

# I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou grew up in the segregated American south with her grandmother, an unusually well-off black store owner. She eventually left Arkansas to live with her mother and attend high school in California, where she also worked as the first black streetcar employee in San Francisco. Shortly after obtaining her high school diploma, she gave birth to her son. She was a lifelong lover of language, performance, and learning. She went on to become an accomplished dancer and performer, but is most famous for her many decorated collections of poetry and for her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. At the time of her death, Angelou was working on another autobiography. Her work addresses issues of racial and gender discrimination, and she is often hailed as one of the most important cultural critics of this century.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book begins in the segregated American Jim Crow South of the early 20th century and ends in San Francisco, shortly after the end of WWII. This turbulent period in American history is insightfully catalogued and examined by Angelou as she recounts the events of her own life. Angelou investigates the effects of systemic segregation and racism on the minds, bodies, and identities of black individuals. In many ways *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* provides readers with a crucial account of the first half of the 20th century from the perspective of a Black southerner.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Angelou worked closely with author and civil rights activist James Baldwin in writing this memoir. The book is interesting in the importance it places on literacy and language itself, and therefore examines various kinds of writing and poetry, from Shakespeare to Dickens to Langston Hughes. The book is also an innovation on a typical autobiography, for it uses techniques and styles common in fiction, while remaining true to Angelou's life story.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
- **When Written:** 1969
- **Where Written:** USA
- **When Published:** 1969
- **Literary Period:** Postwar / Contemporary

- **Genre:** Memoir / autobiographical fiction
- **Setting:** Stamps, Arkansas; St. Louis; California
- **Point of View:** Maya narrates in 1st person.

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Inaugural Poet.** In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. This made her the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost in 1961.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* tells the story of Maya Angelou's childhood in Stamps, Arkansas. She and her brother Bailey are sent away from their parents on a **train** to live with their grandmother ("Momma") and Uncle Willie when they are just three and four years old. Their grandmother owns a **store**, and the children enjoy a certain measure of security. Yet life is difficult for all black people in the segregated American south, and the children encounter various forms of discrimination, degradation, and racial violence.

One day, Marguerite's father, Big Bailey, arrives, and announces he is taking her and her brother to stay with their mother, Vivien. They leave Stamps for St. Louis, and Marguerite feels a longing for home, but isn't sure where home is. In St. Louis, Marguerite is just beginning to adjust when she is repeatedly assaulted and raped by Vivien's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Following Mr. Freeman's conviction (shortly after which he is murdered) Marguerite returns to Stamps and becomes withdrawn, and she believes her mother sent her and Bailey away because she was too sullen.

Back in Stamps, Marguerite struggles to cope with her assault. She is rescued in a sense by the mentorship of Mrs. Flowers, a woman who teaches Marguerite how to read, recite, appreciate, and memorize poetry. Literature and language will remain in Maya's life as a source of strength and comfort.

After Bailey is threatened by a white man, Momma decides it is time for the children to be with their mother, who has moved to California. The children move to San Francisco, and live with Vivien and eventually Vivien's new husband, Daddy Clidell, a con artist whom Maya loves as if he were her own father. Maya and Bailey love their mother dearly, and Maya continues to perform well in school.

One day Maya goes to southern California to stay with her father, and gets in a fight with his live-in girlfriend Dolores Stockland, which results in Maya's needing stitches. She doesn't want to humiliate her father, so she runs away and lives in a

junkyard until her wound is healed, then goes back to her mother. Shortly thereafter Bailey moves out, and Maya gets a job as San Francisco's first black streetcar employee.

Things are going well for Maya until she becomes concerned about her sexuality. She fears she is turning into a lesbian (though she doesn't understand what "lesbian" really means) and believes if she has sex with a boy she will be cured. She does, and the experience is unremarkable until she realizes she is pregnant. She hides her pregnancy for six months before finally telling Mother and Daddy Clidell—they are exceedingly understanding and capable, and help her through the rest of her pregnancy and her labor. Maya gives birth to a beautiful baby boy, and she is so afraid to hurt him she can barely touch him. The book ends with Maya overcoming this fear, with Vivien's help, and napping with her baby in her bed.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Maya Angelou** – Maya Angelou is the narrator of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and the memoir tracks her life from the early years of her childhood, when she was called Marguerite Johnson. Maya has always been a smart, inquisitive person with a passion for spoken and written language. She tells the story of how racial and sexual discrimination and violence shaped her childhood and young adulthood. These experiences come to incite and inform her interest in literary studies; in many ways *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the story of how and why Angelou became a poet.

**Bailey Johnson** – Bailey is Maya's older brother, with whom she has a special kind of familial bond. Bailey looks out for Marguerite when they are children, and Marguerite trusts him more than anyone. Bailey's experiences growing up as a black boy in the south demonstrate the particular challenges and indignities endured by black men in America.

**Momma (Annie Henderson)** – Momma is Bailey and Maya's paternal grandmother, who cares for them for most of their childhoods in Stamps, Arkansas. She is one of the only black storeowners in the area and deeply respected by the black community. She is a devoutly religious woman, and strict with her grandkids, but also ruthlessly protective of them. Eventually she sends Bailey and Maya away to be with their parents in California when it becomes clear that Arkansas is an unsafe place for them to live.

**Mother (Vivien Baxter)** – Bailey and Maya's mother is a beautiful light-skinned black woman who, according to Marguerite, looks just like a movie star. She is no longer with the children's father, and dates other men over the course of the book (one of whom, Mr. Freeman, rapes Marguerite). Vivien, though a frequently absent mother, is full of life and joy and cares deeply for her children.

**Mr. Freeman** – Mr. Freeman is Vivien's live-in boyfriend in St. Louis. When Marguerite and Bailey come to visit them for a few months, Mr. Freeman sexually assaults Marguerite. The abuse escalates until he rapes her. He warns Marguerite not to tell anyone, or he will kill Bailey. But Marguerite eventually does tell her brother, and Mr. Freeman is kicked out of the house. He is sentenced to a year in prison, but is killed (likely by Vivien's brothers) before he can serve his sentence.

**Dr. Lincoln** – Dr. Lincoln is the white dentist in Stamps, Arkansas. Though Momma once lent him money to establish his practice, he refuses to return the favor by pulling Marguerite's teeth when she has very painful cavities. He says he would prefer to stick his hand in a dog's mouth than provide dental care for a black person.

**Tommy Valdón** – Tommy sends Marguerite a love note for Valentine's Day. Marguerite is scared at first for she associates love with Mr. Freeman and her assault. But Tommy sends her another note and Marguerite is touched by this. She develops a crush on him, but nothing comes of it. It is a refreshing example of innocent, earnest, childhood affection.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Uncle Willie** – Uncle Willie is Bailey and Maya's crippled Uncle, who lives with Momma in Arkansas. He is a quiet character, used to keeping a low profile for he is harassed not only for his blackness but also for his disability. He helps raise the children.

**Big Bailey** – Big Bailey is Maya and Bailey's father. He is a strikingly handsome, larger-than-life man whom Maya cares for but who never really seems like a true father to her. He lives in California.

**Mrs. Bertha Flowers** – Bertha Flowers takes Marguerite under her wing when Marguerite returns to Stamps, Arkansas after her assault. She teaches Marguerite how to read, write, and understand literature and poetry, and Maya considers her one of the reasons she became a poet.

**Daddy Clidell** – Vivien's boyfriend in San Francisco. Maya considers him a kind of father figure.

**Edward Donleavy** – A white man who makes a condescending speech at Marguerite's 8th grade graduation. He makes it clear that black boys can aspire to be athletes, but says nothing about black people succeeding in academics; he makes it clear to Marguerite that her brain is not worth anything.

**Henry Reed** – The valedictorian of Marguerite's 8th grade class, Henry makes his speech right after Edward Donleavy talks. He leads the audience in singing the "Black National Anthem," or "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," and in doing so restores Marguerite's faith in and love for her people.

