Easter Sunday church scene in the early 1930s, shortly after her arrival from California. This scene constitutes a three-page prologue which establishes the insecurity and lack of status felt by the child Marguerite. She initially recreates the embarrassment she feels at her inability to remember the four-line poem she recites before the congregation, a situation often experienced by youngsters in like circumstances. As R.A. Gross says, Angelou “opens her autobiography and conveys the diminished sense of herself that pervaded much of her childhood” (1995: A1). Angelou recalls preparing for church and struggling with her troublesome body image. She is dressed in a discarded “ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple
throwaway” (2)*, which to her childish perception symbolises her unacceptable being. She daydreams of having “real” hair and blue eyes, which, in her young mind, denote affluence and acceptability. A tone of “displaced” frustration pervades this introductory section, and the reader is immediately won over and becomes a sympathetic confidante. This beginning initiates the journey to establish a worthwhile self-concept.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (hereafter called *Caged Bird*) is a carefully conceived record of a young girl’s slow and clumsy growth. It is also a record of her initiation into her world and her discovery of her interior identity. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou first confidently reaches back in memory to pull out the painful times: when she and her brother Bailey fail to understand the adult code and, therefore, break laws they know nothing of; when they swing easily from hysterical laughter to desperate loneliness, from a hunger for heroes to the voluntary pleasure-pain game of wondering who their real parents are and how long it will be before they come to take them to their real home.

Growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, as Maya Angelou describes those long-ago years, is a continual struggle against surrender to the very large adults, who, being Black, practiced and taught special traditions whose roots were buried in Africa or had been created during centuries of slavery. According to these traditions, a good child dropped her eyes when speaking to an adult; a good child spoke softly; a good child never resisted the idea that whites were better, cleaner, or more intelligent than Blacks. Growing up and surviving as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and early 1940s was a painful experience for a young girl whose world was coloured by disillusion and despair, aloneness, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of self.

All subsequent references are to this edition.
“What are you looking at me for?  
I didn’t come to stay . . .” (12)

Indeed, Angelou underscores her diminished sense of self and the rootlessness of her early childhood years when she proclaims in the prologue:

The words are painfully appropriate, for the young Maya, then Marguerite Johnson, is a shy, tensely self-conscious child who believes that her true beauty is obscured. As she struggles to remember her lines, she is conscious of her dual self, which is the constant subject of her fantasies. Beneath the ugly disguise—a lavender taffeta dress remade from a White woman’s discard, broad feet, and gap-teeth—is the real Marguerite.

Such fantasies are ephemeral and the time comes when the young girl must face the painful reality of her being. Angelou recalls:

Easter’s early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long too, but it didn’t hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with Arkansas red clay. The age-faded colour made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs (1970: 7).

For Maya there is no magical metamorphosis, no respite from her “black dream.” On this Easter Sunday, she understands the futility of her wish to become “one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what is right with the world.” Unlike Christ, whose resurrection from death the church is commemorating, Maya cannot be reborn into another life where she will be white and perfect and wonderful. Pained by this reality and by the impossibility of her white fantasy, Maya flees from the church “peeing and crying” her way home.
This scene recreates graphically the dynamics of many young Black girls’ disillusionment and imprisonment in American society. In *Black Rage*, psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobb describe this “imprisonment”:

> If the society says that to be attractive is to be white, [the Black woman] finds herself unwittingly striving to be something she cannot possibly be; and if femininity is rooted in feeling oneself eminently lovable, then a society which views her as unattractive and repellent has also denied her this fundamental wellspring of femininity (1990: 25).

The young Maya not only lives in a society which defines beauty in white terms of physical beauty, but she also internalises these notions. In a letter (February 4, 1966) to her long-time friend Rosa Guy, Angelou wrote, “My belief [as a child] that I was ugly was absolute, and nobody tried to disabuse me—not even Momma. Momma’s love enfolded me like an umbrella but at no time did she try to dissuade me of my belief that I was an ugly child” (1990: 25).

In this letter and in the autobiography as well, Angelou offers important insights into the effects of social conditioning on the mind and emotions of a black child growing up in a hostile environment. Writing from the perspective of adulthood, the older Angelou reveals that, within this imprisoning environment, there is no place for the young Maya; that she is a displaced person whose pain is intensified by her awareness of her displacement.

> If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the *rust on the razor* that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult (6).

Such truths characterise important segments of Angelou’s life and provide wide-ranging, significant themes for the work.
Yet Angelou does not relate all facets of her childhood experiences. Rather, through a series of episodic chapters, she selects and chronicles those incidents from which she, as a girl-child, learned valuable, life-determining truths about the world, about her community, and about herself—truths incarnated in moments of insight (initiation) and discovery of self. By identifying these epiphanies, the reader is able to define the unique vision of the work and its precise and individual illumination of reality.

After the prologue, the reader meets two children, ages three and four, who are wearing wrist tags that identify them as Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, Jr. A note addressed “To Whom It May Concern” states that they are travelling alone from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, to the care of Mrs. Annie Henderson. Angelou explains that she and her brother Bailey were shipped to the home of their paternal grandmother when their parents decided to end their calamitous marriage. The porter, who was charged with their welfare, ends his assignment the next day in Arizona, but before leaving the train, he pins their tickets to Bailey’s inside coat pocket. From that day, until the day of their arrival in Stamps, the children are literally on their own. This episode further defines the dynamics underlying Angelou’s battered self-esteem. Early on, when the young Maya fantasises that she is white, blond and beautiful, she does so because, in reality, she sees herself as a child whom no one could possibly love, certainly not her mother or father who have so totally rejected her.

Maya and Bailey reach safely their destination and gradually adjust to their new life in Stamps, becoming integral parts of Grandmother Henderson’s store and religion, of Uncle Willie’s life, and of the community itself, a community that closes around the children “as a real mother embraces a stranger’s child, warmly but not too familiarly.”
There are nights when Maya and Bailey cry and share, their loneliness as unwanted children who have been abandoned by their divorced parents. They also share their questions: “Why did they send us away? What did we do so wrong? Why, at three and four, did we have tags put on our arms to be sent by train alone from Long Beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas, with only the porter to look after us?” (51). Unable to accept the fact that they have been abandoned, Maya and Bailey convince themselves that their mother is dead because they cannot bear the thought that she “would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children” (42). Comforted by the imagined reality of her mother’s death, Angelou, recalling the child’s emotional response, writes:

I could cry anytime I wanted to by picturing my mother (I didn’t know what she looked like) lying in her coffin. Her hair, which was black, was spread out on a tiny little pillow and her body was covered by a sheet. The face was brown, like a big O, and since I couldn’t fill in the features I printed MOTHER across the O, and tears would fall down my cheeks like warm milk (50-51).

Angelou recalls vividly the assault to the young Maya’s diminished sense of self when she receives her mother's first Christmas presents. The tea set and a doll with blue eyes, rosy cheeks and yellow hair are all symbols of a white world foreign to the child’s experience. Not only is her mother alive, as the presents prove, but Maya, the five year old herself, has been, the forgotten child during her two years of separation from her mother. The young Maya may, in time, be able to forgive her mother, but for the moment she must face the unimaginable reality of being both unwanted and abandoned.

