

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings Study Guide

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

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Plot Summary

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is Maya Angelo's painful, yet inspiring, autobiography about her childhood as a black girl in the deep South. Maya is sent to Stamps, Arkansas, by her parents from Long Beach, California. Her parents do not have time for Maya and her brother Bailey. Maya is not accustomed to the discrimination of the South, but she soon learns about the deep differences between blacks and whites. However, her grandmother is one of the few store owners in town, and the only colored store owner. As a result, she is not only well respected by the blacks of the small community, but she is marginally respected by the whites. Therefore, Maya's experiences are different from many, even during the deepest part of the Depression.

This changes, however, when her father returns for Maya and her brother, taking them to live in St. Louis with their mother. Beautiful and part of a powerful family, their mother is the daughter of Grandmother Baxter, a powerful nearly-white woman. The family has power over police as well as other local crime families, and Maya admits she loves the dangerous life. However, it is in this life that Maya, at age eight, is raped by her mother's boyfriend. When the family discovers her secret, they kill the man after he is released from jail. Maya stops speaking to anyone but Bailey, and the two are shipped back to Stamps once again. Maya continues to develop and to experience the low level discrimination common in the South, from dentists who won't treat her because of her skin color to daily struggles with whites. After Bailey is harassed by white police, the children are shipped back to their parents who are in California.

It is during World War II and their mother's marriage to a powerful businessman that Maya learns about the Black underground. But, she also learns about love and respect, as her new step-father is a kind and caring man. Then, she is sent to live with her father for a summer, and she again learns how selfish people can be. Her father finds escape from his girlfriend in a Mexican bar with prostitutes, dragging his young daughter with him. Too drunk to drive, Maya is forced to attempt to take him home. She crashes the car at the Mexican border. Returning home, Maya is cut open by her father's girlfriend and sent to stay with friends. After running away, she finds herself in a junkyard community with other homeless youths. It is here she learns tolerance, brotherhood, and community. After a month, she returns to her mother and discovers that her time away has made her life far less exciting. Bailey soon leaves the house to take a position with the railroad, and Maya finds herself heavily discriminated against when trying to find work. She fights against the city rail system. Eventually, she becomes the first black employee of the San Francisco street car system.

Over the next year, Maya realizes she is still fighting against the "normal" life of those around her, as her experiences have aged her considerably beyond her peers. She finds herself confused by her maturation into womanhood. Maya takes a local lover as her first encounter, only to find herself pregnant. Maya pushes forward, completing her high school education and giving birth only two weeks later. Maya is terrified once her child is born, but her own mother teaches her that being a mother is instinctual and that she can only succeed.



"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is an insightful look into the life of a beloved poet who draws strength, encouragement, and love from her exciting childhood. Although certainly disadvantaged and troubled, Maya uses her childhood to push herself forward. Her life is proof that with faith, love, and acceptance, one can overcome anything.



Introduction - Chapter 5

Summary

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is a heartfelt biography of Maya Angelou. It is written about her childhood and teenage years. All can relate to her story of discrimination, poverty, strength, and hope.

In the Introduction, Maya describes a situation in which she desperately desires a beautiful dress. However, when her grandmother makes it, she realizes the dress does not make her any different. The girls in church still make fun of her, and the episode ends with Maya running from the church, embarrassed and urinating on herself, but happy to be free.

In Chapter 1, Maya explains that she and her brother Bailey came to Stamps, Arkansas, alone by train, after being sent to their father's mother as a result of their parents' divorce. Momma, as they call their grandmother, is a proud, strong black store owner in a highly segregated small Southern town who also cares for her eldest son, who is crippled. Maya watches the other blacks of the town come to the store each day, hopeful about their work in the fields, only to return at dusk, sore and tired and hopeless again, as their money barely pays their bills.

In Chapter 2, Maya explains why she is well educated. Her uncle, crippled after an incident as a child, is a strict but loving man who threatens the children if they do not recite their lessons properly. Maya recalls her uncle's struggles as a crippled black man and recalls one instance where he forced himself upright, pretending to be "normal." Maya notes she felt a kinship to him at that point, as she, too, sought to escape her life through books.

Chapter 3 shows Maya with a love for the family store. Working in it, she learns patience and skill. At night, she continues with household chores. Maya recalls the sheriff coming to warn Momma to keep Willie inside when a local black man is in trouble for raping a white woman. Momma hides Willie in the potato bin, and Maya notes the men of the town were frightening in their anger that was rooted in discrimination.

In Chapter 4, Maya describes Mr. McElroy, one of the only independent black men in town. She also explains her love for her older brother Bailey, a sleek, beautiful young man, contrary to her perceived ugliness. Maya idolizes her older brother, who always plays with her and defends her. She recalls walking twice a year to the white part of town to buy fresh meat. She notes that the segregation in town was so complete that many blacks vaguely knew what whites looked like. She recalls some of the folks working in white homes, but she didn't think of the whites as "people," just "whitefolks."

In Chapter 5, Maya explains that their grandmother is strict, requiring them to bathe even in the midst of winter. She urges them to correctly address adults. The poor white



trash even demand respect as they order people around the store, and Willie and Momma obey. Maya recalls one day when she was sweeping patterns into the dirt in the yard. The young girls come and destroy the patterns. They mimic Momma and disrespect Maya. Momma just stands and takes it while singing. Eventually they leave, and Maya realizes Momma has won by standing up to them.

Analysis

The introduction to the book serves as a symbolic moment in Maya's life that comes to represent her childhood. Her desire to be beautiful, normal, and like the other girls shows strongly in her recollection of the pretty dress, but the humiliation, discrimination, and feelings of loneliness that followed also represent her childhood's emotional state. Throughout Maya's life, she struggled to fit in, while all the while feeling left out and alone. Her breaking through at the end of the Introduction shows her capacity for strength even in dark situations.

Chapter 1 introduces several characters. It also begins to show Maya's troubled childhood. From an early age, Maya is forced to recognize abandonment and discrimination, as her parents leave her and her new town looks down on her because of the color of her skin. However, her grandmother's strength and power in the community are equally clear. Without question, grandmother's strong character traits will influence Maya significantly. The workers in this opening chapter also serve to show readers the true conditions of the South at the time.

Chapter 2 introduces Uncle Willie. Although he is harsh, his care for the children is evident. His own desire to be normal, along with his struggles not only as a black man but a crippled man, show that Maya is not alone in her suffering. Maya's closing remarks about her escape into books show an early love for literature, which is important as she continues in life.

Chapter 3 subtly shows the clear discrimination and environment of hatred that Maya and her family experienced. It also shows what a varied life the family led. On one hand, the store is the hubbub of black life in town, and everyone in the neighborhood highly respects Momma. Even the white sheriff respects her enough to warn her of the possible mob. However, the fact that the white men, so ignorant in their hatred, would think to come harass Willie merely because a black in town harassed a white man shows the deep discrimination in the small town.

In Chapter 4, Maya reveals again the dichotomy of the town, where there are blacks who are independent and well off, while at the same time there are blacks who have never really seen a white person, due to the deeply segregated community. This chapter also shows Maya's idolization of her brother, which comes into play later in the novel. In a way, Maya's inability to see the whites and people is symbolic of the deep seeded racism of the town.



In Chapter 5, the standoff between the poor white girls and Momma is highly symbolic. First, it is clear that Momma understands that even though she is a store owner, she is still a black woman in the South in the midst of discrimination. She is forced to tolerate the white girls' torments. Although Maya wants to intervene, she understands she cannot. In the end, however, Maya does learn that in standing tall against their ridicule, Momma does succeed in winning the battle, a characteristic Maya uses later to overcome her own obstacles.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Maya choose to open her book with the story of her embarrassing church experience as a child? What does this experience show about Maya, and about Stamps, Arkansas, where she grew up?

Discussion Question 2

Momma is a strong black woman in a power position in a racist town. What do you think Maya learns from her grandmother? Why does her grandmother refuse to chase off the poor white girls who mock her? What does this teach Maya?

Discussion Question 3

There are several examples of racism in the first five chapters of the novel. What are some of these examples? How do these show the segregation and racism of the town?

Vocabulary

Calamitous, affluent, inordinate, disciplinarian, rakishly, abomination, anachronism, segregation, impudent, appellations.



Chapter 6 - Chapter 9

Summary

In Chapter 6, Maya introduces Reverend Howard Thomas, a preacher who comes once every three months to Stamps to preach. Maya and Bailey hate him as he is loud and ungrateful. He also eats their favorite parts of the Sunday chicken when he comes to stay. Bailey and Maya often eavesdrop on Momma and the preacher's conversations. By doing so, they learn much about discrimination throughout the South. During one service, Sister Monroe, a woman who often was overtaken with the spirit, overtook the church with her fervor and actually tore Reverend Taylor's suit. So, when Maya sees Sister Monroe arrive for Thomas' service, she is excited for the festivities. As Thomas preaches, Sister Monroe overtakes him, hitting him and knocking out his teeth. Maya and Bailey are overcome with amusement and are pulled from the church and whipped, still laughing.

In Chapter 7, readers learn that Momma was married three times, but none of her husbands stayed. Maya sees her as strong and powerful, but many see her as beautiful and kind. She is also set in her ways with the whites, seeing them as dangerous and not to be trifled with. Once, Momma was accidentally referred to as Mrs. by a white judge, only because she owned a store. He assumed anyone who owned a store would be white. While the whites thought it humorous, the blacks saw it as a sign of her power.

Chapter 8 vividly describes the vast discrimination in Stamps, Arkansas. Maya admits to fearing the whites, but she is also annoyed with their waste. They are wealthy enough to simply throw away that which they no longer need. She also admits that she is confused because Momma has more money than most of the lower class whites, yet she never wastes anything. She makes all their clothing, and they only wear shoes when necessary. Maya notes that when the Depression hits, the blacks don't feel it for two years, as they are already in poverty. However, she also notes that the Depression doesn't discriminate. The government gives food to both blacks and whites. To stay in business, Momma sells items on trade. She takes the government aid provided, and exchanges it for other items. Maya and Bailey are the only children eating welfare goods, but they are the only family not on welfare.

One year, the children receive gifts from their parents, and Maya finds herself saddened, as she has previously been able to convince herself that her parents were dead. Now, she is forced to realize her parents are alive and do not want her. Momma is angry, as she feels the children are being ungrateful. Bailey, on contemplation, believes the gifts may indicate their mother is coming to get them.

In Chapter 9, Maya recalls her father, also named Bailey, coming back to Stamps. He arrives flashy, and Maya is awed by his good looks and charm. Maya is at first thrilled, but when she realizes she is not as pretty as the rest of her family, she is suddenly ashamed. Everyone comes to the store to see Bailey. When he tells the children he



plans to take them with him, Maya is torn. In the end, Maya and Bailey both travel with him. While her brother is thrilled, Maya finds herself often made fun of or teased, by both her father and brother. She also discovers they are heading to St. Louis to be with their mother. When she and Bailey meet their mother, both are in awe of her beauty. Maya and Bailey are left with their mother, and their father returns to California.

Analysis

Chapter 6 shows Maya's religious upbringing, which helps explain her faith. Her grandmother is highly religious. Maya and her brother are often subjected to church and the influence of church goers in their lives. These individuals also teach her about how severe the discrimination is in the South and how deeply religion is used to combat the feelings of hopelessness. Chapter 6 also shows the closeness between Bailey and Maya.