**Louise Kendricks** – Louise is Marguerite's first real friend. Marguerite talks to her about young romance and plays pretend with her.

**Joyce** – Joyce is Bailey’s first love. She initiates him into sex, boasting that she’s been intimate with many men before him. She breaks Bailey’s heart by running away with a much older man.

**Dolores Stockland** – Big Bailey’s girlfriend in Los Angeles. Dolores is jealous of all the attention Marguerite gets.

**Mr. and Mrs. Taylor** – Mr. Taylor is an older neighbor of Momma in Stamps, Arkansas. Mr. Taylor believes that Mrs. Taylor’s ghost appeared to him after she died. Mrs. Taylor’s death (And Mr. Taylor’s response to it) make Marguerite consider her own mortality for the first time.

**Mrs. Kirwin** – Mrs. Kirwin is Marguerite’s teacher in San Francisco, who respects her as an equal regardless of her race.

**Sister Monroe** – Sister Monroe is a particularly fervent worshipper in Marguerite’s church in Stamps. Her behavior—which involves shouting and chasing the Reverend around as he preaches, makes Marguerite and Bailey laugh so hard one day that they are whipped harshly when they get home.

**The Reverend** – The preacher in Marguerite’s church in Stamps. Marguerite dislikes him for no reason in particular.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### RACE, INEQUALITY, AND IDENTITY

Young Marguerite grows up in the segregated American south; but *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* is not simply an investigation of the history and effects of segregation: it is an incisive and honest examination of race, inequality, and identity.

Marguerite is taught by her grandmother to fear and avoid white people, and to think of them as godless, and not to be trusted. At the same time, she teaches her grandchildren never to speak disrespectfully to a white person, even if the person was “powhitetrash”—in other words a white person with very little stature. In the memoir, Maya Angelou carefully describes and records the reality that interacting with a white person in the segregated American south is dangerous for a black person. The Ku Klux Klan—casually referred to as “the boys” by the town sheriff—lynch black men for even looking at a white woman the wrong way. Black people cannot feel safe around white people, because insulting a white person (even inadvertently, even if provoked) is quite literally a deadly mistake. However, this internalized fear and loathing of white

people is accompanied in Marguerite by the desire to be white. White people are, in Marguerite’s eyes, prettier, richer, and happier. They are treated more fairly by the law, their stories are represented in books and movies, they do not live in fear of racial violence. Whiteness is superior, and the effect that this cultural inequality has on Marguerite’s young mind is immense.

The book does not stop at recording and cataloguing the racial inequality between black people and white people. It also identifies a complex hierarchy within the black community between light-skinned black people and dark-skinned black people. Light skin is considered more beautiful, and garners more respect. Marguerite’s mother is light-skinned; Marguerite, upon reuniting with her at the age of 8, thinks that she is too pretty to be a mother. She rationalizes her own rejection by appealing to a general cultural appreciation of light skin over dark skin. Marguerite is dark but her mother is light—she thinks this must be the reason her mother sent her away. Marguerite is also envious of other children in the town, who are either bi-racial or borne of light-skinned parents, who are lighter and therefore, in her mind, better than her. Uncle Willie faces even more discrimination and violence because he is black, dark-skinned, and crippled. His character in many ways demonstrates how various oppressions and prejudices can converge and complicate a person’s identity and experience.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is in part an account of Maya Angelou’s experience growing up black in the American South. Her race, and the violence, discrimination, and degradation she faced as a result of her race, played an integral role in shaping her as a person and as an artist. Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments of this memoir is its nuanced, honest, and unflinching portrayal of racism and its consequences in America.



### SEX, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

This memoir is also an account of how sex and gender influence experience and identity. Marguerite recognizes that being a girl is a kind of disadvantage, and wishes occasionally that she had been born a boy. The novels she reads have men and boys as their heroes and protagonists, so she believes that to be a hero one must be male. Marguerite also feels pressure to be feminine and attractive, and is tormented by her own “ugliness” for much of her childhood.

Marguerite’s rape at the hands of Mr. Freeman—and her struggle to recover, both physically and emotionally—are at the center of a discussion about sex, gender, and violence. Marguerite feels guilty and responsible for her own rape. She had been told by her grandmother to always “keep her legs closed” and she believes her rape is evidence of her own promiscuity. Her relationship with sex and sexuality are complicated by this event, and the text is an account of how she learns to navigate her own sexuality after being victimized.

In many ways, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an investigation of how inequality—both racial and sexual—shape experience and identity. The memoir records the experience of a black woman’s life in America, and her womanhood—like her blackness—inevitably shapes and informs her experience.



## LANGUAGE

Marguerite finds refuge in fiction, poetry, and language itself. The book is in many ways an account of how Maya Angelou came to be a poet, and her love of language plays a central role.

Marguerite is a quiet child, and especially after her assault, learns to take refuge in the sound and quality of others’ speech. She is told by her Uncles in St. Louis that it is okay if she is ugly so long as she is smart. Though her love of language is genuine (and even innate) it is also buoyed by a sense of obligation; because she is not pretty, she must be well read. Her subsequent relationship with Mrs. Flowers—an educated woman who teaches Marguerite how to read, memorize, and appreciate poetry—is one of the most formative in her entire childhood.

The “singing” of the caged bird is analogous to the refuge that Maya Angelou finds in language and poetry. The world in which she grows up is an unforgiving one, always unfair, and often brutal. The author’s appreciation and love of language as an art form is presented as a kind of salvation. In a book so rife with both racial and sexual violence, it is fitting that speech, communication, art and language would be advocated for.



## RELIGION

Religion also plays a complex role in Marguerite’s upbringing—though the church is a kind of sanctuary for the adults in the book, Marguerite is often intimidated by the church and associates it with punishment.

The importance of religion to black southerners is made clear early in the book. The passion of many adults in Marguerite’s church service embarrasses her; but adults see the church as a sanctuary for their displaced and disenfranchised people. The revivalist meetings bring every black person in the town together—no one ever misses one, and it is a place where blacks affirm their own worth and humanity in a culture and landscape that has oppressed them for generations.

Marguerite and Bailey are raised in this highly religious town and their grandmother instills them with a sense of the importance of faith early on, often through discipline. Marguerite is once punished so thoroughly for laughing in church that for a long time afterwards the memory of it makes her cry. She also uses the phrase “by the way” casually, without knowing that it means “by the way of God” and is therefore a form of taking the Lord’s name in vain, and her Grandmother

punishes her for this as well. Both of these whippings stand out in her childhood memory. Marguerite also enforces religious moral codes on herself from a young age. She says her favorite book in the bible is Deuteronomy, because it gives clear instructions for how to live a sin-free and virtuous life.

Religion has a complex place in this text and in Maya’s life. She understands it as a kind of refuge for black southerners who need the church for its strong sense of community and hope. Marguerite uses religion to inform her often fiercely strict moral code, but as an adult Maya recognizes that religion can foster its own kind of ignorance and passivity, which she believes is a dangerous thing.



## FAMILY

The memoir explores the complexity of familial bonds and the importance of family to a person’s experiences and identity. Maya and Bailey’s relationship is in many ways at the center of the book. Young Marguerite loves her brother so dearly and trusts him so implicitly that she confides in him first about her attack. The children often have to cope with feelings of abandonment since they were sent away by their parents to live with their grandmother at a young age, and are sent away again after Marguerite’s attack. Marguerite in particular—who bears no physical resemblance to her mother or father—wonders if her parents are in fact related to her. When Mr. Freeman assaults Marguerite for the first time, she is uncomfortable and confused but so desiring of parental affection that she interprets his actions as tenderness, and wonders if Mr. Freeman is her real father. Marguerite also learns to form familial bonds outside of her own biological family. Mrs. Flowers’ mentorship of Marguerite is another huge source of comfort and support.