Even if Angelou had focused on only the psychological trauma of her early years or had merely probed the fragile relationship between the environment and her coming-of-age, *Caged Bird* would merit the critical acclaim it has received. Clearly, the autobiography does much more. While Angelou constantly demonstrates the
“unnecessary insult” of Southern Black girlhood in her passage from childhood to adolescence, at the same time she skillfully recreates those psychic, intellectual, and emotional patterns that identify her individual consciousness and experience. In doing so, the autobiographer gives concrete embodiment to such significant themes as Death, Regeneration, and Rebirth, and thus, makes a creative and imaginative use of the Christian myth.

Angelou’s childhood is moulded by her wise, hard-working grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson, in a community where weekly church services, periodic revival meetings, and occasional confrontations with whites punctuate the young girl’s education. A tough-minded business woman who purchased her store and first parcel of land in 1910 with $1,000 in dimes earned from her sale of meat pies and lemonade, Grandmother Henderson is not demonstrative in her love for Maya. Yet she is uncompromising in that love. A model of righteous behaviour and a source of knowledge and pride, she sustains the young Maya during one of the most difficult periods of her life. Moreover, she gives the child the kind of nurturing that will later fortify her to face her growing-up years and the outside world. From a childhood still vivid in her mind, Angelou recalls that “a deep-brooding love hung over everything she touched” (155).

Through this indomitable woman, Maya is introduced to the spiritual side of Black life. Portrayed as an individual whose world is ordered by work, duty, “her place,” and religion, Grandmother Henderson represents the religious tradition begun in secret praise meetings during slavery and further developed in the small frame churches that once dotted the countryside and small American towns. Much of the strength of the Black women in general and of Grandmother Henderson in particular can be attributed to
the Black church. From slavery to emancipation, Blacks found solace in the Biblical injunction to “refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded. . .” (Jeremiah 31: 16). A strongly devout woman, Grandmother Henderson begins each morning with a traditional prayer of thanks and supplication, one often heard in Black American churches through individual witness and testimony:

Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn’t allow the bed I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen (8).

To Grandmother Henderson, God is a real and personal friend. In the spirit of many Black Americans of her time, her understanding of Biblical teachings has persuaded her that Blacks are God's chosen vessels, that He will punish those who torment His people. As God protected the Jews from Pharaoh, she believes that God in his own time and in His own way, will protect and deliver Blacks. Until that day comes, she teaches Maya and Bailey to rely on the promises of a just God, to avoid contact with whites wherever and whenever it is possible, and to follow the paths of life that she and her generation had found to be safe ones. She also teaches them to respect piety and those customary laws that governed all areas of a “good” child’s life and behaviour. According to this rigid code, cleanliness is next to Godliness, dirtiness the inventor of misery. An impudent child is not only detested by God and a shame to its parents, but will also bring destruction to its house and life. Through the purity of her life and the quality of her discipline, Mrs. Annie Henderson demonstrates that, by centring one’s being in God, one can endure and mitigate the effects of an unjust world. Angelou internalises these silent lessons. Indeed, she owes much of her clarity of vision to her grandmother, who though
not always able to protect herself and family from the exterior climate of hate, refuses to
diminish herself as a human being by succumbing to bitterness or by engaging in
aggressive, retaliatory behaviour. Like any caring adult who has been charged with the
responsibility of rearing a child, Mrs. Henderson knows that she must not only interpret
society to Maya but also equip her with the pertinent skills and attitudes that will allow
her to survive. While she is often unrelenting in her punishment (i.e., when she gives
Maya a severe beating for using the expression “by the way”) and has little time or
inclination to verbalise affection, Mrs. Henderson does manage to usher Maya safely
through her childhood and early adolescence.

Angelou recalls that in Stamps “segregation was so complete that most Black
children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like” (24). Yet the White
world remained an ever-hovering, dreaded threat. Total awareness of this threat led to a
clearly defined pattern of behaviour on the part of blacks and respect for certain codes of
conduct if one was to survive in the South. One respected, though unwritten, law was
“The less [one said] to Whitefolks (or to even powhitetrash) the better. . . ”. Moreover, as
Angelou writes, Momma “didn’t cotton to the idea that Whitefolk could be talked to at all
without risking one’s life” (46).

Angelou’s consciousness of the oppression suffered by Black Americans is honed
by the realities of Maya’s daily experience, the most difficult of which force her to
acknowledge that like Grandmother Henderson, Uncle Willie and Bailey--like all those
she knows to be good and worthy--she is also bound to be affected by forces outside her
control or comprehension.
Angelou recalls a painfully confusing incident that occurred when she was ten years old, an incident that she later would judge to be a pivotal experience in her initiation because it taught her an important lesson about her grandmother’s ability to survive and triumph in a hostile environment. The incident involves three young White girls who are known to nettle Blacks and who have come onto Grandmother Henderson’s property to taunt the older Black woman with their rudeness, to ape her posture and mannerisms, and to address her insolently by her first name. Throughout this scene, she stands solidly on her porch, smiling and humming a hymn. When their actions produce no results, the girls turn to other means of mockery, making faces at Mrs. Henderson, whispering obscenities, and doing handstands. The young Maya, who observes this painful scene from inside the store and suffers humiliation for her grandmother, wants to confront the girls directly, but she realises that she is “as clearly imprisoned behind the scene as the actors outside [are] confined to their roles” (30).

Throughout the incident, Mrs. Henderson is a pillar of strength and dignity, standing tall and firm as the girls take leave they yell out in succession, “Bye Annie.” Never turning her head to acknowledge their departure or unfolding her arms, she responds, “Bye, Miz Helen, “bye Miz Ruth, bye Miz Eloise” (131). Enraged by her grandmother’s seeming subservience and powerlessness, Maya cries bitterly. Later however, when she looks up into the face of her grandmother who is quietly standing over her, she sees her face as “a brown moon that [shines] on [her].” Angelou recalls this moment:

She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn’t completely understand, but I could see that she was happy. Then she bent down and touched me as mothers of the church lay hands on the sick and afflicted--and I quieted.
“Go wash your face, Sister.” And she went behind the candy counter and hummed, “Glory, glory, hallelujah, when I lay my burden down.”

I threw well water on my face and used the weekday handkerchief to blow my nose. Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won (32).

This scene is a dramatic, symbolic recreation of the kind of spiritual death and regeneration Angelou experienced during the shaping of her development. But it is also a vivid recapturing of Black/White tensions in the South of the 1930s. On the one hand, three white girls, attempting to use their race as an overbearing instrument of power, treat a Black woman like another child, practicing the rituals of white power with the full sanction of the white community and attempting to reduce the Black woman to their level. On the other hand, the Black woman chooses the dignified course of silent endurance. Although Mrs. Henderson knows that she must accord the girls some modicum of respect, she refuses to recognise them as anything but white children, refuses to register their offensiveness or humanity, refuses to play their game. Seeking to preserve her own integrity and to transcend the ugliness of their actions, Mrs. Henderson wins a psychological victory by using this weapon to transcend the limitations of her social world.

White dominance intrudes on other occasions that also teach Maya vital lessons in courage and survival and open her eyes to the fact that she belongs to an oppressed class. In Uncle Willie, for example, she sees the dual peril of being black and crippled when he is forced to hide in the potato bin when the sheriff casually warns Grandmother Henderson that local white lynchers will be on a rampage in the Black community.
Through this terrifying experience, Maya learns that lameness offers no protection from the wrath of bigots.