Chapter 7 allows the reader to learn more about Annie Henderson and why her influence over Maya was so powerful. Momma was strong, religious, and self sufficient. As a black in the South at the time, this was a huge feat. She was also smart enough to know that the whites were dangerous, even if they tolerated her. To the black community, she was a symbol of their strength and a promise of a future that was brighter than their own.

Chapter 8 reveals the true discrimination of smaller Southern towns like Stamps. It also shows poverty to be universal. The town's white individuals were wasteful when viewed through the eyes of the blacks. As a result, when the Depression hit, it hit them hard. The blacks, on the other hand, were somewhat used to poverty and hard times. They were hit less hard by the Depression. Maya and her family were able to maintain their store and their lives through the Depression as a result of their willingness to help others and to take less than others. This allowed them to continue to succeed even in hard times and to help others succeed. This lesson was one Maya used later in the life, as she learned early about the acceptance of hard times and tolerance.

Chapter 9 introduces Maya's parents. Her father is named Bailey, like her brother, and her mother's name is "Bibbi." Readers learn that Bailey was a self centered, egotistical man with little care for his children. He loved them, but he had no time for them in his life. One can see Bailey senior in Bailey junior, and it becomes clear that Bailey junior is a combination of his mother and father. For her part, Maya felt alone in the midst of these attractive, suave individuals. This lack of self confidence continued to plague her in life. Her brother suddenly betrayed her, in that he seemed to immediately side with their mother and father. He could relate to them, and this made Maya feel even more alone.



Discussion Question 1

In Chapter 6, Maya discusses religion and the fervor in which some in the community express their faith. Why do you think Maya chose to include this particular story? Why did she and Bailey dislike Reverend Thomas?

Discussion Question 2

In Chapter 8, Maya notes the deep discrimination in the area and the fact that the Depression didn't discriminate. What does she mean by this? How did the Depression actually help equalize the races? What did Momma's actions during the Depression show Maya?

Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 9, readers meet Maya's mother and father. What are they like? How does Maya feel about her father? About her mother? How does Bailey feel?

Vocabulary

Imperative, hominy, pandemonium, insolently, sobriquet, apprehended, lavishly, discriminate, engulfed, bombastic.



Chapter 10 - Chapter 14

Summary

In Chapter 10, Maya introduces her extended St. Louis family. Her Grandma Baxter is a near-white woman with well known importance and clout in the city. Her sons, with high positions in government unheard of for black men at the time, are also well known as the muscle behind the business. Maya and Bailey are quickly brought up to speed on the crime family ways, and their family's position in the city. She and her brother are enrolled in school, but they find it remedial compared to Stamps. The teachers are rude and uppity. St. Louis does have benefits, however, in that Maya learns to love local foods. She loves watching her mother dance and sing the blues in her nightclub. At home, she can hear her uncle's plan for beatings. In one case, she hears of her mother beating a man for cursing at her. Maya admits she loved their meanness. She found it exciting and nondiscriminatory in its cruelty. She also realizes that they are a close family, and they do not need anyone else. Maya finds this consoling.

Interestingly, Maya's birth name is Marguerite. However, as a result of Bailey's young voice calling out "mya sister," she is now Maya. Maya has a constant feeling of gratitude toward Vivian, her mother, as the children felt her kindness was a gift to them and was not required. At the end of the chapter, Maya points out Vivian was living with a man named Mr. Freeman.

In Chapter 11, readers learn more about Mr. Freeman. He is older and seems to only come alive when Vivian is home, although he does provide for the children. Maya often sleeps with them in their bed. One morning after Vivian has left, Mr. Freeman first fondles her and then holds her tightly while masturbating. After he is finished, he holds her quietly. Although Maya doesn't understand what is happening, she feels quiet and peaceful. Shortly, however, he pulls her out of bed and admonishes her first for wetting the bed. He then threatens that if she tells anyone what they have done, he will kill Bailey. Maya is confused, but obeys, wanting to keep her sibling safe. Mr. Freeman ignores her for several weeks. Wanting affection, Maya eventually crawls into his lap one afternoon, only to have him move her around and then abruptly leave. For months, he didn't speak to her.

In Chapter 12, one day when no one is home, Mr. Freeman forces himself on Maya, raping her at age eight. She is in extreme pain. Although Mr. Freeman seems sorry as he cleans her up, he again threatens to kill Bailey. She finds herself physically exhausted and ill, and her mother is concerned when she goes to bed early. After a night of fever and fitful sleep, Maya awakens to find her mother by her bed, reporting that Mr. Freeman has moved out. When her mother changes her sheets, concerned for her health, she finds Maya's bloody panties and realizes what has happened.

In Chapter 13, Maya is taken to the hospital. Under pressure from Bailey, tells of Mr. Freeman's abuse. He is arrested, but Maya feels that she is persecuted more than Mr.



Freeman as she has to be on the stand to testify. He is sentenced to one year, but he is released the same day. Later, a police officer arrives at the Baxter home. He tells the family that Mr. Freeman has been murdered. Maya feels guilty, but she knows the family has likely had him killed. Maya's response is to completely stop talking. Her family accepts this for a time. Eventually, Maya is punished for being uppity. She and Bailey are sent back to Stamps.

In Chapter 14, Maya is happy to be back in the silence and calmness of Stamps. She and Bailey are treated as world travelers, and Maya is allowed to remain distant. Bailey, for his part, begins telling tall tales of St. Louis, much to the delight of the town folk. Momma begins to see Bailey much like his father, with the gift of speech. Maya's lack of speech is attributed to her "tender heart", and her reluctant return to the South.

Analysis

Chapter 10 introduces the Baxter family and allows readers to better understand Maya's feelings toward her mother. A white woman with police clout who was accepted into a black community would have had tremendous power in that community, particularly if her sons also had high positions in the city. While it isn't expressly stated, Maya's words convey that Grandma Baxter is the matriarch of a considerable crime family. Her sons are the muscle, while Vivian is certainly the looks. Grandma is the brains. This sense of power is not exactly new to Maya, as her grandmother in Stamps also had a considerable reputation in town. However, the lifestyle here is vastly different. Whereas in Stamps, Maya is accustomed to religion, hard work, and discipline, the St. Louis family's focus is on power, manipulation, violence, and illegal activities. That difference aside, there is still a strong sense of family well known to Maya and her brother. However, Maya's feelings of family and loyalty do not appear to extend to her mother. She feels as though her mother is giving her gift by housing her and allowing her into her life. Instead of realizing it is Vivian's parental responsibility, Maya realizes Vivian has, for many years, not housed her children. Thus, Maya is filled with gratitude that many children would not have toward their parents. Finally, this chapter also introduces Mr. Freeman, a man who is soon to become very important.

Chapters 11 and 12 are heartbreaking in their content, but they explain much about Maya's struggles throughout her childhood. Mr. Freeman is a lonely man, as is shown by his dependency on Vivian for his happiness. He is also a cruel man, as is shown not only through his physical rape of young Maya, but also through his manipulation of her. After the first encounter, Maya feels, for the first time, what she interprets as love, although readers can see this is far from the truth. Mr. Freeman quickly douses this and confuses poor Maya. She doesn't understand what has occurred, but she knows enough to know that what Mr. Freeman is saying is not true. Yet, he convinces her that she is guilty of something, leaving her with a sense of shame. Furthermore, his threats to Bailey, the only person she believes she can count on, manipulate her into silence. In his tenderness following the act, he has enticed young Maya with a father's affection, the one thing that she desperately wants. Even though she knows what has happened is wrong, she still seeks Mr. Freeman out again. This behavior is not surprising, as she



is simply looking for affection. Mr. Freeman, of course, takes advantage of this and again uses Maya for his own sexual gratification.

By the end of Chapter 11, readers can only assume what will soon occur, and in Chapter 12, Mr. Freeman completes the act by raping Maya. His false sympathy again manipulates Maya into feeling guilty, and his threats against Bailey again keep her silent. Her physical illness is expected, as the rape of an eight year old would be difficult for her young body to endure. The fight between Vivian and Mr. Freeman is expected, as is Mr. Freeman's inability to remain in the house, even without Vivian knowing of the assault, as his guilt and fear of discovery are great. At the end of the chapter, the discovery of the bloody panties foreshadows Mr. Freeman's discovery. The knowledge of the family history suggests there may be serious consequences.

Chapter 13 proves these consequences to be true, but not before Maya is forced to feel even more humiliation. Her time on the stand is terrifying, and she is forced to lie, or have it be discovered that she had previously been inappropriately touched and had not said anything.

When Mr. Freeman's sentence is lax, he is murdered. It is assumed by Grandma Baxter's words that the family was involved in his murder. Maya's response to stop speaking is understandable, as she is only eight and feels that her words have led to a man's death. Her family's response is understandable, in that they want her to be healthy and happy. This is an unrealistic expectation, considering that she has just been through so much. The sending of the children back to Stamps is likely a move to help protect them, as it is clear the lives they have in St. Louis are less than desirable for children. Bailey's despair shows his deep link to his mother, whereas Maya's happiness at leaving simply reflects her pain. This pain is further seen in Chapter 14, as Maya continues to struggle with daily living. Her silence and distance is seen by some as a reluctance to be in Stamps, but in reality, this is merely an after effect of her rape. Bailey, on the other hand, finds himself more like his father, foreshadowing his behaviors later in the novel as he becomes older.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the extended Baxter family, and why they have considerable clout in the community. Why is Grandma Baxter powerful? What about her sons? What does Vivian Baxter do for a living? What allows her to have power over men?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the development to abuse between Mr. Freeman and Maya. What is their relationship at the beginning? How does the abuse begin? How does it continue? What is the culmination? What is the effect of abuse on Maya?



Discussion Question 3

Maya chooses silence in response to her abuse. Why? What does her silence mean to her? What is her St. Louis' family response? Her Stamp family's response? What is Bailey's response?

Vocabulary

Siditty, enunciation, reprobation, impudent, droll, tousled, habitual, quandary, waifs, flippant, inequities, endentres.



Chapter 15 - Chapter 17

Summary

In Chapter 15, Maya finds someone who is able to break her from her silence. Bertha Flowers is a wealthy, caring, well educated woman in Stamps. She has a close relationship with Momma, although Maya is unsure as to why. It is only later that she begins to understand that it's a shared sisterhood because of race and conditions. Bertha takes Maya under her wing and begins gently pushing her out of her shell. She teaches Maya that language can be powerful and literature even more powerful. She gives her books to read aloud, lemonade, and cookies. She also teaches Maya to learn from her culture and her elders. She instills in Maya an understanding and appreciation of poetry, a love which Maya maintains. Interestingly, when she returns from a visit to Bertha Flowers' home, she is punished by Momma because she uses the phrase "by the way" in her explanation to Bailey about her afternoon. That phrase is blasphemous to Momma.

In Chapter 16, Maya explains her culture's version of preparations for adulthood. Embroidering, crocheting, ironing, washing, and other normal duties are learned at home, but finer lessons, including table settings and cooking, are mastered in the homes of whites. Maya is sent at age ten to help in the kitchen of a local wealthy white woman. The woman is kind at first, but when a white friend says Marguerite is too long of a name, she begins calling Maya "Mary." Maya has sympathy for the woman at first because she was unable to have children and her husband has children with a local black woman. However, when she refuses to call her by her proper name, Maya begins to despise her. In order to be fired, she purposefully drops the woman's precious china. The woman immediately turns cruel, calling her a highly racist name. Maya runs from the home, free.