The picture of family ties described by this memoir is a complicated one: family can be a source of rejection, confusion and pain, but is also an indispensable source of love and support.



## HOME AND DISPLACEMENT

The memoir also explores the idea of home and the pain and confusion of displacement, and in doing so for the particular experience of Maya Angelou also more broadly portrays these issues with respect to the history and experience of black Americans.

Marguerite is sent away from her mother and father to live with her grandmother at a young age; one of her earliest memories is of displacement, of being sent away from her home. She and Bailey often wonder why they were sent away—they feel rejected. At the same time, Marguerite associates Momma with home, and is sad to leave Arkansas when she and her brother go to St. Louis. In many ways,

Marguerite's childhood is characterized by an enduring struggle to identify "home."

When Marguerite and Bailey are moved from Arkansas to California, Marguerite finds the transition painful, but understands it. Bailey is threatened by a white man who forces Bailey to help carry the carcass of a drowned black man found in the lake. After this incident occurs, Momma makes it clear that the children will have to move. In this way, displacement is shown to be a fundamental part of growing up black in America. Though Arkansas is Bailey's home, he is forced to leave because violent racism drives him away.

In a book so deeply concerned with history, and with the history of black oppression, it is appropriate that displacement and the difficulty of finding "home" play a huge role in the lives of the book's characters. The legacy of slavery is still having a palpable effect on the lives of Maya and her family—finding "home" in America proves to be especially difficult.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### MOMMA'S STORE

The store is at the center of Marguerite's life in Arkansas. It is a figure for Momma's prominence and strength—she is the only black storeowner in town. But the store also serves as a reminder of racial inequality. Momma is well-off—the store gives her enough financial security that she is able to lend money to Dr. Lincoln, a white dentist who doesn't have enough funds to start his practice. However, when Momma asks Dr. Lincoln to pull some teeth for Marguerite, who is in a great deal of pain, he says he would rather put his hand in a dog's mouth. So while the store is a place where black members of the community congregate, and it is a source of security and strength for Momma, it can only do so much. It is therefore a symbol of Momma's strength in a world where that strength is necessary for survival.



### THE TRAIN

The train is a symbol of displacement. Bailey and Marguerite ride the train by themselves, with their ticket pinned to Bailey's coat, when they are sent away from their parents. They ride the train again to and from St. Louis, and finally again on the way to California after Bailey is threatened and Momma makes them move away. Angelou reflects on these train rides at length—they fill her with a sense of loss, of possibility, of fear, of longing. In many ways these train rides serve to remind her that, as a young Black girl, she cannot have a home in America the same way that others can.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam Books edition of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* published in 1993.

### Prologue 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.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 4

#### Explanation and Analysis

In the conclusion to her vividly imagined prologue, Angelou highlights the pain and displacement that shape much of the book. She takes as her premise the pain of growing up as a "Southern Black girl," making it clear that she'll be focusing on three core parts of her identity as a writer and as a character within her own autobiographical fiction: her Southernness, her Blackness, and her gender.

Further, Angelou concludes, it is the Southern Black girl's *awareness* of her displacement that makes this pain not only sharp but maybe even dangerous. Angelou's book looks closely at all sorts of regional, racialized, and gendered traumas; with this in mind, we might see this quotation as a statement of purpose for her book. But the rusted knife of pain and displacement is only the starting point for Angelou, and the book proceeds in a life-giving direction too.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

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

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Uncle Willie

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 16

#### Explanation and Analysis

Angelou's exploration of the Black community's rhythms of daily life in Stamps, shaped by their visits to her grandmother's store and their difficult days of manual labor,

describes early morning and nighttime as periods of rest so deeply needed that they might be sacred. At the same time, though, Angelou writes with definite sarcasm; the grouping of “children, Negroes, and the crippled” highlights the ridiculousness of the pairing in the first place – the equating of black people with children and cripples – and in so doing shows how such a grouping emerges from white paternalism (and not from Angelou’s God himself).

Throughout the book, Angelou suggests that the white community’s stereotypes of black people (often referred to as Negroes here) are both true and not. When they are true, they’re usually true for the wrong reasons. The Black community in Stamps holds sacred these periods of evening rest, but not because of any connection between black people and children or cripples.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ When I was described by our playmates as being shit color, he was lauded for his velvet-black skin...And yet he loved me.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Bailey Johnson

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

The brother-sister relationship between Maya and Bailey is central to this book. In other contexts a passage like this might signal jealousy on Maya’s part; she is treated poorly for her tone of black skin, and Bailey is “lauded” for it. But here, amidst all of Maya’s admiration for and amazement at her brother Bailey, there is little room for jealousy. Angelou uses two very different but equally powerful descriptors for their blackness: “shit color” for her, and “velvet-black” for Bailey.

In these descriptions Angelou unflinchingly takes on the language of her detractors, forcing the reader to feel some of the pain Maya might be feeling. Interestingly, at the end of this passage, Angelou writes: “And yet he loved me.” We might expect it to be the other way around: even though Maya is made fun of for her skin color and Bailey admired or his, she is able to forgive him and love him, and so on. But the fact that Maya feels the need to earn Bailey’s love despite her supposedly “shit color” skin shows us how deep the child Maya’s shame runs.

☝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 25

### Explanation and Analysis

Segregation is one of the most powerful, and more disturbing, political realities both of the world Angelou lived in and the world she creates in this book. The line drawn between white and black people in Stamps is not only culturally but physically defined— the white side of town is like an unknown world to the black children. Angelou capitalizes “Black children” and leaves “whites” lowercase, making it clear that black identity is something to be proud of; the lowercase “whites” makes those people anonymous, unknown.

This book’s main characters are also children throughout most of it, and their childhood wonder is evoked in lines like “most Black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like.” There is a desire to know, in Maya and the other children, but the segregated set-up of Stamps and the south makes it extremely difficult to know “the other.”

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths of life she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Momma (Annie Henderson), Bailey Johnson

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 47

### Explanation and Analysis

In reading this passage, it helps to have a sense of how ardently Maya Angelou worked, throughout her career, to tell new types of stories about blackness and being black in the United States. This quotation clearly emerges in retrospect, as Angelou reflects on the ways Momma held her and Bailey within the safe confines of relative black success as sanctioned by white society. In this passage we find both sympathy for Momma’s beliefs and a real desire to surpass them, to live radically outside of what could be

considered “safe” because it wouldn’t offend any of the power-holding white people on the other side of Stamps and the other side of the country.

Momma wants Maya and Bailey to pray diligently, work hard, respect authority; mostly she wants them to keep their heads down. Angelou ends up doing the opposite, of course, writing and publishing a book about her life in Stamps and beyond. So, in many ways, this book is both an affirmation of Momma’s ways (which are described in detail, with respect for the necessity of survival in a world very dangerous to black women) and a piece of tangible evidence that Angelou has exceeded the bounds placed around her.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ He held me so softly I wished he wouldn’t ever let me go. I felt at home.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Mr. Freeman

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 73

### Explanation and Analysis



In the midst of being sexually assaulted by Mr. Freeman, Maya finds peace in the sensation of being held by him. This is one of the most vivid and disturbing sequences in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, and Maya’s utter confusion about what is happening to Mr. Freeman’s body and what he might be doing to her is captured most effectively in this moment. Mr. Freeman has just finished masturbating against Maya’s body, and knowing this the reader cannot help but wince at the intimacy of their embrace. But Maya, who has not yet connected the wetness in the bed to Mr. Freeman’s anatomy, is comforted simply by his close physical presence.