Other occasions provide proof of a predatory white world and of white ritualistic violence against the Black male, for example, when Bailey sees the castrated body of a Black man. Horrified by what he has seen but not understood, Bailey begins to ask questions that are dangerous for a young Black boy in the Arkansas of 1940. The incident leads Angelou to conclude bitterly that the Black woman in the South who raises sons, grandsons and nephews “had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose” (110). Years later, when Angelou must fight for the opportunity to become the first Black person hired as a conductor on the San Francisco streetcar, she learns that White racism is not merely a problem of the South but an evil that penetrates most aspects of American life.

While intrusion from the outside world provides experiences that increase the child’s awareness of her social displacement, the Store, where Blacks congregate before and after work, teaches Maya the meaning of economic discrimination. By keenly observing the cotton workers who visit the Store, she gains insight into their inner lives. In the early dawn hours, Maya observes the cotton workers, gay and full of morning vigour, as they wait for the wagons to come and take them to the fields. Optimistic that the harvest will be good and not choosing to recall the disappointments of the recent past, the workers josh each other and flaunt their readiness to pick two or three hundred pounds of cotton each day. Even the children promise “to bring home fo’ bits” (9). The later afternoons, however, reveal the actual harshness of Black Southern life. In the receding sunlight, “the people [drag themselves], rather than their empty sacks” (9). Angelou writes:
Brought back to the Store, the pickers would step out of the backs of trucks and fold down, dirt-disappointed, to the ground. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn’t enough. Their wages wouldn’t even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown.

The sound of the new morning had been replaced with grumbling about cheating houses, skimpy cotton and dusty rows. In later years, I was to confront the stereotyped picture of gay song-singing cotton pickers with such inordinate rage that I was told even by fellow Blacks that my paranoia was embarrassing. But I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton bolls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demand (9-10).

In cotton-picking time, the late afternoons reveal the harshness of Black Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by nature’s blessing of grogginess, forgetfulness, and the soft lamplight.

While *Caged Bird* vividly portrays the negative social and economic texture of Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou, like many other Black autobiographers, describes the Southern Black community as one that nurtures its members and helps them to survive in such an antagonistic environment. There are numerous examples that demonstrate the communal character of life in Stamps. People help each other. During the Depression when no one has money, Grandmother Henderson employs a system of barter to help her neighbours and thus to save her store. When the wife of an old friend dies and the widower is unable to accept his loss, Grandmother Henderson and Uncle Willie, without a moment’s hesitation, invite him to share their home, although space is limited and the guest will have to sleep on a pallet in Uncle Willie’s small bedroom. When Bailey does not return from a movie at his usual time, the Black men and women share Grandmother Henderson’s concern. One member’s concern becomes the community’s concern because members, in their practice of the rituals of extended family relationships, are not only related through the community but through the church as well.
Innumerable passages in *Caged Bird* provide a sense of the Black community, a sense of oneness, a sense of fused strength. The changing seasons, for example, provide opportunities for fellowship and festivity. In winter, after the first frost, hog killings are spirited events that demonstrate community linkages and strength. Everyone is an important participant in this annual rite. As Angelou describes it,

> The missionary ladies of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church helped Momma prepare the pork for sausage. They squeezed their fat arms elbow deep in the ground meat, mixed it with gray nose-opening sage, pepper and salt, and made tasty little samples for all obedient children who brought wood for the slick black stove. Then men chopped off the larger pieces of meat and laid them in the smoke-house to begin the curling process. They opened the knuckle of the hams with their deadly-looking knives, took out a certain round harmless bone (“it could make the meat go bad”) and rubbed salt, coarse brown salt that looked like fine gravel, into the flesh and the blood popped to the surface (23-24).

In a very direct way, the church-related activity also speaks to the particularly American value of self-reliance, a value that is necessary for survival in a hostile social world. Unlike the White American, in order for the individual Black American to be self-reliant, he or she must rely on the community.

Angelou’s generalised description of a summer picnic fish fry conveys the vigorous solidarity of the entire Black community. Everyone is there: church groups, social groups (Elks, Eastern Stars, Masons, Knights of Columbus, Daughters of Pythias), teachers, farmers, field-workers. Free from their daily chores, excited children run about in wild play and “the sounds of tag beat through the trees” (133).

Musicians perform, displaying their artistry with “cigar box guitars, harmonicas, juice harps, combs wrapped in tissue papers, and even bathtub basses. The harmony of a gospel group float[s] over the music of the country singers and melt[s] into the songs of
small children’s ring games” (134). The amount and variety of food further underscore the importance of the event. The autobiographer recalls:

Pans of fried chicken, covered with dishtowels, sat under benches next to a mountain of potato salad crammed with hard-boiled eggs. . . . Homemade pickles and chow-chow, and baked country hams, aromatic with cloves and pineapples, vied for prominence. . . . On the barbecue pit, chickens and spareribs sputtered. . . . Orange sponge cakes and dark brown mounds dripping Hershey’s chocolate stood layer to layer with ice-white coconuts and light brown caramels. Pound cakes sagged with their buttery weight. . . . And busy women in starched aprons salted and rolled . . . fish in corn meal, then dropped them in Dutch ovens trembling with boiling fat (134-135).

Through such lyrical reminiscences of childhood, Angelou celebrates the richness and warmth of Southern Black life, and the bonds of community, with all of its possibilities for love and laughter that often persist in the face of poverty and oppression. In Maya Angelou’s vision, both with respect to the Black community and to herself, what is kept consistently in focus is the attempt to preserve and celebrate humanity in the face of seemingly impossible odds, *Caged Bird* testifies to the amazing resilience of Black Americans and their ability to cope with the inequities of American racism. The first volume of her autobiography bears witness to the sense of relationships in the Black community—the cooperative alliances that enable Blacks to survive, with grace and exuberance, the most difficult circumstances. For the young Maya, the Black community is the essential community.

When Maya is seven years old, she sees her parents for the first time in her memory. Bailey, Sr., making an unexpected visit to Stamps, stuns the child by the reality of his presence. For the first time in her young life, she need create no elaborate fantasies about her father. Bailey, Sr., who has been described by others as a man who had respect for neither morals nor money, is an arrogant show-off, taller than anyone Maya has ever
seen and with “the air of a man who [does] not believe what he [hears] or what he himself is [saying]” (53). Yet Maya is fascinated by his ironic pretentiousness. In her fantasy world, her father lives richly, among orange groves and servants, in the kind of elegantly furnished mansions she has seen in the movies. In time, however, Maya learns that he is merely a doorman at the Breakers Hotel in Santa Monica, California. She also learns that her father’s real purpose in coming to Stamps is to deliver her and Bailey to their mother in St. Louis. Maya is terrified by the thought of seeing her elusive mother. She wants to beg her grandmother to allow her to remain in Stamps, even if she must promise to do Bailey’s chores and her own as well, but she does not have the nerve to try life without Bailey, who is overjoyed by the prospect of joining his “mother dear.” The day finally arrives when Maya, bidding a tearful farewell to Grandmother Henderson and Uncle Willie, must leave Stamps behind. A few days after the uneventful trip to St. Louis, Bailey, Sr. returns to California. Maya is neither glad nor sorry when this stranger leaves.