Chapter 17 finds Maya explaining about Saturdays in her childhood. Generally filled with movies for Bailey and fun for Maya, one day is different when Bailey doesn't return from the pictures on time. Momma is terrified something has happened, and Maya begins to show concern as well when Willie suggests the women go find him. As they walk, Maya is aware of the pressing, dangerous darkness for a young black boy. But, they find an unharmed Bailey walking home. At home, he is whipped but doesn't make a sound, and Maya knows something is terribly wrong. He is silent for days, but finally reveals to Maya that he has seen someone who looked like their mother, only white, in a movie playing at the theater. He stayed that night to watch the film again. Months later, Maya watches a film with her as well, laughing at the idea that the white's precious actress looks precisely like her own mother. Bailey, however, is again downhearted after the show, as he misses their mother.



Analysis

Chapter 15 introduces Bertha Flowers, a woman who is extremely important in Maya's life. As a wealthy black woman, Bertha is a rarity in Stamps, and she is a person Maya looks up to. Maya's embarrassment at the time shows her lack of understanding about the strong racial and socioeconomic connections of her grandmother and Bertha. These women, both living in a discriminatory time in the deep South, understand one another on a level that young Maya doesn't understand until much later. Bertha's contribution to Maya's life is vast, in that she not only helps heal her by giving her the outlet of language, but she also shows her that she is cared about, and cared for. Maya's recollections show that even as a child, she recognized that she was being singled out. The end of the chapter is important as well, as once can see the irony of the situation, as one woman, Bertha, teaches her the value of words, while the other, Momma, teaches the value of faith and religion through the use of language. It is here where Maya begins to understand how powerful language can be, both in terms of content and in culture.

In Chapter 16, readers are again shown the type of discrimination and racism common in Maya's hometown, and can better understand the hardship Maya and her family went through. Although the experiences are different, white and black girls have rituals in growing up that they each have to go through, but these experiences differ not only in content, but in the level of shame and humiliation required to complete them. Maya is forced to work for another family, and worse, is forced to accept the insult of being called by other than her own name. Some women, like Glory, accept this as part of the cross she has to bear, but Maya refuses, showing a determination and a fight against racism she will continue to show throughout her life. Her actions to escape the situation are not vengeful, but simply necessary in order to escape what she feels is an inexcusable condition. Her fleeing at the end of the chapter, leaving the door open so the neighborhood can hear, again shows her fight against the unjust treatment her people receive at the hands of the whites.

In Chapter 17, racism is again present. But, this chapter also shows the deep damage Bailey's relationship with his mother, or lack thereof, has caused. First, when Bailey doesn't come home, it's clear that the fear that something has happened as a result of his color is felt by Maya and her grandmother. That fear is also expressed in the responses from those they pass as they look for Bailey. Everyone understands that to be a young, black man in the South at night is dangerous. However, Bailey's response to his punishment is also indicative of the pain he is feeling. He knows all too well the worry he has caused, but his heavy heart is too heavy to even pretend to feel affected by their sense of fear, as his realization of his loss is too great. Bailey, as Maya pointed out earlier, idolized his mother. When he sees an actress who reminds him of her in a film, he has to stay. Maya, on the other hand, simply finds it amusing that the white world, the world that takes pleasure in treating those in her world badly, idolizes a woman who looks exactly like her mother.



Discussion Question 1

Who is Bertha Flowers? How does she help Maya escape her pain? What lessons does she teach Maya that she recalls, even far later in life?

Discussion Question 2

What is Maya's experience working for the white woman? Why does the woman refuse to call her by name? How does this insult Maya? Is her response understandable? Why or why not? Why didn't she just quit?

Discussion Question 3

Why does seeing Kay Francis bother Bailey so much? Why does seeing her make Maya so happy? Why are their reactions so different?

Vocabulary

Evenizer, chifferobe, sacrilegious, debutante, tureen, goblet, plodding, exemplary, berated, construed.



Chapter 18 - Chapter 21

Summary

Chapter 18 reveals Maya's experience with a religious tent revival. Maya is at the Store, listening to the farmer's talk of their exhausting days, and she is shocked to hear almost all of them trading their rest for a night of religion at the local tent revival. Maya notes the teenagers like the meeting as they use them for courting while the adults see them as a straight connection to God. To small children like Maya, however, the practice was confusing, as she and the others questioned whether Jesus would attend such a transitory setting. All religions were represented at the revivals, as it was open to everyone. After much prayer and singing, Maya is amazed at how quickly the audience is awakened with spirit by the minister preaching. The preacher asks one minister from each attending church to come forward, and all of them openly accept new members under one roof. On the way home, Maya hears her neighbors bask in the glory of their positions with God. She is surprised because she has also seen their lowly and downtrodden positions on earth. She begins to understand why they seek answers from their God as to how long they must endure, as she understands their reality.

In Chapter 19, Maya explains the link between her fellow blacks and boxing. In the Store, everyone within miles is perched, listening to the announcer on the radio announce the Joe Lewis / Carnera boxing match. When Joe begins to falter, Maya notes, it is like her entire race is faltering, their identity so tied to the black boxers fight against his white opponent, Joe's fight representing their own struggles against racism. When Joe is hit, the blacks, according to Maya, see another lynching, another raped black woman. If Joe loses, it is representative of their own failure, and it shows they really are no better than the whites believe them to be. When Joe wins the fight, however, there is celebration, as the strongest man in the world, the champion, is proven to be a black man. The chapter ends with a note that those blacks who lived far away had made arrangements to stay in town, as it would be far too dangerous to travel on a night Joe Lewis won the world championship.

Chapter 20 finds Maya attending the summer picnic fish fry in town, the biggest event of the year. Musicians, all forms of Southern foods, baked goods, fish of all kinds, caught and immediately cooked by the pond, are all part of the day. Maya, not wanting to relieve herself with the young children and knowing Momma will beat her for using the adult toilets, finds a small secluded area, and after reliving herself, takes a break from all the noise. She is discovered by Louise Kendricks, who soon becomes a good friend. Maya notes that "after being a woman for three years, I was about to become a girl." Soon after, she received a valentine note, and she shares it with Louise. Maya is confused, not knowing what to do. When pressed by Louise, Maya makes a comment she won't ever be someone's love "again." She and Louise tear up the valentine. On the following day, Maya receives another from the boy, saying that she will always be his valentine, in spite of tearing up the note. Maya is touched by the boy's sincerity and



makes a point to try to talk to him. But, she finds herself giggling each time, and he loses interest.

In Chapter 21, Bailey discovers the joys of girls. At first, Maya helps him play a game, where he takes girls to a tent. He wriggles against them, clothed, believing this to be the act of sex. When he meets Joyce, however, she introduces him to true sex. Maya, outside the tent watching for adults, hears what is happening and tries to interrupt, but she is shooed away. As their relationship continued, Bailey stole things for Joyce, as she was very poor and living with a poor aunt. She is considerably older than Bailey. She becomes his entire world. However, when she disappears months later, he is a different person. Later, Maya learns through store gossip that Joyce ran away with a railroad worker. Bailey remains closed about the topic.

Analysis

Chapter 18 is important because it reveals for the first time Maya's interpretation of the link between faith and the conditions the blacks endure. In the beginning of the chapter, Maya hears those in her community discussing their real lives, including their despair, their hard work, their disappointment, and their exhaustion. At the same time, however, she notes their drive to attend church. Even exhausted and desolate, these individuals want more than sleep. They want to feel closer to their God. Mayas' differentiation between the children, young adults, and adults show the varying levels of faith within any community. Here, too, Maya notes the feeling of community within her town at such events. Rarely do multiple religions come together to accept parishioners. At the end of the chapter, though, readers are reminded of the link between God and the meek. Maya points out that these individuals see themselves as receiving the glory of God because of their measly conditions. They ask for God's grace. They want to know how long they must endure their suffering on Earth.

In Chapter 19, Maya's commentary about a night at the Store during the fights is important in understanding the symbolism of boxing to the black community in which she lives. The close link between Joe Lewis and the feelings of the black community are clear here, as Maya explains what those in the Store feel as the fight goes on. Their mental and emotional linking of the physical fight between their black hero and his white opponent represent their own struggles against the whites. Maya's note at the end of the chapter again shows how dangerous the lives of these individuals are.

In Chapter 20, Maya's new friend shows that she is beginning to heal from her rape. Louise's friendship allows Maya to step out of her serious, adult state and step back into her childhood. Since her molestation, Maya has been without joy and without a "normal" childhood. Louise allows her to rediscover both of these. At the same time, Maya is constantly aware of her difference, as is shown through the valentine note. She doesn't want to disclose her past, but it does impact how she sees the world and her actions. This is also shown in Chapter 21, as Maya's fear for Bailey is directly related to her own experiences. Bailey behaves as a normal boy, although his actions are more fitting for an older child, but Joyce is much older, and far more experienced. Her seduction of



Bailey is frightening for Maya, because she has been victim of molestation, and is convinced that Joyce's actions are similar to those of Mr. Freeman. Again, readers can see how drastically Maya's rape has affected her. For his part, Bailey's first love and first sexual experience change him, as well.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the tent revival meeting. What is its purpose? What is surprising about the revival to Maya? What does she realize about her people? Why are they turning to God?

Discussion Question 2

How do the black men and women in Chapter 19 feel about boxing? Why is the fight so important? What is the relation between the fighters and the audience? What does the fight symbolize?

Discussion Question 3

How does Maya meet her new friend? What secrets do they share? What does Maya almost accidentally reveal?

Vocabulary

Impermanence, condescension, vaunteth, lowed, ecumenical, treacherous, presumptuous, profusely, tedious, reeking.



Chapter 22 - Chapter 23

Summary

In Chapter 22, Maya and her family are awaiting a large storm when they are roused by Mr. George Taylor, a recent widower who has been taking meals all over town since the burial of his wife in summer. Mr. Taylor intrigues Maya, as he is clearly distraught. Yet, he seems to be renewed by the food and good company. When Momma laments about Mr. Taylor and his wife never having children, he comes visibly alive with emotion. He tells the family that his deceased wife has been talking to him, telling him she wants children. Maya knows Mrs. Taylor is deceased, as she was forced to sit through the woman's funeral, which she remembers vividly. Now, Mr. Taylor explains he was lying in bed the previous night, and was commanded to open his eyes. When he did, he saw a baby angel. He heard his wife saying she wanted children. Momma explains her ghost may have meant for Mr. Taylor to take on a Sunday school class or take a youth for a farmhand. Maya feels the fear of ghosts dispel and credits her grandmother for the change in mood.

Chapter 23 finds Maya graduating from grammar school. She, and the other students and their families, are all excited, as graduation is a large event in the community. The students who can afford it are given new clothing, and those who cannot are still made new clothing. The students are proud, knowing whites will attend the ceremony and knowing they are the people to be paid attention to. With top honors, Maya is proud of her accomplishments. She is excited about her new clothing, her hair, and even her loss to another for the Valedictorian position, as she is proud of her friend. Maya is given many presents from friends and family, as well. The morning of the event, she wakes to a huge Sunday-type breakfast, and the family walks proudly to the school. As she sits, Maya suddenly feels as though something bad is about to happen. Soon, a white speaker comes to the stage, and begins noting how much money the white school would be receiving to improve their system, and how this meant the black school would also be improved. Mr. Denleavy, the white man, notes how many athletes come from the black school, and applauds the students for their athletic abilities. Maya and the other students are furious. While they see the same black athletes as their heroes, they also see men such as George Washington Carver and other noted intellectuals as heroes to their people. This white man, to Maya, is claiming their only worth is in their athleticism. When Mr. Denleavy leaves, all the students and family feel broken and saddened. When the valedictorian speaks, his words do not bring the hope he had planned. However, when he leads the crowd to sing what was known as the Negro national anthem, the poem by James Weldon Johnson, the crowd rallies, rejuvenated by their heritage and once again filled with a hope for a brighter future. Maya closes the chapter with a note about the dedication of black poets, and their ability to keep their people hopeful.