Throughout the early chapters of this book, we can feel Maya searching for intimacy from adults— this makes sense given that her story begins with her and Bailey’s abandonment by their parents. Maya feels “at home” when Mr. Freeman holds her. And so with characters like Mr. Freeman and Mrs. Flowers Maya seems to be searching deeply for someone to hold her, emotionally or physically. The trouble comes when an adult— in this case Mr. Freeman— capitalizes on Maya’s earnest wish for closeness by causing her harm.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be a Negro, just by being herself.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Mrs. Bertha Flowers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

As she did with Mr. Freeman (to disastrous effect), Maya looks to Mrs. Flowers for an adult ally. However, the relationship she develops with Mrs. Flowers is positive, and formative in spurring Maya’s fascination with reading and writing. Mrs. Flowers also, as Angelou suggests here, is a living denial of the stereotypes Maya struggles against as a black girl. Educated, dignified, elegant: Mrs. Flowers is everything the white people say black women cannot be. Thus she makes Maya “proud” simply by existing, by providing a vital counterexample in Maya’s youth to the stereotyped image of blackness and femininity promoted in Stamps and the rest of the segregated South.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ The Black woman in the south who raises sons, grandsons, and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Momma (Annie Henderson), Bailey Johnson

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 114

### Explanation and Analysis

In this startling passage, Angelou ties the common imagery of “heartstrings” to the uniquely black horror of the “hanging noose.” This shift from a universal image to a very particular one conveys the specificity of Angelou’s claim: it is the southern black woman— and these are the three core aspects of Maya’s political reality— who feels this unique pain of knowing that her son, grandson, and nephew could be killed for just about any sort of infraction, legitimate or not, like Bailey’s failure to return home by sundown. Black men are in unique danger, which puts their family members in a unique state of fear. It is tragic then, in a way, to be a black woman— bound to fear most deeply for the ones she loves.

☝ I laughed because, except that she was white, the big movie star looked just like my mother...and it was funny to think of the whitefolks’ not knowing that.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Mother (Vivien Baxter)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 118-119

### Explanation and Analysis


Inspired by Bailey's earlier insistence that a white actress in a movie he sees looks exactly like their mother, Maya sees the actress in another film a few months later. This is one of a few moments in this book when humor (and sometimes laughter) takes over— and, like the moment in church when Maya cannot control her laughter, this one is caused by something Bailey says. Her brother is one of the great sources of humor in her youth, and here it is funny because Bailey ends up spot-on about the resemblance between their mother and the white actress.

To Maya, it is hilarious to think that the “whitefolks” could “not know” something as shocking as the fact that a black woman (and a non-famous one at that) could look as good as a famous white actress. Humor and interior monologue often give Maya a way break from the way other people see her and her blackness and see things in a radically new way; in this case, the realization isn't so much that black women can be beautiful, but that white people either don't know how beautiful they can be or won't acknowledge it. Put another way, Maya has discovered how white people's own arrogance can make them blind and be a kind of weakness.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly—mostly—let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and lowly...than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis

This is Maya's elaborate way of telling the world she is forced to live in to “go to hell”— a brief moment of ironic distancing from her world as respite from the exhaustion of constantly noticing everything in it. Maya's list of things that whitefolks can keep— money, power, segregation, sarcasm, etc.— combines tangible things with cultural and emotional

realities. By pairing these two types of things, for example segregation and sarcasm, Angelou creates a comic effect while making a real point. She ends on “whiteness,” the thing she least wants white people to give to her.

“Whiteness” refers not only to the color of their skin, but also to the collection of ideas attached by stereotype to the white person— respectability, money, power, and so on. In fact, whiteness in Maya's view is really just the amalgamation of all the things she has already mentioned letting white people keep. Angelou adopts the archaic language of the whitefolks' racist conception of black people (“meek and lowly”) in her own sarcastic turn of phrase. If black people are “meek and lowly,” Angelou concludes in the same Biblical register, white people will “spend eternity frying in the fires of hell.”

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ “It looks like Joe Louis is going down.” 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 the slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 135

### Explanation and Analysis

Joe Louis, one of the most famous and successful black boxers, seems likely to lose the heavyweight championship while everyone listens on the radio in Momma's store. Angelou captures the tragedy of another loss for black society by putting Louis' defeat in the same category as the terrible (and terribly violent) things black people had to live through in the segregated South. All sorts of racial violence, like the violence of Louis' boxing defeat, are evoked here: lynching, ambush, rape, whipping, the chasing of slaves, the abuse of black servants. Louis' loss is a huge disappointment for “my race,” Angelou tells us. It is another invalidation, another form of violence to the spirit.

☝☝ It wouldn't do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis has proved that we were the strongest people in the world.



**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

When Joe Louis finally does win, it is a victory for the black community tainted by the fear that any form of celebration over Louis' win could bring about retaliatory violence in the southern white community. Angelou elucidates some of the symbolism behind Louis' victory, the reason it would have been so devastating— a groan for Angelou's entire race— had Louis lost: his victory was to prove that black people were the strongest in the world. Louis, somehow able to bear the weight of this task, demonstrates at least in Maya's eyes that blackness and success would have to be recognized as compatible by the white community. Admitting this would be scary for a society so bent on proving the inferiority of black people, hence the threat of violence against anyone celebrating Louis' big win.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Edward Donleavy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis



In another adeptly crafted and very funny passage turning cultural assumptions about blackness and womanhood on their heads, Angelou shows us how her racial shame could be triggered at any moment— even a celebratory one, like at her eighth-grade graduation. Mr. Donleavy, the white speaker from Arkansas, encourages the black boys at Maya's school to take as their models Jesse Owens and Joe Louis (Owens was a four-time Olympic gold medalist runner, and Louis a world champion boxer).

Not only is it disappointing that Donleavy mentions nothing of the black girls, but as Maya notices these are not the same role models Donleavy would probably mention at a white graduation. In white culture, we'd expect to hear

about great scientists like Galileo or Madame Curie, or great artists like the painter Gauguin, at most eighth-grade graduations. So Donleavy's intrusion on black Alabama is further marked by his failure to encourage black boys to be anything besides good athletes (which implies his belief that black boys can't hope to have good minds), and his failure to even acknowledge the future possibilities of black girls (implying his belief that black girls have nothing of importance to offer at all).

☝ We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Henry Reed

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 184

### Explanation and Analysis



Having reacted bitterly to the irony of her classmate Henry's "To Be or Not To Be," Maya is— like the rest of the audience at her eighth-grade graduation— pleasantly surprised when Henry sings the Black National Anthem. The scene explodes with singing, like the black church Momma takes Maya to, and this vocalization of her community's unity and solidarity quickly makes them forget Mr. Donleavy's unfortunate speech.

By one-upping Donleavy with song, instead of trying to out-speak him, Henry accesses a plane of connection with his audience utterly inaccessible to the aloof white educator. Maya feels this direct connection strongly, and like her interactions with Mrs. Flowers it makes her proud again to be black. Surviving— getting through the "icy and dark" depths— is impressive, and the struggle of surviving leaves a "bright sun" speaking to their souls.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

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

**Related Characters:** Dr. Lincoln (speaker), Maya Angelou, Momma (Annie Henderson)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 189

**Explanation and Analysis**



The strangeness for Maya of hearing anyone speak to Momma the way Dr. Lincoln does is marked first by the jarring “Annie” he calls her by. It is unfamiliar to Maya, and to the reader who has encountered mostly “Momma” for almost two hundred pages. The “Annie” captures how Dr. Lincoln sees Momma as inferior to him, as someone he has the right to call by her first name.

And then comes the brutal excuse, complete with racist epithet, that Dr. Lincoln offers for not treating Maya’s rotten teeth: he’d rather touch a dog’s mouth than a black person’s. Of course this is hurtful language, for Momma and especially for Maya, but the real tragedy is that this type of speech is culturally sanctioned; and so any white public figure, like a dentist, can openly abuse black people without any consequences, and can do so in “legal” language and refer to their own racism as a kind of “policy.” The black people being abused meanwhile, have to simply take the abuse or risk death for any sort of self-defense.