If Bailey, Sr. represents some distant world unknown to Maya, Vivian Baxter's world is equally foreign. Vivian Baxter, Maya’s lively, beautiful mother, is bold, self-reliant, and unconventional. Although a trained surgical nurse, she does not work at her profession because neither the operating room nor the rigid eight-to-five schedule provides the excitement she craves. Rather, she cares for herself and children through liaisons with a variety of live-in “boyfriends” who furnish the necessities and through the extra money she earns cutting poker games in gambling parlours. Men are permitted to remain with Vivian Baxter only as long as they follow her stricts code of conduct; one has been cut and another shot for failing to show proper respect for her prerogatives.
For Maya, Stamps and St. Louis stand in sharp contrast. In Stamps, there are Grandmother Henderson and the Store; there is also religious devotion and the acceptance of one’s worldly and racial lot. In the closely knit rural community, Maya knows all the black people in town, and they know her. For the young Maya, Stamps is a symbol of order; in fact, the orderliness, of the store—the carefully arranged shelves, the counters, and the cutting boards—reflects the orderliness of her life in general. In St. Louis, however, Angelou is thrown into her mother’s world of taverns, pool halls, gambling, fast living and fast loving. This is a far looser environment than Maya had ever known and one that is devoid of the customary laws that Grandmother Henderson had taught her to respect. The range of sanctioned behaviour is also broader, individuals are less stringently controlled by moral laws or social pressures, and relations among individuals are less stable. Although Maya lives comfortably in St. Louis and is excited by many aspects of urban life, she remains a stranger among strangers, mainly because the urban community treats the individual as individual rather than as part of a group, and so is powerless to provide her the emotional security she needs. Moreover having spent four years in the solitude of Stamps, Maya is dislocated by the strangeness of her new environment: the tremendous noise of the city, its “scurrying sounds,” its frightening claustrophobia. Grandmother Baxter’s German accent and elegant manners are also unfamiliar. Her mother, aunts and uncles are equally unreal. St. Louis provides Maya neither sense of place nor permanence. Indeed, after only a few weeks there, she understands that it is not her real home:

In my mind I only stayed in St. Louis a few weeks. As quickly as I understood that I had not reached my home, I sneaked away to Robin Hood’s forest and the caves of Alley Oop where all really was unreal and
even that changed every day. I carried that same shield that I had used in Stamps: “I didn’t come to stay” (68).

Shifted from one temporary home to another, Maya develops a tough flexibility that is not only her protective “shield”, but also her means of dealing with an uncertain world. Angelou’s evocation of the palpable strangeness of the city derives from her ability, as an artist, to maintain the childlike angle of vision in recreating this phase of her childhood.

Yet, for one brief moment, the child, deluded into a false security, fantasises that she is at home, at last, with her real father. For that moment, Mr. Freeman, Vivian Baxter’s boyfriend and someone whom Maya has come to love and trust, holds her close to him. Mr. Freeman’s conscious violation of the child’s trust, coupled by the child’s own need for attention and physical closeness, leads to a further violation that the eight-year old Maya is too young to understand:

He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn’t ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he’d never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. But then he rolled leaving me in a wet place, and stood up (71).

In the past, Maya’s world had included Bailey, Grandmother Henderson, Uncle Willie, reading books, and the Store. Now, for the first time, it includes physical contact; and, while not understanding what has taken place in her mother’s bed, she is anxious to repeat the experience which has made her feel so loved and secure.

Many growing young girls, denied the emotional satisfaction of loving, concerned parents, look for emotional support at school or at play; and if they are lucky, they find something that moderates their emotional discontent. Maya, however, finds little compensation of this sort. Her autobiography is singularly devoid of references to rewarding peer associations during her eight-month stay in St. Louis. She is not only
dislocated by her new environment, but is also alienated from any supporting peer relationships.

The second time Mr. Freeman embraces the eight-year old girl, he rapes her. The rape, an excruciatingly painful act which involves Maya in ambiguous complicity, produces confusion, shame, and guilt. The courtroom where Mr. Freeman’s trial for rape is held would be imposing to a mature, self-confident adult, but it is shattering to the child whose confusion, shame and guilt are further compounded by the voyeuristic aspects of the open courtroom testimony. When Maya is unable to remember what Mr. Freeman was wearing when he raped her, the lawyer suggests that she, not the defendant, is to blame for her victimisation. Bewildered and frightened, Maya denies that Mr. Freeman ever touched her before the rape—partly because, in her confusion, she is convinced of her own complicity in the two sexual episodes but more because of her life-long desire for her mother’s love and approval:

I couldn’t say yes and tell them how he had loved me once for a few minutes and how he had held me close before he thought I had peed in my bed. My uncles would kill me and Grandmother Baxter would stop speaking, as she did when she was angry. And all these people in the court would stone me as they had stoned the harlot in the bible. And Mother, who thought I was such a good girl, would be disappointed. . . .

... I looked at [Mr. Freeman’s] heavy face trying to look as if he would have liked me to say No. I said no.

... The lie lumped in my throat and I couldn’t get air. . . Our lawyer brought me off the stand to my mother's arms. The fact that I had arrived at my desired destination by lies made it less appealing to me (82-83).

Later, when Mr. Freeman is found murdered, Maya is convinced that he is dead because she lied; that evil flows through her mouth, waiting to destroy any person she might talk to. To protect others, she convinces herself that she must stop talking: “Just my breath,
carrying my words out, might poison people and they’d curl up and die like the Black fat slugs that only pretended” (85). Acting on this conviction, Maya becomes a voluntary mute, Mr. Freeman’s death having provoked not only Maya’s spiritual death but also her quasi-isolation from her world.

In Stamps, Maya could count on the unwavering support of Grandmother Henderson and the Black community. However, there is a surprising inability on the part of Vivian Baxter and her family to provide adequate emotional support for Maya or to understand the psychological difficulties of an eight-year-old who has been traumatised by rape. When Maya does not behave as the person they know and accept her to be, she is punished for being so arrogant that she will not speak to her family. On other occasions, she is thrashed by any relative who feels offended by her silence. When the family can no longer tolerate Maya’s “grim presence,” Vivian Baxter again banishes Maya and Bailey to Stamps, Arkansas, fulfilling Maya’s prophesy that she had not come to St. Louis to stay.

Maya welcomes her return to Stamps, where she finds comfort in the barrenness and solitude of a place where nothing happens. Of this Angelou writes:

After St. Louis, with its noise and activity, its trucks and buses, and loud family gatherings, I welcomed the obscure lanes and lonely bungalows set back deep in dirt yards.

The resignation of its inhabitants encouraged me to relax. They showed me a contentment based on the belief that nothing more was coming to them, although a great deal more was due. Their decision to be satisfied with life’s inequities was a lesson for me. Entering Stamps, I had the feeling that I was stepping over the border lines of the maps and would fall, without fear, right off the end of the world.

Into this cocoon I crept (86).
In this passage and, indeed, throughout her recaptured childhood years in Stamps, Angelou examines herself introspectively. Though, Angelou, the autobiographer, locates herself in the physical environment of her childhood—in a series of physical scenes—her inward retrospective musings and the interiority that she manages to capture so well are more significant to the reader’s understanding of the autobiographer’s private self than of the external phenomena from which the musings emerge.

Of all of the black residents of Stamps, the one person Angelou treats with unqualified respect is Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Maya calls her the “aristocrat of Black Stamps” (77). A self-supporting, independent, graceful woman, Mrs. Flowers gently nurses Maya through her years of silence by reading to her and loaning her books so that Maya’s love of literature makes her want to speak it. The critic Mary G. Mason (1990), although she doesn’t specify Angelou, has observed a pattern in women’s autobiographies in which another woman—a mother, a daughter, a grandmother, a friend—helps the subject identify herself as a writer. This pattern certainly holds true for Mrs. Flowers, whose encouragement is a major factor in Maya’s development as reader, autobiographer and poet.