Analysis

Maya's story in Chapter 22 is important, as it shows her first funeral experience. Mr. Taylor's frightening story, told on a dark and stormy night, is the perfect backdrop for Maya's recollection of his wife's funeral. In part, this chapter reminds readers that Maya and Bailey are still children and still have childhood responses to things. Whereas Momma worries for Mr. Taylor's sanity, Bailey and Maya simply believe that Mr. Taylor has seen a ghost. When Momma calms everyone through rational thought, Maya sees her as a saint, in that she can dispel ghosts, or at least the perception of them.

Chapter 23 is a pivotal moment in Maya's life. Her excitement about her grammar school graduation is important, as it shows her dedication to her own learning and education. The community's excitement is also clear here, as they celebrate the movement from one stage of life to another in the children. The new clothing, gifts, and celebratory atmosphere all serve to show just how much this moment means to the young people. Unfortunately, when the white men arrive to speak, this excitement turns again to shame, anger, and resentment. The men not only speak down to the students, but they remind them that they are less important and valuable in the eyes of the whites. Their value is in sports alone, and the men make this very clear, changing the mood from hopeful to downtrodden. However, what Maya realizes at the close of the chapter is the amazing ability of her people to rise up, to pull themselves up when needed, and to come together in support of one another. Singing their anthem at the end of the chapter reminds them they have consistently overcome. They will continue to do so. Maya's notes about poets are important, as she herself has become one of the best known African-American poets.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of including the story of George Taylor? Why does Maya see this tale as an important moment in her life?

Discussion Question 2

Why is grammar school graduation so important to Maya and her fellow students? How do the white men tear down this enthusiasm?

Discussion Question 3

What does the song the valedictorian has the crowd sing symbolize? How does it help them to again overcome their sorrow and rise above the pettiness of discrimination?



Vocabulary

Radiance, romanticist, apparatus, patronage, nourishment, onerous, studiously, ghouls, purported, fatalism, presumptuous, abomination.



Chapter 24 - Chapter 27

Summary

In Chapter 24, Maya's candy eating catches up to her, and she is plagued with a toothache. Momma takes her to the local, white dentist, as he owes her a favor. Maya notes she is aware Momma loaned money to both blacks and whites during the Depression, and many still owe her. Maya, in horrific pain, does have enough wits about her to straighten up as they walk through the white neighborhood, but her pain is immense. Maya points out that she felt the pain lessen in the white neighborhood. At the dentist, Momma goes to the back door, and when greeted by a young white girl, is left to wait for over an hour before Dr. Lincoln arrives. When Momma explains to him that Maya is ill, he attempts to gently remind her he doesn't work on blacks. She persists, reminding him of his debt to her. He notes his money has been paid. When Momma continues to push, Dr. Lincoln becomes angry, saying he would rather treat a dog than a black. He goes back inside. Annie follows him, and Maya dreams of her telling Dr. Lincoln off. Maya is proud. Although she doesn't know precisely what happened, she can imagine Momma as a hero. Momma takes her to Texarkana to a black dentist. Back at home, Maya overhears Momma tell the real story. She had gone to Dr. Lincoln to demand that he pay unpaid interest on his loan from her, so she could take Maya to the dentist in another town. Maya prefers her version.

Chapter 25 finds Maya and Bailey being taken to California to live with Vivian. Maya suspects the reason has to do with an incident involving Bailey. One afternoon, Bailey comes back from the white neighborhood extremely shaken. He explains that he was walking when the police pulled a dead black man from the pond, bloated and rotten. Bailey was asked to help carry the body into a rail car with some prisoners. When he did so, the white man running the body removal locked them in, laughing. Maya suspects Momma began planning for California that very night. Momma and Maya are set to go first, as they cannot afford for Bailey to go at the same time. Maya's feelings of loss are based on Bailey, Willie, and missing Louise.

In Chapter 26, Maya sees her mother again. She notes the strangeness of seeing Momma and Vivian together. Vivian and Momma get them settled in LA, and Vivian goes to San Francisco to make permanent arrangements. Bailey Sr. visits, and Momma seems to settle in well for six months. Then, she heads back to Arkansas, while the kids move to Oakland. Maya is impressed to notice that Vivian seems nervous. The kids spend months with the Baxter family, although their crime family status has reduced. One evening, Vivian wakes her children for a 2:30 am biscuit and chocolate party, and they are again impressed with her free spirit. Vivian Baxter is not a merciful woman, but she is an educated and smart woman. In an argument with a business partner who cursed her, she shot him twice. He lived, and she was not punished, although she spent the night in jail. At the end of the chapter, Maya notes World War II started, and Vivian married Maya's first father figure, Daddy Clidell, a successful businessman. The family moves to San Francisco.



Maya notes in Chapter 27 that although one would think Maya, as a person who was discriminated against, would recognize the same happening to Asians during world War II, she admits that as the Japanese areas were changed to black neighborhoods, she didn't notice. For the first time, she notes, blacks could live freely, and earn enough to make ends meet and provide for a family. Further, she notes, there was a separation from the Japanese because they were not white or black/ Thus, they were neither feared nor considered. Maya finds herself in this colorful, constantly changing environment finally able to feel as though she fits in. Maya notes that although discrimination seemed hidden, it was still ever present.

Analysis

Chapter 24 again shows the deep seeded racism and discrimination that exists in Stamps, and it also shows Maya's own feelings about the whites in town. First, Maya's depiction of her pain running away from the whites, as though it were inferior, shows just how inferior Maya feels to the whites of the town, simply as a black young woman living in the racist south. Her grandmother, however, knows she is owed by those same individuals, and as a result, she expects better treatment. Unfortunately, Dr. Lincoln proves to be hypocritical, as he refuses to help, even though he himself was helped by Annie. For her part, Annie's reaction, to demand interest on a debt already paid, in order to gain enough money to help Maya, shows her desperation, but also her strength. She does what she needs to in order to help Maya, even if she feels badly about it.

Chapter 25 again shows the horrible racism existing in the south, as young Bailey is tormented by a local white power figure. Bailey's visual depiction of the deceased black man, combined with his story of the white man's torment of him and other black men, tells a story that is far too dark to ignore. Momma recognizes that the children are becoming old enough to have to endure the more severe levels of racism in the community, and she understands that in order to save them, she must send them away. Momma's determination to get the children on a train, despite the monetary setback, shows her dedication to the kids. Maya's own feelings show she is not sorry to leave Stamps, but that she has found a home there with her friends and family.

Chapter 26 reveals even more of Vivian Baxter's personality, as well as that of Momma's. Momma is a strong, righteous, religious, old fashioned woman who does the best by her grandchildren as she can. Vivian is a free, easy going, toughened young woman who believes in the carefree nature of life. However, she too has a strength in her intelligence and beauty. These women are so different, and yet they are so very similar in ways as well. Momma's ability to blend in is merely another sign of her enormous strength. Vivian, too, shows strength in her ability to take on these children she has barely known, but clearly loves. The story of her shooting a business partner not only shows her strength, but also a lack of mercy that the depictions though the eyes of Maya would never convey. Maya and Bailey idolize their mother, but readers can see that although she adores her children, Vivian is a hard, beautiful, smart woman who uses her looks and brains to attain a better life. When Daddy Clidell appears, Maya



assumes him to be another of Vivian's toys, but she is surprised when he turns into a father figure.

Chapter 27 is an interesting look at World War II through Maya's eyes. Having seen so much discrimination, racism, and cruelty in her life, even Maya recognizes that the blacks of San Francisco should have found kindred spirits in the displacement of the Asian and Asian-American populations. However, as she points out, for the first time, blacks had found their own neighborhoods, where they could find housing, employment, and lives that were not permeated by oppression and discrimination. For the first time, they were free and able to raise families and thrive, without being under the thumb of anyone. In this environment, then, they were too occupied enjoying their lives to notice the lives of the other populations in the area. However, as Maya notes, although the discrimination was not as visual, it was still ever present.

Discussion Question 1

What did Momma do for Dr. Lincoln? Why does he respond so rudely when he is asked to help Maya? What does this say about the level of racism and cruelty in the area? Why does Momma respond as she does?

Discussion Question 2

Describe what happens to Bailey in Chapter 25. Why is he so afraid? Why would the white man play such a joke? Why would this incident push Momma to move the children?

Discussion Question 3

Explain the atmosphere of San Francisco during World War II. Why does Maya seem to identify with this environment? What are the elements she relates to?

Vocabulary

Baliwick, contemptuous, enunciated, cholera, obliterated, retributive, gallantries, djinn, marauding.



Chapter 28 - Chapter 30

Summary

In Chapter 28, Maya finds it difficult to fit in at her local school. She is transferred to George Washington High, where she is one of only three black students. She struggles, but is somewhat saved by Miss Kirwin, a strong, wonderful teacher who respects her students enough to treat them as equals. She challenges them, treats all races the same, and honestly seems to care about their education. Maya, many years later, continues to visit her classroom. When Maya is fourteen, she accepts a scholarship to the California Labor School, a college for adults. She attends nightly drama and dance courses and finds herself dedicated to learning how to dance.

Chapter 29 finds Maya building a relationship with her mother's husband. Daddy Clidell is an uneducated man who has managed to become highly successful in real estate. He teaches Maya to play cards, and Maya finds she even looks like him. She is introduced to many representatives of the Black underground through Clidell, and they teach her not to become the mark, or victim, of anyone's scam by telling her stories of their own escapades. Maya finds herself proud of these con men, as they use their intelligence to overcome the rejection that comes naturally to them. She also notes that "the Black mind" sees crime differently. Through her own experiences, she understands how the lives and upbringing of black individuals are so different than those of whites.

Chapter 30 finds Maya heading to Southern California to see her father. Maya is to meet her father's girlfriend at the rail station, and she is surprised that the woman is so young. Delores is disappointed from the beginning with Maya, as well as her father. Instead of finding paradise, Maya finds her father living in a trailer park. After a few weeks of struggle, Bailey takes Maya to Mexico with him, presumably to find hard to locate ingredients, as he is a cook. Bailey and Maya set off and stop at the border, where Bailey appears to know the guard. They drink together and even joke about the guard marrying Maya. Further into Mexico, they stop at a cantina, where Maya sees a new side to her father. He is easy going and friendly, and Maya suddenly sees him as lonely, and constantly looking to fit in. He is popular with both the men and the scantily clad women in this bar. Maya enjoys herself in the fiesta-like atmosphere. However, she soon realizes her father is no longer there. She makes her way to the car, certain he has left her or sold her to the guard. Then, she realizes he is likely with one of the women from the bar. When he finally returns, he is completely drunk and passes out in the back seat. Maya, determined not to sleep in the vehicle, attempts to drive her way home. She has never driven and has several close moments before she does manage to make it to the guard station, although she hits a vehicle there. After much difficulty trying to explain her predicament in broken Spanish, the guard and the other people realize the reality of the situation when they see Bailey. They wake him, and he handles the situation smoothly.