**Chapter 25 Quotes**

☝ I wouldn’t miss Mrs. Flowers, for she had given me her secret world which called forth a djinn who was to serve me all my life: books.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Mrs. Bertha Flowers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 200



**Explanation and Analysis**

In this crucial passage, Maya registers one of the main reasons she loves books and feels grateful toward Mrs. Flowers for imparting her love of reading. Books, Maya, realizes, can be taken anywhere; they are not dependent on the physical or emotional closeness of anyone else, and offer an indirect but always accessible form of communication between reader and writer. The same is true, in a way, between the different readers of the same book. If Maya reads a book she learned about from Mrs. Flowers, she might feel again like she’s spending time with her black woman role model. It is no simple hobby Mrs. Flowers has shown Maya, but a “secret world which called forth a djinn”— in other words, Mrs. Flowers has given Maya not just a transient human connection, but a lifelong passion and a kind of magic that gives her a new way to sustain herself and engage with the world.

**Chapter 27 Quotes**

☝ The Japanese were not whitefolks...since they didn’t have to be feared, neither did they have to be considered.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 210

**Explanation and Analysis**

In one of the few moments in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* when Angelou analyzes the status of a United States ethnic minority besides black people, we sense that the younger Maya isn’t quite sure how to process a group of people that is neither black nor white, neither *us* nor *them*. Her analysis is interesting because it is fear of other people, in her mind, that warrants consideration of them. One tragedy of Maya’s childhood is that she must always consider things in order to avoid violence, racial or otherwise; so it makes sense, in a way, that she’s not using much energy to consider people she needn’t fear.

**Chapter 28 Quotes**

☝ Miss Kirwin never seemed to notice that I was Black and therefore different.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Mrs. Kirwin

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 216

**Explanation and Analysis**



Maya’s departure from Stamps and arrival in San Francisco mark one of the book’s biggest turning points, and for the reader closely following Maya through her childhood it’s hard not to wonder what her experience will be at her new school—especially given how much of a child’s life takes place at school during her student years. Strangely, in this alien world to the west, Maya’s teacher “never seemed to notice” her skin color, and treats Maya like all of her other students.

One of the unfortunate ironies of this passage is that, as Angelou seems to hint, all students probably should have gotten this sort of equal treatment in the first place. Thus Miss Kirwin’s treatment of Maya is both special and not at all; it is special to Maya, who has never met a teacher like Miss Kirwin, but really it is the bare minimum a teacher could do in an ideal (or even a relatively decent) society.

## Chapter 29 Quotes

☝☝ The Black man, the con man who could act the most stupid, won out every time against the powerful, arrogant white.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker), Daddy Clidell

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 221

### Explanation and Analysis

As we've seen her do before in this book, Angelou turns assumptions about whiteness and blackness on their heads so that they become something of an advantage for black people (who otherwise suffer under these stereotypes). Whether or not Angelou thinks a con man's success is a real victory, the point remains the same: if you're going to label us with this set of identities, we'll find a way to make them work better than yours.

This pertains also to the major victory of Joe Louis earlier in the book; Louis, carrying all the stereotypes of black male violence and bestiality, turns them into boxing glory. With that in mind, note that the black man described in this quotation is only *acting* stupid and that, when it comes to white people, power and arrogance are lined up next to each other as their defining traits. The black con man uses white power and arrogance to benefit himself.

## Chapter 34 Quotes

☝☝ The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste, and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 272

### Explanation and Analysis

There's a standard novel formation called the *bildungsroman* in which a young character (usually a white male) grows up and goes out into the world seeking to do or achieve something. In this passage, and really throughout the book, Angelou makes it clear that in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* she's writing her own "American Negro female" sort of *bildungsroman*. Because the black woman's development of

a "formidable character" is far from the standard narrative promoted by Angelou's society, it is shocking and even "distasteful" to people in more privileged positions.

Yet, as Angelou says, it is the standard narrative, the "inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors." If you can make it through an "American Negro female" youth and early adulthood, Angelou suggests, you're bound to end up formidable. The word "struggle" is one possible summary of what Angelou has written about to this point, but in a sense it is inadequate; so the whole book has, in a way, elucidated this struggle and prepared us for this big statement, one of Angelou's more politically clear pronouncements throughout her book.

## Chapter 36 Quotes

☝☝ I patted my son's body lightly and went back to sleep.

**Related Characters:** Maya Angelou (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 289

### Explanation and Analysis

This is the very last line of the book. It is both a pleasant, life-affirming image to end on, and also something more than that. Maya's soft pat of her son contrasts sharply with the many forms of violence inflicted on her body throughout the novel, from the way Momma beats her for minor infractions to the jarring acts of sexual abuse and rape committed by Mr. Freeman. It is a form of bodily contact that conveys not fear or pain but closeness, kindness, care, and love. It is also a comforting gesture toward her child, of the type we might have wished for Maya as we read our way through her own childhood.

Without being too heavy-handed or at all sentimental, Angelou's last line suggests that Maya— her character and perhaps, at the same time, herself— is at least somewhat settled in her life. She has a son, seems good at taking care of him, and drifts off to sleep, offering a natural close to the novel that tracks her circadian rhythms and reminds us of the daily rhythms of her black community back in Stamps, showing up at Momma's store before spending another day at work in the fields. That Maya is able to sleep, and tells us so, signals that she is relatively comfortable and at ease in this life she describes so vividly. Readers, like Maya herself, can breathe a bit easier for Maya after reliving her struggle with her, and look to the future with hope.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

The prologue tells a story about Marguerite in church on Easter, performing in a play. She is wearing a dress that she'd hoped would make her look like one of the white girls she'd seen in movies. She dreams that one day she will wake up white, and her blackness will have been a curse put on her by a mean fairy stepmother. Marguerite stumbles over her lines and then runs from the church because she has to go to the bathroom. She runs, peeing and crying, back home. The prologue closes with this summation: "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."

*The pressures of traditional femininity and the ideal of whiteness weigh heavily on the mind of our narrator in this opening segment. Marguerite's running toward "home" from the church in this scene is followed by a note about the pain of displacement. Black life is not only dangerous in the south (there is a metaphorical razor threatening the throats of black people); but it is also displaced; where is a southern black person's home? The book will in many ways serve as a lengthy investigation of what displacement means—conceptually, practically—and this prologue begins that discussion.*



## CHAPTER 1

Marguerite and her brother Bailey arrive in Stamps, Arkansas when Marguerite is three and Bailey is four. They'd been sent on the **train** to live with their grandmother after their parents had decided to divorce. Years later, Maya writes, she would discover that millions of Black children had been sent back and forth between the north and the south, looking for the safety of home, and never quite finding it.

*Maya didn't start out in Stamps—she was sent away from her parents as a young child. Though Stamps is Marguerite's home, at least nominally, her very migration to Stamps is an example of displacement. Marguerite is like other "millions of black children" in America because from the start she struggled to find acceptance, permanence, and home.*



Marguerite and Bailey's grandmother, whom they call Momma, has owned a **store** for 25 years. The store is central to black life in Stamps. Everyone does their shopping there, and men come there to rest after long laborious days working in white people's fields. Their tired bodies and beat up hands teach Marguerite about the harshness of being a black man in the south

*The book keeps a keen eye on the effects of gender as well as race—it means something different to be a black man than it does to be a black woman. Black men in this book record a history of violence on their bodies: they endure hard labor, assault, and the threat of lynching. Black women are victimized (as we will see) in other ways.*



## CHAPTER 2

Uncle Willie lives with Momma too—he is a bog man, who was crippled in an accident as a child. In the south, able bodied black men had a difficult time making a life for themselves; Willie is not only black, he is especially dark skinned and crippled, and is victimized by both blacks and whites. Marguerite can only remember one time where Willie, usually sensitive and honest, pretended not to be crippled. Strangers had stopped by the house, and Marguerite noticed Willie in the kitchen, standing behind the counter upright, though this position must have been very painful for him. The strangers asked Willie if he had children, and Marguerite reflects that she'd been willing to pretend to be Willie's daughter. In that moment, when he'd tried so desperately to escape his burden even just for a few minutes, Marguerite felt closer to him than ever before.