Maya lives in “perfect personal silence” (86) for nearly five years until she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Stamps’ black intellectual, who will become for the adult Angelou her “measure of what a human being can be” (91). Mrs. Flowers throws Maya her “first life line” (92) by accepting her as an individual, not in relation to another person. Moreover, Mrs. Flowers ministers to Maya’s growing hunger and quest for individuality by giving her books of poetry, talking to her philosophically about books, and encouraging her to recite poems. Committing poems to memory, pondering over them,
recalling them when lonely, give Maya a sense of power within herself, a transcendence over her immediate environment.

Maya’s “lessons in living” with Mrs. Flowers awaken her conscience, sharpen her perception of her environment and of the relationship between Blacks and the larger society, and teach her something about the beauty and power of language. Emotionally and intellectually strengthened by this friendship, Maya begins to compose poetic verses and sing songs, and to keep a scrapbook journal in which she records her reactions to and impressions of people, places and events, and new ideas that she is introduced to by books. When she is not yet nine years old, she records her impressions of early pioneer life in Arkansas:

Such jolting, rumbling, squeaking and creaking! Such ringing of cowbells as the cattle plodded along! and dust—dust—so thick that your mouth was full of grit, your eyes were—oh, very dirty, and your hair was powdered with the reddish Arkansas dust. The sun was hot and the sweat was streaming down your face, streaking through the grime. But you were happy for you were on a great adventure. You and your father and mother, brothers and sisters, and many of your neighbors were moving from your old home in the East. You were going to settle on some rich land in Arkansas. And you were going there not on a train of railroad cars—for there were none—but in a train of covered wagons pulled by strong oxen (1990: 44).

As Angelou chronicles her movements from innocence to awareness, from childhood to adolescence, there are certain social barriers that she must confront and overcome in order to maintain a sense of self and relative freedom.

For example, Angelou’s first confrontation with a white person catapults her into a clearer awareness of social reality and into a growing consciousness of self-worth. This confrontation proves to be a major turning point in her life. During a brief time when she was eleven years old, Maya worked in the home of Mrs. Viola Cullinan, a wealthy,
transplanted Virginian. With the arrogance of a Southern white woman whom neither custom nor tradition had taught to respect a black person, Mrs. Cullinan insults Maya by calling her Mary rather than Marguerite, a name that Mrs. Cullinan considered too cumbersome. Mrs. Cullinan’s attempt to change Maya’s name for her own convenience echoes the larger tradition of American racism that attempts to prescribe the nature and limitations of a black person’s identity. In refusing to address Maya by her proper name, the symbol of her individuality and uniqueness, Mrs. Cullinan refuses to acknowledge her humanity. A sensitive, reflective nature, combined with an alert intelligence, enables Maya to comprehend the nature of this insult. She writes:

Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being ‘called out of his name.’ It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely constructed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots, and spooks (106).

Maya strikes back, deliberately breaking several pieces of Mrs. Cullinan’s heirloom china. In doing so, she affirms her individuality and value. Through this encounter, the young Maya learns that until the individual is willing to take a decisive step toward self-definition, refusing to compromise with insults, he or she remains in a cage. In short, the individual must resist society’s effort to limit his or her aspirations. Only after Maya determines to risk Mrs. Cullinan’s outrage and to defy the expectations of others is she able to begin to loose herself psychologically, from the “dehumanising atmosphere of her environment.” Dolly A. McPherson sees Maya’s intentional breaking of Mrs. Cullinan’s China as an affirmation of Maya’s “individuality and value” (1990: 45).

Another white whose bigotry affects Maya is Mr. Donleavy, the guest speaker at the eighth-grade graduation at the segregated Lafayette County Training School. Amid all of the pride and loving detail that surround Angelou’s exquisite description of
graduation day, Mr. Donleavy hangs over the event like a dense white cloud. All his ideas about education are formed along divisions of race and gender. Some first-rate baseball and football players once graduated from Lafayette County Training School, he remarks, never mentioning the black girls. He is pleased that because of his efforts, the white students at Central High School will be getting new microscopes for their laboratories. When Donleavy leaves for a more pressing obligation, having destroyed the educational dreams of the black children, Idenry Reed, the valedictorian, turns to the audience and starts singing the Negro national anthem.

Angelou remembers her graduation from elementary school not as the customarily exciting and happy occasion for the young graduates and their families and friends, but as a dramatisation of the painful injustices of a segregated society and an underscoring of the powerlessness of blacks within that society. As she listens to the insulting words of an oblivious and insensitive white speaker, the young girl perceives a terrifying truth about her racial self and about the desperation of impotence, especially about the impotence of black people in the South of the 1930s:

It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my colour with no chance of defense. We should all be dead (176). Her momentarily mixed feelings of despair, shame and anger on her graduation day at the seemingly hopeless future for young Blacks in racist America are surmounted by her pride in Blacks when the Negro National Anthem is sung. As Maya consciously joins the class and audience in singing, she unconsciously, from her perspective in time, also predicts her own future as a poet:

We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud
graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonder, beautiful Negro race.

Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the only night made less lonely by your songs, or by the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?

If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers) (179-80).

Many American autobiographies besides *Caged Bird*, including *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *Black Boy*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Black Folks Speak*, Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and others, are structured around a narrative enactment of change on two levels: the personal and psychological on one hand, and the socio-historical and intellectual on the other. Paradoxically, while Angelou is growing in confident awareness of her strength as an individual, she is also becoming increasingly more perceptive about her identity as a member of a oppressed racial group in Stamps. In Stamps, as throughout the South, religion, sports and education functioned in ways that encouraged the discriminated class to accept the *status quo*. But Angelou demonstrates how Blacks in Stamps subverted those institutions and used them to withstand the cruelty of the American experience.

In a graphic description of a revival meeting, Angelou recalls her first observation of the relation between blacks and religion. To the casual observer, the revivalists seem to “[bask] in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden” (127) and to believe that “it was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little time” (128) on earth. Although the poor give thanks to the Lord for a life filled with
the most meagre essentials and a maximum amount of brute oppression, the church rituals create for them a temporary transcendence and an articulation of spirit. However, in this tightly written, emotionally charged scene, Angelou briefly records the joining point between the blues and religious tradition. Miss Grace, the good-time woman, is also conducting rituals of transcendence through her barrelhouse blues. The agony in religion and the blues is the connecting point:

A stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between the songs sung a few minutes before [in church] and those being danced to in the gay house by the railroad tracks. All asked the same questions. How long, oh God? How long? (108).

Early on, the reader gleans that although the Joe Louis victories in the boxing ring in the 1930s were occasions for street celebrations that caused tens of thousands of Blacks to parade, sing, dance, and derive all the joy possible from these collective victories of the race, for Angelou, Joe Louis’ victory over heavy-weight contender Primo Camera was “a grotesque counterpoint to the normal way of life” in Arkansas. Angelou describes the scene that takes place in her grandmother’s store on that night of the fight, vividly recapturing John Dunthey’s style and language:

Louis is penetrating every block. . . . Louis sends a left to the body and it’s the uppercut to the chin and the contender is dropping. He's on the canvas, ladies and gentlemen.

Babies slid to the floor as women stood lip and men leaned toward the radio.