Analysis

Chapter 28 explains Maya's educational attainment and shows her to be a gifted learner. Her dedication to learning, as long as she feels safe and secure, is indicative of her personality thus far in the book. Her admiration of Miss Kirwin, too, shows she admires those who can overcome the concept of race entirely, to where everyone is treated equally not on purpose through a conscious effort, but merely because all individuals are always treated equally. This attitude inspires Maya, and has an impact on her life as Maya shows many of these same qualities later in the book.

Chapter 29 further describes the one man in Maya's life who is a father figure, Daddy Clidell. Her attachment to this man comes both as a result of his kindness, his lack of superiority, and his physical resemblance to Maya. In him, she finds a caring man with a natural paternal instinct who strives to be a father to her, as best he can. While his teaching of card games and introduction of the crime syndicate to Maya may seem irresponsible, it is his way of helping to protect and care for Maya. As Maya goes on to explain, in doing this, Clidell hopes to make Maya a more aware and more secure individual. His view of crime, as a way out of a national oppression, shows his actions are protective rather than a promotion of criminal acts.

Chapter 30 shows the true nature of Bailey Sr. First, Maya's view of her father is clearly idealistic at the beginning, but she soon learns her thoughts were a far stretch, as he proves to be self centered, and fairly uncaring. Delores' distaste for Maya is clear from the beginning, foreshadowing the fights that are to come later. But Maya's trip to Mexico with her father reveals more that his selfishness. Maya also sees in her father a pervasive sense of loneliness, and an overwhelming need to fit in, something Maya can relate to. His drunken behavior, his tryst with another woman, and his complete lack of responsibility for his child all show him to be selfish, but still Maya can see his pain. Maya's own determination is seen in this chapter, as well, as she defeats the mountain by managing to drive, or at least guide, a car down to the border. Her refusal to let the situation defeat her also foreshadows her strength later in the book.

Discussion Question 1

What is Maya's education? Why is this important to understanding Maya's life and career? Why did Miss Kirwin make such an impact on Maya?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Daddy Clidell? Why is he so influential to Maya? Why do you think she so easily relates to him? How does he see her? What does Maya mean about the blacks feeling differently about crime?



Discussion Question 3

How do you see Maya's father? How does she see him at the beginning of Chapter 30? How does this change? What does Maya mean when she says he is lonely?

Vocabulary

Bore, soliloquy, melodrama, liveried, seersucker, arrogant, ominous, futile, condescending.



Chapter 31 - Chapter 34

Summary

Chapter 31 finds Delores sitting in waiting at home when Maya and her father arrive. Maya goes to her room. She listens as Delores and Bailey fight over her existence. When Bailey storms out, Maya attempts to heal things by apologizing to Delores, but they end up fighting viciously, with Delores calling Maya's mother a "whore." Maya slaps her, and Delores stabs her. Maya flees to the car, and Bailey and the neighbors come to take Delores back into the house. When Bailey returns to the car, he realizes how badly Maya is bleeding and takes her to a local friend for treatment. He explains he doesn't want the scandal of going in for treatment to a hospital. He leaves her with friends for the night and briefly checks on her the following day. Maya realizes it would be better for everyone if she left. She thinks of going home, but she remembers too well Mr. Freeman's death on account of her revelations of his actions, and she wants no harm to come to her father. As a result, Maya simply runs away.

In Chapter 32, she spends the next day wandering the streets and comes to find a junkyard of old cars. In the morning after sleeping in one of them, Maya awakens to a group of kids her age. Bootsie, their leader, explains that they are all runaways. They work communally for money and pool their resources for food and other needs. Maya spends a month at the lot. She learns to drive, and she jitterbugs in a local contest. Maya and her partner win second prize. Maya now admits that the tolerance and acceptance she felt during that time changed her, in that it made her more bold and readily accepting of life. Further, it taught her a tolerance for others that remained with her throughout life. She returns home, and Mother doesn't question much, only noting her weight is down.

Chapter 33 find Maya realizing she is older, as is Bailey. He has changed, and he is now running with street boys in their zoot suits and chains. She does go dancing with him, however, as she is now able to dance without self consciousness. Bailey, Maya realizes, is hopelessly in love with his mother, whose idols are friends with monogrammed \$200 suits. Bailey responds to this competition by becoming a pimp to a local white prostitute. Maya watches as he and Vivian's relationship struggles between love and power, and she feels relief when Bailey, at sixteen, finally leaves home after one final argument with their mother. Maya sets out the next day to find him. She locates him living in a boarding house. She also finds Bailey and Vivian have already talked that morning, and Vivian has already inspected the room. Maya realizes their relationship is the same, but they both had to move on. Vivian works to get Bailey a position with the railroad, and Maya realizes her brother is moving away from her.

In Chapter 34, Maya finds herself bored without Bailey. She begins looking for work, and determines she wants to work for the San Francisco street car company. Unfortunately, they do not hire blacks. Maya persists, each day looking for new avenues that would lend her assistance, and she finds her mother respects her efforts. After



several weeks, Maya is hired as the first black individual working the streetcars. Her mother shows her strong support, but when school begins, Maya finds herself out of place again with her classmates. She is wiser, she feels, and begins to cut classes and detach from school. Maya notes that she struggles through these years, and she now recognizes that black teens have a life much more difficult than whites, in that both experience all the "normal" teen issues, but young black women also have the challenges of racism, discrimination, and oppression.

Analysis

Chapter 31 continues to show not only Bailey's complete lack of responsibility to his children, but also Delores' hatred of Maya, and Maya's own growing sense of determination. First, Bailey's words to Delores in no way help defend his daughter, but instead serve just to make Delores more angry. The fact that he leaves her with his daughter shows his lack of care. Delores, then, shows her true self by not only insulting Maya's mother, but stabbing her, as well. Bailey's reaction, to worry more about the scandal than his daughter, is typical of his reactions. For her part, Maya's decision to run away is partially based on her guilt about Mr. Freeman. She still believes it is her fault he was killed, and as a result, she fears that if she goes home to mother and her brothers, Bailey and Delores will likely both be harmed. To her, then, running away is the only option.

Chapter 32 reveals an important, but short, time in Maya's life. Her month as a runaway, living with other teens from all races, teaches her not only about solidarity and community, but about tolerance and acceptance. These young children show Maya more about what it means to be a part of something than anything she has ever experienced. She learns to accept herself through their acceptance, and learns to see herself as a strong person.

When she returns home in Chapter 33, this new found sense of self causes her to see the world differently. She can sense the same in her brother. As a result, she understands him. Bailey, too, has grown up a bit. However, in his case, his desperate love for his mother crowds his judgment. His decisions are based solely as an effort to win his mother's love. Instead, they drive the two further apart. Maya can see this, but she is helpless to stop their power struggle. In the end, Vivian's decision to push her son out is, perhaps, the only way these individuals can maintain a healthy relationship. She does not abandon her son, as is shown when Maya learns Vivian has already been looking in on Bailey the following morning, but instead, she realizes he is older than his age, and in need of a new life. Vivian has spent her life in freedom, and would do nothing to stand in her children's way of that freedom, even if it means letting them go.

Maya again proves herself to be self sufficient and determined in Chapter 34 as she combats racism head on. Her efforts to overcome racist policy lead to her first job and more importantly, the admiration of her mother. Maya, once silent for almost a year, has blossomed by this point into a completely capable young woman. On the other hand, Maya now notes, she still struggled with the daily issues of teen life and knows she had



to work harder than her white classmates, as she also had to fight racism and discrimination.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Delores resent Maya? What do you think of her statement, that she isn't marrying Bailey's children? What does this say about Delores and Bailey?

Discussion Question 2

What does Maya learn during her time on the streets? How do her experiences help teach her tolerance and self dignity?

Discussion Question 3

What is the relationship between Bailey and his mother? Why is it so tense, now that he is a teenager? Do you think Vivian made the right move in asking him to leave? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Prudently, futility, communally, pivoted, detachment, oedipal, raglan, pavane, gumption, supercilious, belligerence.



Chapter 35- Chapter 36

Summary

Chapter 35 finds Maya struggling with her sexuality. She confuses lesbianism with hermaphrodites, and cannot understand, but does feel for their plight. She hears her low voice, sees her large hands and feet and her lack of breasts, and she begins to fear she is "becoming lesbian." Maya, painfully embarrassed, asks her mother about a "growth" on her vagina, only to have her mother calmly explain the female reproductive system, including the vulva. As Maya cries with relief, she explains her fears of "becoming lesbian," and her mother gently explains that she is not a lesbian. Two weeks later, however, Maya finds herself in awe of a friend's breasts as she changes clothes quickly in front of her. Maya is now able to explain she was awed by the sense of female beauty, and by envy, but at the time, her uncertainty of her sexual orientation returned in full force. In order to satisfy her questions, Maya asks a local boy to have sex with her. He does, and Maya finds the experience less than appealing. Three weeks later, Maya realizes she is pregnant.

In Chapter 36, Maya feels guilt, revulsion, and fear as a result of her new condition. Maya realizes she can expect nothing from the boy, as she herself is solely responsible for her plight. She finally tells Bailey, who is at sea with the marines, and he cautions her not to tell mother until she finishes school, as mother would make her have the child and quit school. Maya fools her mother by becoming the silly schoolgirl she could never succeed in being, and mother doesn't realize anything is wrong. Mother moves to Alaska for a few months, leaving Maya to Daddy Clidell, who also doesn't realize that things are amiss. Finally, when Maya graduates, she informs Daddy Clidell and Vivian that she is going to have a baby in three weeks. Vivian takes her to doctors and prepares for the baby, without a trace of judgment. When she has the baby, Maya finds herself both pleased and terrified. One evening Vivian forces Maya to sleep with the baby, and Maya is terrified she will hurt him. Maya, to her dismay, falls asleep, to be awakened hours later by her mother. Vivian points to Maya's side, where the baby lay happily sleeping, curled close, and remarks that as a mother, she will do the right thing without thinking. Maya realizes she can succeed.

Analysis

Chapter 35 brings a huge change to Maya's life. Her struggle with her sexuality, something most teens struggle with, is not surprising, although perhaps her concerns are. She is not well educated on the female body, likely as a result of her upbringing by a strictly religious, Southern white woman, combined with her early molestation. Those around her have tried to protect her from sexually charged concepts, and Maya pays for this through her lack of information. However, her mother does show tenderness as she explains Maya's issues. But Maya's curiosity cannot be satiated without physical contact, and her selection of a partner is merely based on execution and not romance.



Her lack of knowledge again causes her to not think about protection. As a result, she is pregnant and still confused.

In Chapter 36, Maya's pregnancy is important, as it shows a change in Maya's life, from child to parent. She struggles with telling her family, but only because she fears a halt to her education. This again shows Maya's determination to become educated, as she values education and enlightenment more than almost anything. It is only when she has graduated that she can think about the life ahead. Her mother and stepfather respond surprisingly well, considering, and they are supportive of her, as always, showing again that although Vivian may not be a perfect parent, she never stops supporting her children. This is again shown in her final act of the novel. Maya's fears are clear, and her mother knows she must overcome them in order to be an effective parent. Her forcing Maya to lay with her child proves to be just the move that allows Maya to lay aside her fears, and become a mother. This transition, from child to mother, shows the end of Maya's childhood. As a result, it is the perfect ending to the book.