During these early years in Stamps, Marguerite “met and fell in love with William Shakespeare.” She feels as though Shakespeare understands her, even though he is white. She rationalizes that Shakespeare has been dead so long his race doesn't matter; she does, however, have to hide her love of Shakespeare from Momma, who wouldn't approve if she found out Maya's literary hero was a white man.

## CHAPTER 3

Marguerite loves the **store**—it is her favorite place to be as a child. She is intelligent, and deft with weighing out quantities and making calculations at the register. In evenings at the store, after a long days work, Uncle Willie doesn't stutter or shake like he does during the day. Marguerite believes those evenings are an assurance that the “covenant God made with children, Negroes and the crippled was still in effect.”

One such evening the sheriff comes to visit them, casually telling them that a black man had “messed with” a white woman today. He, with a condescending kind of benevolence, tells Momma she better hide Willie, because “the boys” would be in town tonight. “The boys” are actually the Ku Klux Klan. Marguerite is filled with loathing for the sheriff, who rides away jauntily as though he has done a good deed. Momma hides Uncle Willie in a bin of onions and potatoes. Marguerite reflects that it is lucky the Klansmen didn't ride to their house that night, for they would have found Uncle Willie and lynched him.

*Uncle Willie represents the way prejudices can converge and complicate a person's life and identity. It is a difficult life for a healthy, able bodied black man in the South. Willie's other features (his dark skin, his handicap) make him a victim at the hands of able-bodied blacks as well as whites. The story about Willie pretending in front of the strangers is a touching articulation of the exhaustion of Willie's burden. It also highlights Marguerite's longing for family, and for a father figure. As a young black girl in the South, she identifies with the desire to live without burden, even for a moment, and this makes her feel connected to Willie.*



*Maya's love of language and poetry starts early—she is not even ten years old before she is reading Shakespeare. The way Maya rationalizes Shakespeare's whiteness indicates how important it is to her (and to her family) to read and learn about black voices. They live in a white person's world.*



*The store is perhaps the closest thing to “home” that Marguerite has. It is a place where people congregate, where Marguerite is capable and comfortable. It even conveys to her a kind of spiritual security—she sees in the store evidence of God's covenant with the meek and downtrodden.*



*The Sheriff's condescending benevolence, and his especially awful habit of calling a murderous group of white supremacists “the boys,” is a painful reminder that Stamps can never really be home. The store has gone from seeming like a kind of sanctuary in the previous chapter to being a shoddy hiding place for Willie, who is apt to be punished for the (rumored) actions of other blacks because he is not only black, but crippled.*



## CHAPTER 4

Bailey, Marguerite's brother, is the "greatest person in her world." Where Marguerite perceives herself to be ugly and awkward, Bailey is a beautiful boy, with velvety black skin that earns him many compliments. Marguerite's playmates often describe her as being "shit color." Bailey protects Marguerite and punishes those who make fun of her looks. Bailey is Marguerite's "kingdom come"—he is an important source of hope and reassurance in a difficult childhood.

Segregation in Stamps is so complete that black children aren't even very aware of the existence of white people. They do know, though, that white people are powerful and dangerous and associated with feelings of dread. Maya can remember not really believing white people were real. She thinks they can't be real—their skin is too white and almost transparent; they walk on their heels "like horses." They are a strange kind of "alien unlife;" they are not folks, they are whitefolks.

## CHAPTER 5

Everyone in Stamps follows certain rules of decorum, except for "powhitetrash" children, who behave in ways that astound Marguerite. They are unkempt and dirty, and they call Uncle Willie by his first name even though he is their elder. One afternoon a group of powhitetrash children comes down the street toward Momma's house. Marguerite is nervous and Momma tells her to go inside the house; Marguerite obeys, but listens and watches from the door.

The children harass Momma, who sings a hymn. They "ape" her—which involves doing a degrading kind of monkey dance. Momma keeps singing. They call her Annie, which makes Marguerite furious. One of the girls does a handstand in her dress, and her skirts come up and expose her nakedness to Momma. They grow bored and say goodbye, and Momma says goodbye to them respectfully, calling them "Miz." Marguerite is furious and doesn't know how Momma could stand to call them "miz" after they did such things to her. But Marguerite can also tell that some battle had taken place, and that Momma had won.

*The color of a Black person's skin doesn't only matter to white people—there is a complex hierarchy present in Marguerite's community based on different kinds of black skin tones. Marguerite feels that, on top of being black, she is the wrong shade of black. Fortunately she has her brother, whom she thinks of as her salvation. Notice how Marguerite uses religious language when describing things outside of the church: her spirituality is important to her, but her religion is non-traditional.*



*By recording her honest thoughts about white people as a child in the segregated south, Angelou offers us a perspective centered on black experience, where white people are "alien" and strange, a reversal of the typical portrayal of minorities as the "strange" outsiders. This perspective is one of the reasons her memoir is so important and unique.*



*"Powhitetrash" (Poor white trash) children do not have the stature or sophistication of many of the black adults in Stamps, but simply because they are white, they still treat blacks as inferior. Though their moniker ("powhitetrash") makes them seem pathetic, they still make Marguerite nervous; their whiteness is a threat.*



*This is a scene about maintaining dignity in the face of overwhelming degradation. Momma endures the racist and dehumanizing behaviors of the children (which happens when Momma is standing on her own front porch) and steadily sings a hymn—she finds refuge in faith and worship. Though Marguerite is furious that Momma treats the children so respectfully, she also understands that, by keeping her composure and remaining polite, Momma has prevailed over the children's racist cruelty.*



## CHAPTER 6

The Reverend often comes to visit Momma at the house, and she always welcomes him, but Marguerite hates him. She doesn't know why exactly—she just hates him in the irrational way that children sometimes hate certain adults. One day in church the Reverend reads from Deuteronomy, and Marguerite is conflicted—she hates the sound of the Reverend's voice, but she loves Deuteronomy; it is her favorite book in the Bible because it lays down the rules most clearly.

There is a woman in church called Sister Monroe who cannot make it to every service, and seems to make up for her absences by shouting harder than anyone. In this particular Sunday she becomes so enraptured by the Reverend's words that she yells at him to "preach it!" over and over, even going so far as to chase him around the pulpit, yelling. Others begin to pursue her to try and restrain her, and the result is all of them taking a big fall off the stage area. Sister Monroe rises calmly and thanks the Lord for she has come to Jesus.

The next Sunday Sister Monroe is back. The ushers set up near her, ready to restrain her again should she become overzealous again. She begins to shout "preach it!" then rises from her seat, evades the ushers, and pursues the Reverend again. Bailey keeps whispering "preach it!" to Marguerite, and she can barely contain her laughter. Sister Monroe finally reaches the Reverend, and in a moment of frenzied passions whacks him over the head with her purse. The Reverend's dentures fall out of his mouth onto the floor. Marguerite cannot contain herself and she and Bailey fall to the floor laughing. Afterwards Uncle Willie gives them the whipping of their lives, and from then on anytime Bailey whispers "preach it!" to her she hits him as hard as she can.

## CHAPTER 7

Marguerite sees Momma as one of the strongest and most powerful people in Stamps. She was the only black woman in the town's history ever called "Mrs." by a white person, though it was a mistake; a judge read her name as a witness in a petty crime that took place near the store; he didn't know she was black, and when he realized his mistake he laughed. But the blacks in town believed this event was a testament to Momma's greatness.