Here’s the referee. He’s counting, One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. . . Is the contender trying to get up again?” (131-132)

The dentist, who is ironically named Lincoln, refuses to treat the child, even though he is indebted to Momma for a loan she extended to him during the depression:
“Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s.” As a silent witness to this scene, Marguerite suffers not only from the pain of her two decayed teeth, which have; been reduced to tiny enamel bits by the avenging “Angel of the candy counter,” but also from the utter humiliation of the dentist's bigotry as well: “It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache an have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness” (159-60).

In an alternate version of the confrontation, which Angelou deliberately fantasises and then italicises to emphasise its invention, Momma asks Marguerite to wait for her outside the dentist’s office. As the door closes, the frightened child imagines her grandmother becoming “ten feet tall with eight-foot arms.” Without mincing words, Momma instructs Lincoln to “leave Stamps by sundown” and “never again practice dentistry”: “When you get settled in your next place, you will be a vegetarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?” (162). The poetic justice in Momma’s superhuman power is perfect; the racist dentist who refused to treat her ailing granddaughter will in the future be restricted to treating the dogs he prefers to “niggers.” After a trip to the black dentist in Texarkana, Momma and Marguerite return to Stamps, where we learn the “real” version of the story by overhearing a conversation between Momma and Uncle Willie. In spite of her prodigious powers, all that Momma accomplishes in Dr. Lincoln’s office is to demand ten dollars as unpaid interest on the loan to pay for their bus trip to Texarkana.

In the child’s imagined version, fantasy comes into play as the recounted scene ventures into the unreal or the impossible. Momma becomes a sort of superwoman of enormous proportions (“ten feet tall with eight foot arms”) and comes to the helpless
child's rescue. In this alternate vision, Angelou switches to fantasy to suggest the depth of the child’s humiliation and the residue of pain even after her two bad teeth have been pulled. Fantasy, finally, is used to demonstrate the undiminished strength of the character of Momma. Summarising the complete anecdote, Angelou attests, “I preferred, much preferred, my version.” Carefully selected elements of fiction and fantasy in the scene involving Dr. Lincoln and her childhood hero, Momma, partially compensate for the racial displacement that she experiences as a child.

All the men in the store shouted, “No.”

“--eight, nine, ten.” There were a few sounds from the audience, but they seemed to be holding themselves in against tremendous pressure.

“The fight is all over, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s get the microphone over to the referee. . . Here he is. He’s got the Brown Bomber’s hand, he’s holding it up . . . Here he is . . .”

Then the voice, husky and familiar, came to wash over us—“The winnah, and still heavyweight champeen of the world. . . Joe Louis.”

Champion of the world. A Black Boy. Some Black mother’s son. He was the strongest man in the world. People drank coca-colas like ambrosia and ate candy bars like Christmas. Some of the men went behind the Store and poured white lightning in their soft drink bottles, and a few of the bigger boys followed them. Those who were not chased away came back blowing their breath in front of themselves like proud smokers.

It would take an hour or more before the people would leave the Store and head for home. Those who lived too far had made arrangements to stay in town. It wouldn’t do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis has proved that we were the strongest people in the world (131-132).

Maya comes to realise at the church meetings that her neighbours use religion as a way of “basking in the rightenousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the down-trodden” (98). Finally when Grandmother Henderson and Maya are insultingly ejected
from the office of a white dentist and total that he would rather stick his hand “in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (184), the child can only compensate for such painful impotence by her fantasising powers and triumphant revenge. The only way she can find solace is by fantasising that her grandmother has ordered the white dentist to leave the town and that he actually obeyed her.

Angelou’s complex awareness of what Black men, women and children encountered in their struggles for selfhood is apparent in each of these incidents. Such experiences are recorded not simply as historical events, but as symbolic revelations of Angelou’s inner world. They are social, geographic and psychological occasions. The implication that one’s powerlessness in the larger world may need to be experienced and overcome in the process of personal development is very clear.

In 1941, when Maya is thirteen, she and Bailey move to Oakland and later San Francisco to live with their mother whom they have not seen in six years. By this time, Vivian Baxter has married Daddy Clidell, a gambler and respected businessman, who will soon become “the first father [Maya] would know” (203). For a while, Maya re-experiences some of the personal dislocation already felt so acutely in Stamps and St. Louis. But in time “the air of collective displacement [and] the impermanence of life in wartime” (205) dissipate her sense of not belonging. Of this she writes:

In San Francisco, for the first time I perceived myself as part of something. . . . The city became for me the idea of what I wanted to be as a grownup. Friendly but never gushing, cool but not frigid or distant, distinguished without the awful stiffness (206).

In San Francisco, the tender-hearted girl changes into another imagined self: a compound of her mother, Mrs. Flowers, and Miss Kirwin of Washington High School.
Just as Stamps and St. Louis stood in sharp contrast, so do San Francisco and Stamps. From her prosperous stepfather Maya receives a basic ghetto education:

He owned apartment buildings and later pool halls, and was famous for being the rarity “a man of honour.” He didn’t suffer, as many “honest men” do from the detestable righteousness that diminishes their virtue. He knew cards and men’s hearts. So during the age when Mother was exposing us to certain facts of life, like personal hygiene, proper posture, table manners, good restaurants and tipping practice, Daddy Clidell taught me to play poker, blackjack, tonk and high, low, Jick, Jack and the Game. He wore expensively tailored suits and a large yellow diamond stickpin. Except for the jewellery, he was a conservative dresser and carried himself with the conscious pomp of a man of secure means (213-214).

In San Francisco, Maya is also introduced to a colourful cast of urban street characters (i.e., Stonewall Jimmy, Just Black, Cool Clyde, Tight Coat and Red Leg) who make their living through gambling and trickery. Here she learns a new morality: “the Black American ghetto ethic by which that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country’s table . . . by ingenuity and courage, is able to take of himself a Lucullan feast” (219). Mr. Leg’s story, for example, is an excellent portrayal of such an individual and a brilliant recapturing of the trickster motif found in African and Afro-American literature. Through trickery, Mr. Red Leg, a con artist and a hero-figure of Black American urban folklore, outwits his white antagonist. In doing so, he symbolises the strength, dignity, and courage black Americans are able to manifest in spite of their circumscribed lives, although they may function as miscreants, not only in the eyes of the white world but also to the preachers and matriarchs within the Black community. Black men like Mr. Red Leg, who use “their intelligence to pry open the door of rejection and [who] not only [become] wealthy but [get] some revenge in the bargain” (218), are heroes to Maya and her “Black associates” (219).
Three other experiences further dramatise Angelou’s awareness of self and her world, changing with sometimes bewildering speed, and help her to work out new patterns of selfhood and personal direction.

Maya has to use her resources and figure the way out of a tough situation. The real father, “Daddy Bailey”, invites her to spend the summer with him in Southern California. She is truly excited, still anticipating that he lives the good life, just as she had when he first drove into Stamps. Yet the illusion is soon destroyed when Maya arrives at her father’s rather secluded trailer home, which is also inhabited by his very young girlfriend, Dolores. Maya and Dolores have a near-immediate disliking for each other, and her father seems to take pleasure in this.

Maya is surprised when her father proposes that just he and she take a trip to Mexico, where he is known to go from time to time, supposedly to pick up food for special dinners. So far Bailey, Sr., has paid her little attention and not attempted to help create a pleasant vacation. Maya is excited by the trip and thinks it will be exotic and fun.

