Why The Caged Bird Sings Essay, Research Paper

I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiography of the life of Maya Angelou. The book begins with the divorce of her parents, and Maya and her brother Bailey moving from St. Louis to Stamps, Arkansas, where their grandmother lives. Maya deals with sudden, unexpected separation from stability and security, sexual abuse, rape, racism, poverty, death, abandonment, solitude, and uncertainty all before the age of sixteen. After leaving the safety and comfort of life with her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, Maya and her older brother Bailey travel to St. Louis to live with their mother Vivian. After almost a year of not adjusting to city life, Maya becomes the victim of a savage rape, by her mother?s boyfriend. It leaves her so traumatized that she stops speaking and slowly recovers after returning to Stamps to the love and care of Momma. After proudly graduating from junior high school and entering their teenage years, Maya and Bailey again go to live with their mother. She moves to San Francisco, where Maya feels more alone and insecure than ever. She has to come to terms with the feelings and issues of being a teenager, getting a job, finishing school, watching her brother pull away to find freedom, and an unexpected pregnancy. Eventually she overcomes all the cards stacked against her to give birth to a healthy son.

Throughout I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, the author lives in several towns and cities, all of which effect her differently. The fast-paced, noisy life Maya finds in St. Louis is totally foreign to her, and seems worlds away from the quiet, secure life she had in Stamps with Momma. Maya thrives and seems happiest and most comfortable in Stamps, with Momma, Bailey, and Uncle Willie. From the time that she was three until she was seven. The rural, poor southern town of Stamps was the only home that Maya knew.

Maya was inspired to write her autobiography after meeting novelist James Baldwin, editor Robert Loomis, and cartoonist Jules Feiffer. She booked a downtown hotel room and wrote from six till noon on weekdays. She did this for six months, and by 1970 she had a manuscript for publication.

After reading I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, I would like to say that it is a very interesting look into a turbulent life of a young troubled girl. I think that it was entertaining, but at the same time there were some serious issues dealt with by the author. It helped me realize how hard life can be for some people. I would strongly recommend this book to any mature reader.

The author easily fulfills the goal of the novel. I think that her goal was to successfully give a feeling of what her life was like as she grew up. She deals with sexual abuse, rape, racism, poverty, death, abandonment, solitude and uncertainty, all before she was sixteen. The detailed accounts of the events in her life made me feel as if I was growing up along side of her. I could see her pain and anguish throughout her childhood years. I was affected most when she gave her feelings after she was raped. She wrote of the guilt and her fears of how the rape was her fault. Maya says, ?I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey?When I refused to be the child they knew and accepted me to be, I was called impudent and my muteness sullenness?The bareness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness. 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.? This account of Maya?s is an example of how she fulfills her goal of making the reader feel as if they were with her as she grew up.

Angelou?s writing style is descriptive and colorful; she uses many literary devices to emphasize scenes and conversations that show the development of her character. For example: Characterization ??when she was called upon to sing, she seemed to pull out plugs from behind her jaws and the huge, almost rough sound would pour over the listeners and throb in the air.? Symbolism ?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. I had to stop talking.? Simile ?Bailey smelled like a vinegar barrel or a sour angel.? Dialect ?Ritie, don?t worry ?cause you ain?t pretty. Plenty pretty women I seen digging ditches or worse.? I liked her writing style. She wrote in dialect, and colorfully described characters and settings. It allowed me to put myself in her shoes. I liked how she made her own similes, used symbolism, dialect and characterization throughout the story.

I enjoyed the way that Angelou described the settings in the novel. If she wrote about a specific place, she would describe its sounds, smells, and the way it looked. It gave me the feeling as if I was in the particular place that she was describing. For example, she describes why she didn?t like St. Louis. “I had decided that St. Louis was a foreign country. I would never get used to the sounds of flushing toilets, or the packaged foods, or doorbells or the noise of cars and trains and busses that crashed through the walls or slipped under the doors. In my mind I only stayed in St. Louis for a few weeks…I carried the same shield that I had used in Stamps: I didn’t come to stay.” This description gives me a feeling of the loud poverty stricken town of St. Louis. It helps me to understand why Maya dislikes the city, and why she wants to go back to Stamps. This type of feeling is what makes detail and description so important to writing.

I believe that the theme of the Novel has to do with racism. The places that Maya grew up in all had large amounts of racism. She had to be able to overcome it, and not let it bother her. For example, she says, ?In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed.” This quote describes the high amount of segregation people faced in Stamps. This is one of the many racist situations that Maya faces in the novel. This is also one of the many situations she was able to rise above. She chose not to let Stamps social status bother her. She just continued to live her life the way she wanted to.

Most of the conflict during the story is between Maya and herself. She doesn?t like her self-image. She describes herself as a, ? too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.? She has a longing to succeed and doesn?t believe she can do so, being a black girl. One of her most joyful moments was when she graduated the eighth grade. “The faded beige of former times had been replaced with strong and sure colors…I had taken to smiling more often, and my jaws hurt from the unaccustomed activity…I had outdistanced unpleasant sensations by miles. I was headed for the freedom of open fields…Youth and social approval allied themselves with me and we trammeled memories of slights and insults. The wind of our swift passage remodeled my features. Lost tears were pounded to mud and then to dust. Years of withdrawal were brushed aside and left behind, as hanging ropes of parasitic moss. My work alone had awarded me a top place and I was going to be one of the first called in the graduation ceremonies.” This shows how she was able to overcome the conflicts with herself, and succeed in life.

I think that a book that is similar to I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is Farewell to Manzanar. Both novels were written by people who were discriminated against, and who grew up with the least amount of possessions. The main characters in both stories succeeded in the end, and rose above discrimination.

Even though they have similar characters and experiences, the writing of the novels is very different. I believe that Maya Angelou was a much better writer than the author of Farewell to Manzanar. She wrote with more symbolization, color, and literary techniques, such as similes. I also think that I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is just more interesting. I remember Farewell to Manzanar being a very boring book, which I wasn?t interested in. I would strongly recommend I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings over Farewell to Manzanar any day.