*Marguerite is disdainful of the church—we have already seen that her faith is non-traditional. But her love of Deuteronomy is telling; Marguerite wants to know the rules. She wants to understand what she must do in order to make it to heaven. This desire for belonging, for knowledge and comfort in her surroundings, shows how eager she is to feel accepted somewhere.*



*Sister Monroe is a rare source of humor and levity in a very difficult story. The humor here also highlights that Angelou—though raised in a staunchly religious community like Stamps—has a sense of humor about religion. She understands its importance to her community, but she also is capable of taking it lightly.*



*Having a sense of humor about religious worship was not well received in Stamps. Sister Monroe's behavior lends itself to a hilarious scene. It is perfectly understandable that Marguerite should laugh after witnessing her antics. But her uncontrollable laughter leads to a brutal punishment. The lesson Marguerite learns is that it is unsafe to think funny thoughts about church—she hits Bailey every time he tries to make her laugh about the incident. Childhood traumas like these are always compounded by Marguerite's race. She is not only young and struggling with the rules, like every other child: she is also black and struggling to survive.*



*Though Momma is a highly accomplished businesswoman and upstanding citizen, calling her "Mrs." is a laughable error to the white judge. It is a very serious matter to black residents in Stamps, however, for the respect of a white person (even if inadvertent or erroneous) is rare, and cause for celebration.*



## CHAPTER 8

One of the main differences between blacks and whites in Stamps regards how each group elects to spend money. Marguerite perceives whites to live grotesquely lavish lives—blacks do not tend to spend money on readymade (i.e. not homemade) clothes even if they could afford them. Momma is a prime example of this—she is so frugal and diligent that she manages to keep the **store** open throughout the Great Depression.

One Christmas Marguerite and Bailey receive Christmas gifts from their mother and father. The gifts confuse them, because they have not heard from their parents in so long. Both Marguerite and Bailey cry—the gifts make them wonder all over again why their parents sent them away on the **train** when they were so young.

*From Angelou's perspective as a black person, the behavior of white people seems errant and irresponsible. Momma's success even during the Depression is a testament to her enormous dedication and determination. She manages to endure in Stamps not only in spite of racist violence and segregation, but also in spite of the severe economic downturn.*



*Typically a gift from one's parents would be cause for happiness and celebration. But for Maya and Bailey it's a reminder of their displacement. They are only left wondering why they were sent away as children.*



## CHAPTER 9

One year later, when Marguerite is seven years old, Daddy Bailey comes to town. He is a huge, exceptionally handsome man with a great sense of humor. He tells Bailey and Marguerite he will take them to St. Louis to stay with their mother. Marguerite is apprehensive, but Bailey clearly worships his father and is excited to go. Marguerite thinks it's possible their father is delivering them to hell.

When they finally arrive and see their mother, Vivien, the children are blown away. She is light skinned ("butter colored") and wears lipstick. Marguerite thinks she is too beautiful to be a mother, and Marguerite bitterly notes that she is too ugly to be the daughter of a woman like that. Shortly after dropping them off, Big Bailey leaves St. Louis to go to California.

*Marguerite's fear of being relocated is understandable. She has worked hard to try and feel at home in Stamps, and the idea of moving again frightens her. Like the millions of other black children mentioned earlier in the book, she travels between cities, trying to find a safe and accepting place.*



*The children's mother is beautiful—but her beauty makes Marguerite feel isolated. Her dark skin and her unfeminine appearance make her feel like she cannot belong to her mother. Her feeling of displacement and unworthiness comes from complicated cultural hierarchies regarding skin color and gender norms.*



## CHAPTER 10

The children are struck by the fact that the schools in St. Louis are full of relatively uneducated children. Marguerite and Bailey knew how to count because of their work on the register, and they both spent much of their free time reading, so they were well ahead of their classmates.

One of their mother's brothers tells Marguerite one day that it doesn't matter if she isn't pretty, because she is smart. He says intelligence is always better than prettiness.

*Despite all of the turbulence in her life, Marguerite is a good student. This is evidence of her innate passion for language and learning. She never finds studying difficult, because she enjoys it.*



*Marguerite's investment in her education results in part from her insecurity about her appearance. She is driven to expand her knowledge and intellect as if to "make up for" her ugliness.*





Their mother has a live-in boyfriend named Mr. Freeman. He is fat and ugly and seems to understand he is lucky to have a woman like Vivien (their mother) in his life. He longs for her when she is gone and his eyes follow her throughout the house when she is home.

*Marguerite's first impression of Mr. Freeman is that he is "too ugly" for her mother. Recall that Marguerite also thinks this about herself—this is perhaps one of the reasons she will seek out affection from Mr. Freeman later in the book*



## CHAPTER 11

Marguerite begins sleeping in her mother's bed because of nightmares. One morning she wakes up after her mother has left, and feels a pressure in her back. She has a dim understanding that Mr. Freeman is pressing his penis into her, but doesn't know if this is wrong or not. Then Mr. Freeman puts his hands between her legs, and she remembers Momma told her to keep her legs closed, and feels guilty. Mr. Freeman asks Marguerite to touch him and then masturbates while she lies on his chest. Afterwards he holds her gently, and Marguerite is so happy for the affection; she feels that she has found the father she was meant to have.

*Marguerite's first assault is fraught with a complex and confusing power dynamic. Marguerite knows very little about sex; she only knows that as a girl she is obligated to keep her legs closed. Marguerite's lack of a solid home and family life makes her misinterpret Mr. Freeman's abuse. Though Mr. Freeman is at fault, his abuse makes Marguerite feel guilty. In an example of tragic irony, she considers his actions to be normal, even fatherly.*



Soon she becomes very confused again, however. Mr. Freeman accuses her of wetting the bed. Then he tells her that if she ever tells anyone what just happened, he will kill Bailey. Marguerite is frightened, and struggles to understand but agrees to keep the incident a secret from Bailey.

*Marguerite doesn't understand that Mr. Freeman's abuse is a vast breach of trust and an abuse of power. Why would he want to keep it a secret, she wonders? But the threat against Bailey is enough to convince her to obey—Mr. Freeman is abusing Marguerite's dependence on her family.*



After a while Marguerite becomes lonesome, and longs to be held gently again. One evening she sits on Mr. Freeman's lap. He moves against her for a short while then abruptly stands up to go to the bathroom. After that he doesn't speak to her or even look at her for a long time.

*Marguerite feels lonely and abandoned after the initial abuse—she longs for affection and contact and she seeks it out from the one person she believes has provided it to her. Though her impulse is understandable and innocent, Marguerite will feel guilty about it later.*



Marguerite starts to spend more and more time at the library—books are a refuge for her. She wishes often that she had been born a boy, because only boys get to be heroes in the stories she reads.

*Language and literature provide an escape for Marguerite. Yet prejudice and inequality follow her here, too—because she does not see women represented in stories, she wishes she were a boy.*



## CHAPTER 12

One afternoon when Vivien and Bailey are out for the day, Mr. Freeman calls Marguerite over to him. She resists—she has found happiness in the library and doesn't feel she needs him to hold her anymore. He insists, and when she goes over to him, he becomes rough. He tells her if she screams he will kill her. He demands that she pull down her underwear and then he rapes her. The pain is excruciating. Marguerite blacks out. She wakes up and Mr. Freeman is washing her in the bathtub and his hands are shaking, and he tells her he didn't mean to hurt her. He reminds her again it must be a secret.

Marguerite wanders to the library but finds the seats are too hard and painful for her to sit on. She goes home and goes to bed. Mother returns and makes Marguerite soup, believing her to have come down with some virus. Mr. Freeman threatens Marguerite again as she is lying in bed. Later that night Marguerite hears her mother and Mr. Freeman fighting. A few days later, Mother says she needs to change Marguerite's linens. When they strip the bed, Marguerite's bloody underwear is exposed. Her mother rushes Marguerite to the hospital.