Discussion Question 1

What was Maya's first sexual encounter? How do you think this has affected her feelings of sexuality? Do you think her fears, and her response to those fears, is related to her abuse? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is Maya's mother's reaction to her fears? Do you think this is appropriate? Why or why not? How would you have dealt with such questions?

Discussion Question 3

What is Vivian's purpose behind placing Maya's baby with her in bed? What is she trying to teach Maya? Does it work? What is Maya's response? What does this lesson show Maya? What does it say about her mother?

Vocabulary

Lesbianism, repelled, venereal, isolation, vulva, hoarded, courtesies, esthetic, tedium, virtuous, egocentric, condemnation, dictatorial.



Characters

Marguerite Johnson (Maya Angelou)

Marguerite Johnson, perhaps better known as author Maya Angelou, is the primary character in the book, and the teller of her story. Maya has a rough life, bouncing between cities and parents, being molested at a very early age, becoming pregnant at an early age. Her mother and father originally send her to live with grandparents, as they don't have time in their busy lives to care for the children. She is raised until age seven by her father's mother who is a kind, strong black woman living in the South. Momma, as she is known, runs the only Black operated store in the small Southern town, and earns marginal respect for it, even as the whites discriminate against her. When her mother sends for her, Maya and her brother are forced to move to St. Louis, where her mother is a nightclub singer, living with her brothers and mothers who run a successful crime family. When she is molested by her mother's live in boyfriend, however, they are sent back to her grandmother for a few years. As a result of this constant change and lack of stability, Maya struggles throughout her life with feeling "normal" and with trying to fit in, while the rest of her family seems to thrive at standing out in the world. She adores her brother more than anything, as he is the sole constant in her ever changing life, but he too eventually grows older, and away from her. After a trip to her father's where she is abandoned, forced to drive her drunken father, and stabbed by his girlfriend, Maya finds herself living with a group of runaways in an abandoned car lot. It is during this time that Maya comes to find herself and her strengths. Through the tests of her life and the guidance of her colorful family, Maya learns to accept herself as she is, and even to find comfort in standing out. She fights to become the first black streetcar employee in San Francisco, and she begins to recognize her strengths as a person. She comes to love herself not in spite of her faults, but because of them.

Bailey Johnson, Jr.

Bailey Johnson Jr. is Maya's brother. The son of two beautiful parents, Bailey is an attractive young boy, in contrast to Maya's interpretation of herself. Bailey is Maya's only constant in her life, as he is with her throughout all of her trials. It is Bailey who stands up for her when others call her ugly, Bailey who is the keeper of her secrets, and Bailey who is the other half of her life. Bailey is strong and sure, and is a relatively good young man. When his father returns from California, Bailey changes a little, as he is better able to relate to his father than Maya, and for the first time, Maya feels almost betrayed by him, but this only lasts a few days. When Maya is molested, her attacker knows it is Bailey she cares about most, and to keep her silent, it is Bailey's life the man threatens. Maya's feelings of despair at not being able to tell Bailey what happened show her love for her brother. When Maya decides to stop speaking as a result of her attack and the ensuing events, it is again Bailey who remains her sole confidant. In *Stamps*, Bailey's life is changed when she sees a deceased black man and is forced to help whites deal



with the body. He experiences for the first time the extreme hatred of the whites toward him, and this experience forces he and his sister to move back with their mother in California. As Maya and Bailey age, however, and as Bailey becomes entwined with the California life, Bailey begins to show more of a teenage behavior, and the two become less close. Bailey begins to strike out at his mother, and as a side result, at Maya. This does not indicate a lessening of their love for one another, but merely a natural progression in the relationship of siblings. Maya continues to show a strong bond with her brother.

Annie Henderson

Annie Henderson, better known in the book as Momma, is the mother of Maya and Bailey's father. Annie is the only black store owner in a small Southern town, and as a result, she challenges the southern racist view. Annie helps people during the Depression, including whites, and commands at least marginal respect from them, while the blacks see her as untouchable as a result of her position with the whites. Annie is a strong valued, highly organized and highly religious woman. She takes in Maya and Bailey in an effort to raise them in a godly way when their parents separate, and she does everything she can to make their lives successful. Although Annie and her family struggle against discrimination, Annie does her best to teach her grandchildren to rise above it. She teaches them an honest respect and fear of the whites, and teaches a fear and respect of God. Further, as a result of running the store, the children learn math and other necessary skills, and learn discipline, as well. Annie also shows her grandchildren vast amounts of love, a key element in Maya's life. It is in part her grandmother who teaches Maya to love God, her family, and herself, and Momma who plays a pivotal role in her development. Annie Henderson shows Maya early on that hard work and dedication are necessary to be successful.

Vivian Baxter

Vivian Baxter is the mother of Maya and Bailey. Vivian is a "shiny" woman, who lives the life she wants to, without time for the interruption of children. Vivian is from a powerful crime family, and as a result, her life is often fast, and filled with unsavory characters. However, Vivian is a beautiful woman, and a strong personality. She is loving and kind and filled with a light energy that almost everyone finds difficult to resist, including Maya and Bailey. Vivian sends her children away when she and her husband divorce. Although this seems selfish, it is likely the best possible outcome for Maya and Bailey. When they do return to their mother, they find her amazing and nearly perfect, but they also understand they do not quite fit into her life. When Maya is molested by her mother's boyfriend, the family immediately has him killed, and Maya and her brother are shipped back to Momma in the South. Eventually, however, they return to their mother who is now in California. Vivian proves herself to be a caring, if not always stable, mother. As Maya and Bailey get older, Vivian's lifestyle doesn't change, but she does promote and encourage Maya and Bailey to do what they want to do. This is, in part, how Maya finds the courage to push to become the first black streetcar operator. Vivian



Baxter may not be a model parent, but she does show love, affection, and a love of life to her children that Maya retains throughout her own life.

Bailey Johnson

Bailey Johnson is the father of Maya and Bailey, Jr. Bailey Sr. is a good looking, charismatic individual, but he is also irresponsible and unreliable. His family adores him, not able to see his flaws. When he returns into the lives of his children, Maya is resentful, but Bailey looks up to his father. He is, to Bailey, merely a brief presence throughout the novel, but to Maya, he is much more. Maya doesn't know her father well, but she is sent to live with him for a summer in California when she is a teenager. Once there, she learns that her dreams of her father are not reality. Instead of being a millionaire in a mansion, he lives in a trailer with a woman he is seeing. The woman's name is Delores, and she is half his age. She despises Maya because she takes time and attention away from her. One day, Bailey takes Maya to Mexico to a prostitution house, where he leaves her in the company of the help, having fun, so he can sleep with his mistress. He becomes too intoxicated to drive, leaving Maya, too young and untrained, to try to drive them home across the border. She has an accident, after which Bailey sobers up enough to get them home. When Delores becomes enraged, Bailey leaves her with Maya. The two argue, and Maya is stabbed. Instead of leaving Delores, however, Bailey simply takes Maya to a local doctor at home and leaves her with his friends. Maya runs away, and it is during this time that Maya learns she is stronger than she ever realized. Bailey proves to be a charismatic, but completely false character whose lack of responsibility and care for his children surmounts his ability to talk his way out of things.

Grandma Baxter

Grandma Baxter is the mother of Vivian and the grandmother of Maya and Bailey. Grandma Baxter is nearly white and speaks in a strong German accent. The fact that she married a black man at the turn of the century shows her determination to rise above any discrimination. Living as a white woman in a black world, Grandma Baxter becomes the head of a strong crime family in the black neighborhoods. Having strong white influence impresses the blacks, and her formidable sons carry out the necessary dirty work for her. This is the world Maya is brought into when she comes to St. Louis to live with her mother and her family. The Baxter crime family is influential. Although Maya does learn some unsavory lessons, she loves the fast life she is witnessing too. She finds the colorful characters endearing. For her part, Grandma Baxter has little to do directly with the children, but it is suggested that she is the person responsible for having her sons kill the man who molests young Maya. Grandma Baxter's character is strong, influential, and completely contrary to Momma's, which helps to show Maya the vast roles women can play in the world. This helps her to develop her eventual strong sense of self and purpose that so many see within her later writings.



Mr. Freeman

Mr. Freeman is Victoria Baxter's boyfriend in St. Louis when Maya and Bailey arrive. Mr. Freeman is a seemingly nice enough individual who isn't mean to the children, but just seems to ignore them. His entire focus is on Victoria, and her bigger than life personality. He seems almost unable to function without her presence, and seems to light up only when she is around. Maya often sleeps between them. One morning, when Victoria has left and Maya is in bed with him, he pulls her on top of him and masturbates. When he finishes, he threatens her that he will kill Bailey if she tells anyone. Although Maya doesn't understand, she feels shame and overwhelming despair, as she cannot tell Bailey what has happened. She also feels a sense of loneliness, having felt a loving connection between herself and Mr. Freeman. One day, she goes to him and sits on his lap, hugging him tightly. He shifts her around on his lap until he ejaculates. Then, he pushes her from his lap. Several months later, when no one is home, he fully molests her. When she becomes ill, her mother is concerned, and in changing her bedsheets, finds her wadded up, bloody panties. She is taken to the hospital, and Mr. Freeman is arrested. After a trial, Mr. Freeman is released. He is killed, presumably by Maya's family. Mr. Freeman's character serves several points. First, it shows why Maya becomes a near mute for a year after her ordeal. Secondly, it explains much of Maya's self doubt growing up. Third, it shows the immense violence of the Baxter family when their family is threatened or harmed.

Willie Johnson

Willie Johnson is the uncle of Maya and Bailey, the brother of Bailey Sr, and the other son of Momma "Annie" Henderson. Willie was born crippled, and as such, has been dealt a double whammy. Living in the South during the Depression as a black man would be difficult enough, but living also as a crippled man limits his life greatly. He lives with his mother and helps her run the store, and take care of Maya and Bailey. Willie is a good man, although harsh and strict, and Maya comes to identify with him in many ways. Willie has lived his whole life in the shadow of his brother Bailey, and Maya understands this feeling of being "less than." She herself feels ugly and unsophisticated around her family. Willie often feels the same way. Willie's character is a constant caring male figure in Maya's life, and his own lack of self-esteem does help Maya to identify with him.

Dolores

Dolores is the girlfriend of Bailey Sr when Maya is sent to live with him for a summer. Dolores is a selfish, cruel woman who wants Bailey, Sr to herself. When she believes Maya is coming between them, she threatens her, and eventually stabs her. Dolores is the reason Maya runs away from her father's home, and begins living on the streets with a group of homeless teenagers. Dolores is a minor character in the book, but her actions force Maya outside of her comfort zone, which helps her to begin to develop her own sense of self, away from her beautiful and powerful family.



Daddy Clidell

Daddy Clidell eventually becomes the husband of Vivian Baxter. Daddy Clidell is a real estate mogul with no education. He taught himself business and is highly successful. He is a kind, charismatic man who prides himself on his treatment of others. Maya finds in him a true male role model, a man who cares for her as a daughter and who treats people with respect and kindness. Maya also finds comfort in the concept that she looks like Daddy Clidell, feeling as though she has found a father figure. However, Daddy Clidell is also a card player, and as a result, Maya meets many of the California underground. They tell her stories of their conquests, and Maya comes to see them more as family than a danger. Maya finds herself culturally bound to these stories, as she prides herself, and her race, for overcoming discrimination and hatred through whatever means necessary, and it is this environment where Maya begins to find racial pride.