On the way to Mexico, Maya’s father stops for some time to drink with a guard, and when he finally gets back in the car he jokingly asks the guard if he wants to marry Maya. While the teenager had wanted to be introduced to her father’s friends, she had never envisioned this. The guard starts grabbing her, but eventually her father takes off. They ride along twisted roads to the dirt yard of a bar, where half-naked children are chasing chickens. A group of women emerge, greeting Bailey Sr. while the women laugh when they hear that Maya is his daughter, once inside the ramshackle building everyone is quite welcoming to both of them. Maya sees her father with new eyes here. He is the
centre of attention and completely relaxed. Shortly she too is totally at ease, dancing and revealing with complete abandon.

The teenager then realises she has not seen her father for sometime and at first panics at the thought of having been abandoned. When she sees his car outside, she decides to wait there for him, and eventually he appears, thoroughly intoxicated, and falls fast asleep in the car. Rather than spend the night there, Maya decides she will drive them back home, assuming that she has watched enough other people drive to be able to do it herself. The teenager is exhilarated by her success and power as she finally gets the car back to the guard station. At this pint she smacks into another car, yet she is not afraid, just wondering whether anyone is hurt, whether her father has woken up, and what will happen next.

No one is hurt, and Maya and the passengers of the other car set about waking her snoring father. After some effort, they get him up; he assesses the situation and walks off with his insurance papers, a half-empty bottle of liquor, and the guard and the driver of the other car. In a short time, they return laughing, and Bailey Sr. gets behind the wheel as if completely recovered. Maya is quite angry that he does not praise her for her tenacity and driving, and instead is oblivious to her remarkable accomplishment.

Soon after their return to California, Dolores (her father’s current “girlfriend”) almost immediately starts arguing with Bailey Sr., saying Maya has come between them. The fight escalates until Bailey leaves, slamming the door behind him. While Maya has never liked the woman, she does feel sorry for her, since her father had left Dolores behind to work and worry over what escapades the father and daughter were involved in, and when they would return. Maya decides to console Dolores and feels proud of the
decision, which shows what a good-hearted sort she is. Yet the end result is hardly a merciful exchange; it is a physical fight. Dolores calls Maya’s mother a whore; Maya slaps her, and Dolores locks her arms around Maya, who finally shoves her away.

Once outside the trailer, Maya realises there is blood dripping down from her waist. Dolores chases after her with a hammer, and Maya takes refuge in her father’s car. Dolores was still screaming wildly when Bailey Sr. and his friends crowd around to calm her. Once she is back in the trailer, the angry Bailey Sr. comes back to get into the car with Maya. She does not warn him about her blood before he sits in the puddle that has made it to the passenger’s side; she gets some delight from hoping he will realise that Dolores is quite a monster. After taking her to one friend to emergency medical care Barley, Sr., leaves her with a second friend knowing that violence would ensue if she returned home and her mother learned that she had been cut.

Maya leaves without telling her father or his friend, and after wandering about San Diego for some while, joins a junkyard commune of homeless children whom she describes as “the silt of war frenzy” (247). After she has spent a month in the commune, Maya’s thought processes have altered so significantly that she is hardly able to recognise her former self: “Her peer’s unquestioning acceptance dislodges her familiar feelings of insecurity; moreover, the unrestrained life that she experiences within the group expands her spiritual horizons and intimates [her] into the brotherhood of man” (247). The gratitude Angelou owes those who befriended her on her passage from childhood to adolescence to adulthood will forever include her junkyard family:

After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly out of the pale of
the human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life (247).

Time and time again, Angelou brings us to the question of human relationships. Through the junkyard experience, she learns that, beyond the barriers of race, all men and women are the same; they share the same fears, the same loneliness, and the same hopes. The commune experience also confirms Angelou’s determination to exercise further control over her being and helps her to establish a valuable new direction for her personal growth. Months later when Angelou becomes the first black hired as a conductor on the San Francisco streetcars, her determination and success in this venture can be directly attributed to these pivotal experiences in Mexico and California.

Angelou must confront and overcome one other obstacle before she can begin to know herself. This problem relates to numerous questions about her sexuality that plague her when she is convinced, after her third reading of *The Well of Loneliness*, that she is verging on lesbianism: “Why are her voice so heavy and her hands and feet so far from being feminine and dainty? Why are her breasts so sadly underdeveloped? Is she a lesbian? Do lesbians bud gradually “or burst into being with a suddenness that dismayed them as much as it repelled society”? (267). For weeks, Angelou seeks answers to these questions, probing into unsatisfying books and into her own unstocked mind without finding a morsel of peace or understanding. When she finally approaches her mother to seek answers to the questions about her sexuality and about the disturbing physical changes that are taking place in her body, Vivian Baxter gently reassures her daughter that the physical changes are just human nature. Not altogether convinced by her mother’s assurances, Maya decides that she needs a boyfriend to clarify her position to the world and to herself. From her point of view, “a boyfriend’s acceptance of [her] would guide
[her] into the strange and exotic lands of frills and femininity” (272-273) and at the same time, confirm her heterosexuality. But among her associates, Maya cannot find an interested partner. Taking matters into her own hands, she decides to offer herself to a neighbourhood youth; and, at sixteen, she becomes pregnant, a surprise consequence of a single, impersonal, unsatisfactory experiment.

Like the “aloneness” that she has experienced most of her life, Maya is literally “alone” during most of her pregnancy, for she manages to keep this fact hidden from her mother, her teachers, and her friends for eight months and one week. When Vivian Baxter learns from Maya that she will deliver a child shortly, she nurtures her daughter with understanding and support and, in doing so, becomes the compassionate, loving mother of Maya’s childhood fantasies. The birth of Maya’s son is a celebration of a new life, of Maya’s own rebirth as a young mother, and of Maya’s discovery of her creative self. But it is also an ironic outcome of a completely loveless and casual relationship.

The final scene of *Caged Bird* is richly symbolic, Maya is reluctant to let her three-week old baby sleep with her because she is certain that she will roll over in the night and crush him. But Vivian Baxter ignores her daughter’s fears and places the baby beside his mother. The next morning, Vivian Baxter is standing over her daughter. Under the tent of a blanket which Maya has devised with her elbow and forearm, the baby sleeps soundly. Vivian Baxter whispers to her daughter. “See, you don’t have to think about the right thing. If you are for the right thing, then you do it without thinking” (281). This scene verbalises Vivian Baxter’s faith in Maya’s instinctive qualities of motherhood and Maya’s acceptance of herself as a creative, life-giving force.
By the end of *Caged Bird*, the displaced young Maya has found a place and has discovered a vital dimension of herself. No longer need she ask, “What you looking at me for?”, or fantasise a reality other than her own. By the end of the autobiography, Angelou, the young adult, has succeeded in freeing herself from her cage by assuming control of her life and fully accepting her womanhood. Indeed, as Sidonie Smith posits (1990: 54), with the birth of her child, Angelou is herself born into a mature engagement with the forces of life. In welcoming that struggle, Angelou refuses to live a death of quiet submission:

> Few, if any, survive their teens. Most surrender to the vague but murderous pressure of adult conformity. It becomes easier to die and avoid conflicts than to maintain a constant battle with the superior forces of maturity” (1990: 55).

Roy Pascal (1990: 55) observes that autobiography acquires its shape through the autobiographer’s consciousness of what the child ultimately became. Angelou is able to confront her memories of her own past with honesty, humour and irony because they form a necessary part of her spiritual and intellectual development. She believes, as most autobiographers do, that memory affords access to the past that is worth revealing and that an understanding of the human condition—not information about a life, but insight into its process—is intrinsically valuable.