Bertha Flowers

Bertha Flowers is a black woman in Stamps who is wealthy, and who takes a liking to Maya. When Maya returns to Stamps, somewhat broken following her molestation, Bertha takes her under her wing. Maya is entranced by Bertha and her formal education. She is often embarrassed as her grandmother speaks to Bertha without using formal English and sometimes using wrong words. Maya later understands her mother and Bertha were like sisters, separated only by education but bound together by so many other, important things. Bertha teaches Maya to speak again, using language not only as a tool, but as a weapon when she needs it. She explained that even though her people were "homely," their knowledge was vast and highly valued. It was Bertha who taught Maya that her heritage was important and that her language was powerful. It was also Bertha who introduced Maya to poetry, an art form Maya would continue to practice throughout her life.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Store

The Store is the grocery and convenience store owned and operated by Annie Henderson, Maya's grandmother. As a black woman in the south during the Depression, the fact that Annie owns a store makes her a very powerful figure in the community. The Store, always thought of by Maya with a capital S, becomes a symbol for her of her grandmother's power, and the only thing standing between her family and the extremely high level of racism in the community.

Stamps, Arkansas

Stamps, Arkansas is the small town in the South where Maya spends much of her childhood. Stamps is a highly racist community, and Maya learns much about the plight of the blacks from living in this poor town. The town is symbolic to Maya of discrimination and despair. Although she escaped some of this due to her grandmother's position in town, she does witness it daily, and her brother is affected by it more frequently.

Books

Books are Maya's way of escaping her life, regardless of where she is. In Stamps, Maya is able to escape racism and poverty by reading adventurous tales. In St. Louis, Maya can avoid thinking about her molestation and her sense of not fitting in, can avoid her feelings of loneliness and shame through books by Shakespeare and other romantic poets. Throughout her life, books are able to fulfill her in a way her normal life cannot, and this love of literature is what eventually leads her to becoming one of the most well known, prolific black writers of her time.

Boxing

Boxing is only mentioned in one chapter in the book, but it is highly symbolic. The people of Stamps and blacks throughout the nation were enthralled with Joe Lewis' fight against a white man. Maya explains that the entire struggle of the black against the white rested on the fight. The fight proved that the blacks were capable of beating the whites at something, thereby making their struggle worthy. A loss would mean the whites were right, they were inferior. Boxing was a metaphor for the struggle of blacks during times of discrimination.



San Francisco Streetcar

The San Francisco Streetcar Company becomes a symbol for Maya's own abilities and dreams. Maya applies for a position with the company, only to be told they do not hire blacks. Maya, determined to fight the system, daily pesters and continues to quietly but firmly demand her right to interviews, and the hiring process. Eventually, Maya wears them down and becomes the first black employee of the San Francisco Streetcar company.

Religion

Religion is an important symbol for Maya during the novel. Maya's grandmother is very religious, and she teaches Maya to be fearful and respectful of God and his wishes. This is, in part, why Maya is able to overcome many of her challenges in life. Her strong faith in God allows her to struggle through the darkest times, knowing God is watching and believing in her. Maya suffers tremendously in the novel, but her faith in God remains a constant

Railroad Tracks

The railroad tracks in Stamps, Arkansas, become a symbol for both Maya and Bailey in the novel. First, the tracks are a symbol of escape for Bailey and Maya. They see the tracks, and the trains that go by endlessly, and they see that the world does extend beyond Stamps. They begin to realize that the discrimination that exists in Stamps may be different in other places. Bailey even hops a train one day and escapes for a short time. The same railroad tracks that brought them, fearful, to Stamps are the same tracks that eventually take them away, saddened, back to California. The tracks come to represent change.

Dentist Lincoln

Although Dentist Lincoln is a character in the novel, he is much more suited as a symbolic figure. Dentist Lincoln is a white dentist whom Annie helped during the depression. When Maya is in need of help, then, Annie assumes he will be gracious enough to offer assistance. However instead, he demeans her in front of her granddaughter, and shows himself to be a pure racist, with little concern for the feelings of the blacks. He is rude and cruel, and Maya learns from that moment that the whites cannot be trusted. Dentist Lincoln is a symbol of the horrific discrimination that existed at the time of the book.



Easter Dress

At the beginning of the book, Maya desperately wants a beautiful Easter dress. The dress becomes a symbol for her. She believes that it will make her beautiful, golden, loved, and desired. Most importantly, it will make her "white." She dreams of slipping on the dress and having it transform her into a lovely white child, who fits in with others. When she puts on the dress, however, she realizes it is only a dress. She is still the person that she has always been.

The Junkyard

The Junkyard is the abandoned lot in which Maya lives following her running away from her father and Delores. The junkyard comes to represent freedom for Maya. For the first time in her life, Maya is away from her beautiful and influential family. No one knows her, so no one has expectations of what she should be. Maya finds this liberating, as she is finally able to gather a sense of self that is not directly tied to her family. It is this pivotal moment in her life that Maya really breaks away from the family image, and is able to begin forming a self image.



Settings

Stamps, Arkansas

At a very early age, Maya and her brother are shipped to a small Southern town in Arkansas, named Stamps. Stamps is a split community, with a number of both blacks and whites, and like most cities in the south, it is highly segregated. Maya's grandmother, Annie, is the only black store owner in Stamps, and as such, gains at least marginal respect from the whites, and tremendous respect from the blacks. The whites in Stamps, however, are highly racist, and the blacks rarely ever even see the whites. Stamps, Arkansas is the place where Maya learns much about discrimination and racial hatred.

St. Louis, Missouri

When Maya is still young, she is moved with her brother to St. Louis, Missouri, to live with her mother. St. Louis is much different than Stamps, Arkansas, in that while it is still a racist town, it is not nearly as segregated as other towns. Additionally, Maya lives with her nearly white grandmother, who has political and city power, and as a result, Maya learns more of the black and white crime syndicate than of racism. Her mother and family are part of a crime family, and Maya is exposed to violence, and a very different life than she is used to. Her school is more strict, while her home life is much more lax.

San Francisco, California

When Maya is a preteen, she is moved again, this time from Stamps, Arkansas to San Francisco, California. Much like St. Louis, San Francisco is not a town of racial hatred and bigotry, but of money and power. Maya's school is not segregated, but it is strict. Her teachers are much less caring than those in Stamps. That is not to say, however, that San Francisco is not a racist community, as Maya finds when she begins hunting for employment. In fact, it is Maya who fights the city streetcar system to become the first black attendant in its history.

Mexico

When Maya is still young, she and her father take an unexpected trip to Mexico. Her father claims to be buying special groceries, but when they arrive, Maya discovers they are really at a bar, with prostitutes, and her father appears to be with one of them. During the trip, Maya is forced to drive her inebriated father back home, but is unsuccessful as she crashes into another car. She escapes penalty only because her father straightens out the situation. Maya's trip to Mexico sets off her first summer away from home, where she learns much about life on the streets, and personal strength.



Southern California

Following the trip to Mexico, Maya runs away from her father. She lives in a junkyard in Southern California for a month with a band of other runaway children. It is during this time that Maya learns about being self sufficient, as she and her new found friends work what jobs they can for their survival. Maya learns she is capable of achieving what she believes, and of doing anything she puts her mind to. She also becomes aware that the adult world is less intimidating than she believed.



Themes and Motifs

Discrimination

One of the primary themes in the novel is that of discrimination. From the very beginning of the novel, Maya describes a very deep, intimate and painful knowledge that she was different than everyone else. She knew, from an early age, that she was part of a group of individuals that, for whatever reason, were seen as "less than". When she is a young child, she can recognize that she feels differently because of the color of her skin and her lack of monetary wealth. She sees, in Stamps, Arkansas, that there is a vast difference in the way whites and blacks are treated, but even this is somewhat muted day today, as her grandmother is someone with substantial power and influence, as a local store owner. Over time, however, Maya begins to realize the depth of hatred some of the whites in town feel for the blacks, and she begins to understand that she is struggling against racial and socioeconomic discrimination. From dentists who refuse to treat her because of her skin color to white girls who tease and torment her to watching her grandmother forced into silence as white girls make fun of her, Maya begins to feel the dull anger and rage of a discriminated class. When whites come speak at her school about careers, she is appalled to hear them speak only of sports, as though blacks were worth nothing more. When she is sent to work for a white woman as a maid, she is angered and infuriated at the way the blacks are treated. When Bailey is forced into a train car with a dead black man at the hands of white police, Maya is sickened for her brother. Through these experiences, she feels helpless, and this in part causes Maya such self worth issues, she is unable to see herself as beautiful or strong. When she moves to St. Louis, the discrimination is certainly less, but Maya is still aware there is a difference in class. She and her family are influential, and as a result, they have power. But, Maya still finds herself discriminated against at school at one the streets.

Maya's true test of discrimination, however, comes in San Fransisco. Maya applies for a position at the streetcar company, and is rejected because of her race. Tired of being judged only by her skin color, and beginning to gain a sense of worth and independence, Maya fights the company, eventually earning her place as the first black streetcar employee. Maya's struggle shows that even though she was taught early to fear the whites, as were many in the era in which the book was written, Maya used her experiences to gain self confidence, and find a purpose, and fought discrimination as she found it unjust. Maya's continued struggle against oppression and discrimination throughout her life would not have been possible had she not had such intense and drastic experiences as a child.

Child Molestation

Another major theme in the novel is that of child molestation, and the effect of molestation on the self esteem and psyche of the victims. When Maya is eight years old, she is sent to live with her mother, who has a boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. The first



experience with him that she can recall as sexually abusive occurred in he and her mother's bed. After holding her while he masturbated, Mr. Freeman accused her of wetting the bed. He continued, and threatened that if she told anyone what "they" had done, he would kill Bailey. Maya describes extreme confusion and fear during this time. Not only did she not understand what had taken place between Mr. Freeman and herself, she is also confused how she is somehow connected to the act by Mr. Freeman's comments of what they had done. She understands enough to know she didn't intend to cause his arousal, but through his manipulative words, Maya finds herself ashamed, afraid, guilty, and feeling dirty. Maya's recollections of this time show very clearly that Mr. Freeman's actions not only caused her concern, but a severe sense of wrongness about herself. When he later molests her, these feelings amplify, and Maya is physically sickened by her emotional confusion. Even when Mr. Freeman is caught, Maya is forced to re-endure her pain in court, and then to watch him get little punishment, and be freed. When he is killed, Maya is unable to feel relief, because again, she is left feeling responsible for his death. Through his manipulation and actions, Mr. Freeman causes Maya to feel constantly ashamed and guilty of actions that were not hers to control. Her voluntary mutism for nearly a year following Mr. Freeman's death show just how deeply Maya was wounded by the entire experience, and her continued lack of self worth, her sexual confusion, and her inability to achieve intimacy for many years are all symptoms of the abuse she endured. Although Maya is eventually able to overcome this, and use her experiences to feed her writing talent, her story shows just how deeply child abuse victims carry their pain and how very drastically these victims are impacted.

Self Esteem

Another theme in the novel is that of Maya's lack of self esteem. As a direct result of both the discrimination she experiences as well as her molestation, Maya struggles her entire life with a lack of self worth. Feeling abandoned by her mother and father at a very young age, she is sent to live with relatives in a discriminatory town on the south. She is deeply loved, but she realizes early on she is different from others. She finds a kindred spirit in her uncle, who is crippled, and Maya quickly identifies with his feelings of pain and suffering at not fitting in. When she is taken back to live with her mother, she feels even more out of place, as her mother is very beautiful, as is her mother's family, and even her own brother. Maya herself feels she is ugly, big, and not as glamorous as the rest of her family. When she is molested, these feelings intensify until she is barely able to communicate. She speaks only to her brother, and finds escape from her life through books. She is saved by a woman named Bertha Flowers, who teaches her about literature, and about appreciating her heritage. She shows her that language is not something to hid from, but a powerful tool to use to convey human emotion and meaning.

Maya's self esteem remains rocky throughout her childhood and her teens, however. Her father's lack of responsibility leads to her stabbing, and running away from home in her early teens. At the time, she is feeling particularly low about herself, but in the moth she spends in an abandoned lot with other teens, she is finally able to begin to see her



self worth. She finds she has talent, and can be liked in the company of those she feels comfortable. Without her family around to accidentally intimidate her, she finds herself blooming. She is then able to take on the streetcar company once she returns home, forcing them to give her a position even though she is black. At the same time, however, she experiences confusion of her sexuality. Having already had bad experiences with men, she begins to wonder if she is a lesbian, and forces herself to have sex to prove to herself she is not. Instead, she is unsatisfied, and finds herself pregnant.

It is Maya's pregnancy that seems to solidify her self worth. She is petrified and concerned about her ability to be an mother, but she finishes school, showing a determination many do not have. Once she gives birth, it is her mother who shows her that motherhood is natural, and that Maya has a natural ability to parent. It is this moment that seems to create the basis for the rest of Maya's life, as she slowly becomes one of the most prolific and known black writers of her time.

Family

Another theme in the novel that ties into other themes is that of the importance of family, and the differences in family experiences. For some, family involves primarily the immediate members of mother and father, and siblings. In Maya's world, however, family incorporates not only immediate and extended family, but also the entire community. Maya's parents, early in life, prove less than capable of raising their children, and as a result, Maya lives with her grandmother. This is not uncommon at the time, Maya points out, as many in the Southern community are raised by grandparents as parents move or find work. Her uncle and grandmother raise her for a time, and then she is shipped to live with her mother, and again, her extended family. Coming from a strong, religious southern family to a strong crime family in the north is a shock to Maya, but she again experiences much love and affection. It is her family who supports her when she is molested, and who in fact kill the perpetrator. She is shipped again back to her Southern family. Although these moves are hard on Maya, they do show underlying family decisions occurring that Maya may be unaware of. She is again left in the company of a strongly religious black community, but when the discrimination hits home as Bailey is on the receiving end, they are sent to California, where discrimination is less violent. Again, here, we see Maya raised by an extended family of relatives who may not always be responsible, but who do always show her love and support. Her father proves to be worthless and irresponsible, but Maya finds a father figure in Daddy Clidell, her mother's boyfriend. It is this constant extended family that shows Maya the power of community, loyalty, and human connections, and that leads her to use these themes throughout her life and her work.



Styles

Point of View

As the novel is an autobiography, the story is told entirely in first person, and is told from the author's point of view. This point of view is important, since the book is an explanation of the events of the author's life. As such, she knows only what she thinks and feels throughout the book, and she can only suggest the motivations of the other characters. This helps keep the narration focused on how the actions and events in the novel shape and form the emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of the main character. Without the emotional aspects of Maya's own words, the impact of the scenarios presented would be less effective.

Much of the story is told through narrative, with some dialog interjected. One assumes the dialog is summarized, in that word for word conversations are not given. However, the areas where dialog is present tend to be the more painful or important aspects of Maya's life, and the fact that those conversations would be recorded in memory shows their emotional impact on the author. Further, this use of narration allows the author to skip large areas of time in which nothing of vast importance occurs. This allows the book to progress without day to day details that would make the novel cumbersome.

Language and Meaning

Maya Angelou is a well known author and poet. Her command of the English language is clear in her other works. However, she writes this novel in a very simplistic way, with few overly advanced word choices. This allows the book to be accessible to a wide audience, including teen audiences. Although the content is at times violent, gruesome, and adult in content, Maya avoids overly descriptive passages that would make the book unreadable for teens. As the book is about her own struggle with her sense of self, her language choices allow the book to be understood by an audience who may desperately need to read it. Further, her work is highly emotional, with Maya holding very little back in terms of her own self worth issues and her struggle to fit in. This leads to a powerfully gripping book, and one that many can relate to, particularly those raised in racist or violent environments. Her strong faith in God, her positive attitude, and her overwhelming belief that in her life turned out well, in spite of or even because of her experiences, serves as a hopeful story.

Structure

The novel is chronological in nature, as it is an autobiography. The book begins with an experience of Maya's in which she realizes she will never fit in with the white girls of her community, as this moment really defines the nature of the book, that of self discovery and the finding of self worth in a world of discrimination and violence. The book continues with Maya's experiences early in life, traveling by train at age for to live with



her grandmother in the deep south. Her experiences here help to shape a God-fearing, happy, young girl. The next section deals with Maya's time in St. Louis, where she lives with her glamorous mother and her crime family. This time in Maya's life is crucial, as she is molested, suffers tremendous pain, deals with self worth issues, and feels intense shame. The third section of the book follows Maya back to Stamps, where she suffers even more discrimination, but begins to find an anger within her at the injustices she has faced. The final section of the book focuses on her teenage years in California, where she is finally able to gain a sense of self and value, and where she finds herself pregnant, giving birth, and begins to relate to her own mother figures over the years. Although these sections are not broken apart physically in the book, they are chronologically obvious. The book is broken by chapters of unequal length, with a total page count of 289.



Quotes

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.

-- Maya Angelou (Introduction paragraph Paragraph 9)

Importance: Maya's quote at the end of the Introduction is important, because it sets the tone for the rest of the book. Her recollection, that being aware of one's position in life if that position is bad is troublesome, lets the reader realize that Maya and other blacks at the time suffered not only because of their poverty and position, but because of their realization that not everyone had these same issues.

He must have tired of being crippled, as prisoners tire of penitentiary bars and the guilty tire of blame. The high-topped shoes and the cane, his uncontrollable muscles and thick tongue, and the looks he suffered of either contempt or pity had simply worn him out, and for one afternoon, one part of an afternoon, he wanted no part of them.

-- Willie (Chapter 2 paragraph 20)

Importance: Maya relates strongly at this point in the novel to Uncle Willie, as he seeks refuge from his condition. Often times throughout the novel, Maya herself seeks to escape her life, and her conditions, and in this moment in the novel she understands what her uncle feels, and can relate to him in a way she rarely relates to others.

It seemed that the piece of a day's ending was an assurance that the covenant God made with children, Negroes, and the crippled was still in effect.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 3 paragraph 5)

Importance: Maya's faith is very important to her, and throughout the entire book, she notes how her relationship with God and religion develops. Her assertion that there is a covenant between God and those in her family reassures her that all is right with the world.

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 different, 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.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 4 paragraph 23)

Importance: One of the primary themes of the novel is the complete and almost unbelievable level of segregation in Stamps, and in the rest of the country. Maya eludes to this high level often, but statements such as these show plainly that segregation was absolute. Another minor, but important, point of the quote is Maya's capitalization of the color "Black", but not of the color "white", which she does throughout the book, indicating an emphasis on one race over the other.



People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except of July Fourth. Other days he had to be satisfied with chocolate.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: Again, this quote shows the deep sense of discrimination the blacks felt in Stamps, Arkansas. Although whimsical, Maya's note about July Fourth is sarcastic, as though she sees this even imagined allowance as more of an insult.

If you ever tell anybody what we did, I'll have to kill Bailey.

-- Mr. Freeman (Chapter 11 paragraph 20)

Importance: This quote is significant, for several reasons. First, and most obviously, Mr. Freeman's words threaten Maya, and convince her not to speak of her rape, showing the power of Mr. Freeman over Maya. Secondly, Mr. Freeman's use of the word "we" in this sentence is important. It shows the suggestion that the rape that occurred was actually consensual, instead of child molestation. This type of phrasing is important, as it helps to convince Maya she is somehow to blame for what occurred. Finally, Mr. Freeman is threatening the one person he knows Maya cherishes most, showing he has power over her.

Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 12 paragraph 8)

Importance: In this quote, Maya bluntly states what has happened to her, in that her small eight year old body has been raped. This quote shows the deep pain, but also the sense of losing ones self, of losing not only body by senses as well. Maya's note that the mind of the violator cannot give shows also a level of understanding on pedophiles that many victims cannot handle.

The Black woman in the South who raises sons, grandsons, and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose. Any break from routine may herald for them unbearable news. For this reason, Southern Blacks until the present generation could be counted among America's arch conservatives.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 17 paragraph 10)

Importance: Again, Maya speaks in this quote of the deep discrimination in the South, but here, she also points out the fear that discrimination caused. It is easy to forget that not only did Black women of the south have to worry about themselves, but also their loved ones. The threats of hangings and lynchings plagued every day, forcing them into roles of conservatives. These individuals were locked into habit, because to deviate from the norm was to invite trouble.

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped



and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 19 paragraph 16)

Importance: Maya's comparison in the quote of Joe Lewis' near loss in his fight against Carnera shows not only the deep association of the Blacks to Lewis, but also the association of any Black failure to the fate of the Black race. Maya notes her "race" groans with Lewis as he fights, and falls as he falls, just as she assumes Lewis does when other atrocities, such as lynching, beatings, and rapes occur. To the black race, Lewis' loss to a white is no different than their own daily loss of respect and their humiliation at the hands of the white race.

Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's.

-- Dentist Lincoln (Chapter 24 paragraph 25)

Importance: In this quote, the white dentist whom Annie goes to in an attempt to get help for Maya shows a complete and total disrespect for all Blacks. Although Annie has done him many favors, the white dentist not only disrespects Annie, but also does so right in front of Maya. His attitude represents that of all discriminatory whites.

My tears were not for Bailey or Mother or even myself but for the helplessness of mortals who live on the sufferance of life. In order to avoid this bitter end, we would all have to be born again, and born with the knowledge of alternatives.

-- Maya Angelou (Chapter 33 paragraph 37)

Importance: Maya shows in this quote not only her growing maturity, but also her understanding of human pain. More than anyone Maya knows the life of the suffering, and understands this life is made worse when one has no concept of an alternative life. She understands that if one sees alternatives, one has a choice, but many simply suffer silently, not understanding there is a different life available.

That's what you want to do? Then nothing beats a trial but a failure. Give it everything you've got. I've told you many times, 'Can't Do is like Don't Care.' Neither of them have a home.

-- Victoria Baxter (Chapter 34 paragraph 8)

Importance: Victoria Baxter is not always the best mother; but, in this quote, she shows her support of Maya and shows her strong determination to be optimistic. Victoria is a strong woman, and she supports Maya's decisions to fight the system, regardless of whether or not she has a chance to succeed.

See, you don't have to think about doing the right thing. if you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking.

-- Victoria Baxter (Chapter 36 paragraph 32)

Importance: At the end of the book, Victoria Baxter's statement is a testament to Maya throughout the book, and really, her life. Victoria is not particularly "good," but she is

also not "bad." Victoria is who she is and has learned to accept herself, and those around her. She knows that if she believes in the right thing, then she will by default do the right thing. This lesson is an important one for Maya, as she struggled her whole life against racism and sexism, and this statement by her mother is one that encompasses Maya's fight.