The narrative voice at work in *Caged Bird* is that of the older autobiographer who is not only aware of the journey, but also enlarged by it, an achievement that is emphasised by the affirming nature of the work. In *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou undergoes the archetypal American journey of initiation and discovery.

The text thus charts Angelou’s development from innocence to awareness, from childhood to an ever-quicken sense of adolescence. To maintain a relative sense of
freedom and autonomy, Angelou overcomes certain ideological values that were inscribed within the social fabric. As she develops, she challenges and overcomes the pervasive and naturalising tendencies of these values; this is the strength of this segment of her autobiography. The ability to subvert those institutional discourses and practices that were meant to ensure her mental enslavement become a very real part of her battle to survive in her world.

(i)

Angelou’s treatment of female role models in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—of her mother and grandmothers and of Mrs. Flowers—is even more positive than her treatment of African-American males. Since it is generally accepted that children of her era developed stronger bonds with their mother than their father, it is not surprising to find Angelou emphasising the importance of mothers and grandmothers. Such emphasis on mothers is, according to Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, “typical in women’s autobiography due to the innate and archetypal aspects of the women’s psyche, celebrated and codified long ago as the Eleusinian Mysteries” (1980: 180). These archetypal aspects may be incorporated in women's autobiographies, but it does not seem to be done consciously by Angelou. What she does do consciously, however, is to make an effort to counter unflattering female types described in the earlier literature by James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving. In this literature, grandmother matriarchs are depicted as silent, post-forty, corpulent and passively working in the kitchen.

Compared to these earlier female stereotypes, Angelou’s paternal grandmother, Mrs. Henderson, is a symbol of strength; she is in no way a weak, passive personality. She is not silent. She is the moral centre and the voice of authority in *I Know Why the*
*Caged Bird Sings.* She is an Earth Mother, a figure who is good, kind, nurturing, and protecting. Angelou calls her “Momma” and in fiction she would be the “Madonna” figure, one who stands for love and home. Her love for Angelou is unconditional and maternal. This love contrasts markedly with the paternal, in which love is more conditional and is usually earned and given only if one is obedient and attractive. In Angelou’s extended family an atmosphere of warmth and love prevails that is not bestowed as a result of obedience or something earned. The strong maternal instinct envelops all.

Momma Henderson, for all her matriarchal positioning, is a total realist. If she ever failed to do her duty or did not observe her place as a lower class citizen, she knows the white power structure would soon find a way to express its displeasure. Those in control are generally more interested in order than in justice. Momma’s firm leadership while still being forced to keep her place, sends a mixed message to the younger generation that requires a good deal of maturity and distancing for them to understand. It was some time before Angelou expressed, particularly in her poetry, the courage and patience of those who kept quiet and saw to the survival of those in whom the future rested.

Two other characteristics of Momma contrast with the matriarchs found in early American literature. In as much as there were few or no opportunities in the professions, many women turned to religion as a means of escape from the confinement of their defined roles. Thus, Momma, a natural leader, became an important figure in her church. Moreover, Momma was an entrepreneur, a female rarity in the 1930s and unheard of one hundred years earlier. Her business acumen helped her family survive the depression
and keep off relief; she preserved her independence. This would not be a role natural to her predecessors.

In addition to her praise of Momma Henderson, Angelou expresses great pride in her maternal grandmother, Mrs. Baxter, who did not take a back seat to anybody. As previously noted, she was very light-skinned and probably could have easily passed as white. She chose to remain a part of a black community. She and her family spoke standard English and provided important liaison with the local white power structure. She was a political activist who wielded considerable clout in her neighbourhood in St. Louis, thus giving the lie to the myth that African Americans could not participate effectively in the political arena. Power blocks delivered votes and reaped the rewards. The Baxters understood the strength of unity.

Similarly, Angelou's mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, emerges as an extremely vital personality. She is Angelou’s role model. Angelou absorbs her personal philosophy and frequently quotes her maxims of life. Mrs. Johnson’s beauty and zest when she was young “made her powerful and her power made her unflinchingly honest” (174); and “To describe (her) would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colours of a rainbow” (49). Vivian is a city woman and sees no need in her world to conform to the subservient country folk tradition. She can “sing and swing” at will.

Vivian also found it too inconvenient to care for her two children or found it too incompatible with her life style. She finds an excuse -- a depressed Maya -- to send Maya and Bailey back to Stamps. This cavalier dumping of her children appears to Stephanie Demetrakopoulos as a failure to come to terms with the matriarchate (her mother), and this treatment, Demetrakopoulos finds, is a disturbing weakness of the book.
Angelou’s mother is seen as “shockingly callous” and insensitive by sending the little girl back to Stamps after being raped. Maya is traumatised by events and full of unwarranted guilt. The mother’s behaviour here and at other times does not justify the favourable treatment she got from Angelou and this action, Demetrakopoulos says, is “puzzling and unsettling. Vivian is just as guilty as Bailey, Sr., of betraying their children. But Mother Vivian is idolised by both Johnson children and neither would dream of questioning her less-than-perfect mothering. She is all that is glamorous and movie-life desirable to them. In Angelou's next book, *Gather Together in My Name*, she does question her mother’s sense of responsibility. She wonders whether her mother “. . . who had left (her) with others until she was thirteen. . . (would) feel more responsibility for (her) child Guy than she had felt for her own” (1974: 3). Thus there existed an awareness of an imperfect relationship with mother as well as father. Even if not openly acknowledged, this would have a dire effect upon her sense of worth. Angelou always seems to seek out her mother’s wisdom and advice, however, and gives her an important role in her life. She does not seem to dwell upon any rejection or lack of love. Years later Vivian would move in with Maya, who would never abdicate family responsibility without remorse. She, like Momma Henderson, fully understood and accepted motherhood and its attendant Madonna aspects.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and her other autobiographies, Angelou does discover herself and her capabilities and effectively conveys her personality and opinions. Her real purpose in *Caged Bird*, however, as well as in her other books, is to illuminate and explain her race’s condition by protesting against white misconceptions and legitimatising the extremes sometimes required for survival. While justifying some
questionable activities, she does not judge the right or wrong of them. She wants to destroy those stereotyped images of African-Americans that prevailed when she wrote *Caged Bird*. Angelou rightly resents this thinking that dehumanised her people, and which continued to be practised despite civil rights progress. Instead of writing an argumentative response or preaching to protest, Angelou chose the traditional form of autobiography to dramatise the conditions, presenting easily understood counter-examples. The reader can relate and conclude that the stereotype image is false and destructive. Forces beyond control dictate actions determined to be anti-social. Given equal opportunities, Angelou believes that like reactions would be demonstrated by blacks and whites. Later she acted this out as the white queen in Genet's *The Blacks*.

*Caged Bird* ends with Angelou facing the adult world full of “Mother Wit” and determination. She accepts enthusiastically the challenge of sustaining herself and her son. Her focus is that of a mature, responsible young woman. She will do better than her predecessors and enhance the mantle of motherhood. She has gained strength from her adversities, and increased status as a mother gives her added confidence for the future. The Maya character in *Caged Bird* addresses the author’s stated themes by overcoming many obstacles, establishing some sense of self as a mother, and repeatedly emphasising the importance of literacy and education. She also serves the traditional black autobiographical themes of bondage, her dependence on others; flight, as she breaks out on her own with the junkyard group; and freedom, by taking control of her life. Thus Angelou includes all required elements in *Caged Bird* and uses it as the base for her future books.