## CHAPTER 13

In the hospital Marguerite says if she tells who attacked her, Bailey will be killed. Bailey tells Marguerite no one can kill him, and Marguerite trusts him enough to tell him that Mr. Freeman was the one that hurt her. Soon after, Mr. Freeman is arrested. Marguerite is called upon to testify in the trial, and the questions from Mr. Freeman's attorney are aggressive and harsh. Marguerite lies and says that Mr. Freeman never touched her before the rape—she is too ashamed of the fact that she felt comforted by him holding her. She hates Mr. Freeman even more for making her lie.

Mr. Freeman is sentenced to one year in prison, but before his sentence even starts he is found beaten to death outside town. It is likely that Vivien's brothers killed him. Meanwhile, Vivien also decides that Marguerite and Bailey would be better off in Stamps. Marguerite becomes withdrawn and sullen, and believes she is to blame for the fact that her mother has again decided to send her and Bailey away.

*Marguerite is raped at the age of 8 by a man she considered a father figure. The rape is incestuous, violent, and physically and emotionally traumatic. Note how careful Angelou is to record Mr. Freeman's response to the rape. Marguerite's sense of guilt is even coded into the language with which she describes her rape; she cannot ignore Mr. Freeman's fear and his pathetic apology. She seems to focus on his emotional response to the rape, not her own.*



*Marguerite tries to go on living as she usually does by going to the library. But the rape has created another kind of displacement: she can't find comfort anywhere. The fact that it takes several days for her mother to discover what happened shows how alienated Marguerite is from her family.*



*Shame and guilt make Marguerite misrepresent Mr. Freeman's abuse. Her religious upbringing has distorted her understanding of the heinous crime she has endured. The hatred she feels all the more strongly now toward Mr. Freeman shows how the abuse continues to harm Maya long after it occurs.*



*Mr. Freeman's death does not put an end to Marguerite's struggle. This time Marguerite blames her sullenness, not her ugliness, for making her mother send her away. She is not a cheerful enough daughter, and has (in her mind) failed to meet her mother's expectations.*



## CHAPTER 14

Momma and Willie treat Marguerite gently upon her return from St. Louis. She wanders about Stamps almost in a daze. People believe her to be “tender hearted”—they don’t forgive her for her sullenness, but they understand it.

*“Tender hearted” is a loaded description. In this case, the phrase is a subtle critique of Marguerite’s response to her rape: she’s being too sensitive. The phrase is simultaneously understanding and cruelly critical.*



## CHAPTER 15

After a difficult year, in which Marguerite becomes more and more withdrawn, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a neighbor whom Marguerite has always admired, asks to see her. Marguerite walks with Mrs. Flowers to her house, where she has tea and cookies. Mrs. Flowers reads to Marguerite from [A Tale of Two Cities](#). Maya remembers this as the moment she heard poetry for the first time. Mrs. Flowers gives her books of poems and teaches her how to read, understand, and memorize them. Marguerite feels that for the first time in her life she is liked—not because she is related to Bailey or Momma, but just because she is herself.

*Marguerite finally finds a place where she can feel comfortable in her own skin. Here she is not defined by her familial relations, her race, her gender, or even her age. Mrs. Flowers respects and cultivates Marguerite’s intellect, and introduces her to poetry, a gift that will change Maya’s life for the better in a tremendous way.*



After this visit, Marguerite comes home and tells Bailey all about it. Then she says “By the way,” and tells Bailey Mrs. Flowers sent him some cookies. Momma comes into the room in a rage and whips Marguerite. Marguerite is utterly confused and doesn’t understand why she is being punished. She learns later that “By the way” is a shortened form of “By the way of God” and is therefore taking the Lord’s name in vain.

*This scene describes the complicated relationship that Marguerite has with religion. Religion for her is in many ways a system of mysterious rules and confusing punishments. Though it brings some peace and stability to the lives of many adults in Stamps, for her religion is a source of fear and chaos.*



## CHAPTER 16

Momma decides that Marguerite should learn refined manners, and therefore sends Marguerite to work as a servant in a rich white woman’s house. The white woman insists on calling her Margaret, and then says that, actually, she prefers the name Mary. This makes Marguerite angry, and she exacts revenge by dropping a huge casserole dish on the floor right in front of the woman. This story is a source of endless entertainment and enjoyment for Marguerite and Bailey.

*Here we see one of Marguerite’s first acts of defiance against racial inequality. Later, Marguerite will find more ways to resist and subvert racial hierarchies, such as by becoming the first black streetcar employee in San Francisco.*



## CHAPTER 17

One day, Bailey, who has become more surly and unhappy after being sent away from his mother yet again, doesn't come back from the movies before sun down. Maya, as narrator of the memoir, explains that to be the caretaker of a black boy in the South means that you must always fear the worst if your boy doesn't return home on time. Momma and Marguerite walk down to the end of the lane to wait for Bailey. After an agonizingly long time, Bailey arrives, unapologetic and sullen. Marguerite is confused and wishes her brother would show contrition for making them worry. That night Willie whips Bailey for what seems to Marguerite like an eternity, but Bailey doesn't cry.

Later Bailey explains to Marguerite that he'd seen Mother at the movies—a white actress that looked exactly like Vivien was in the movie he watched, and he couldn't resist staying and watching it a second time. He says he will take Marguerite back to the movies and show her. Two months later the actress is in another movie playing in town, and Marguerite is astonished at how striking the resemblance is. She thinks with satisfaction how mad white people would be if they knew their white movie star looked exactly like a black woman. On the way home Bailey tries to jump on a passing freight **train** so he can ride it to St. Louis and be with his mother.

*Bailey's adolescent self-indulgence and rebellion is normal—he is a young boy who is upset about the apparent loss of his mother. But because Bailey is black, his simple mistake of missing his curfew raises other implications. Black men in the South were in a unique kind of danger—villainized and demonized by white society, they could be lynched at any moment. When Maya has her own son later, she also worries deeply about his safety and vulnerability in society.*



*This is a striking articulation of the displacement Bailey feels—he must remember and feel close to his mother by watching a white movie star who bears a superficial resemblance to her. Once again, home and community are made unavailable, and whiteness finds its way into the center of Bailey's life, simultaneously seducing him and excluding him. Bailey is not in control of his own destiny. It seems he can only ride the train when he is asked to by someone else.*



## CHAPTER 18

The family—Momma, Bailey, Marguerite, and Uncle Willy—attends a revivalist meeting—no one ever misses the revivalist meeting, and every congregation is represented. The preacher's sermon is about how the meek and the poor and the downtrodden will make it to heaven. It is a thinly veiled criticism of white affluence, and an affirmation that after many years of suffering black people will at last be rewarded in the afterlife. Marguerite can see the satisfaction and delight on the worshipers' faces—they take so much comfort in knowing that white people would one day get their comeuppance. "They basked in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden." Marguerite can see them thinking "let them have their whiteness" for they know that it is better to be poor and downtrodden in this life than to burn in hell for eternity. The chapter ends with Maya wondering "how long" until black people in America find justice and peace.

*Angelou's description of the worshipers contains a note of criticism—their fervor seems like zealotry, and their solution (to wait for deliverance in the afterlife) seems somehow lacking. The meeting fosters "righteousness and exclusiveness"—but only because they live in a world where they are victimized by the righteousness and exclusiveness of institutionalized racism. Their faith, even if it is not the best solution, in many ways seems like the only solution available to this generation of black southerners.*



## CHAPTER 19

Every black person in town is gathered in Momma's **store** to listen to the radio coverage of Joe Louis's fight. Joe Louis is a black boxer who is one match away from being heavyweight champion. They follow the fight with their hearts and souls—they groan when Joe is hit, they cheer when Joe succeeds. Finally Joe is crowned champion, and there is unrestrained rejoicing and revelry. But those who live far away from the store must find accommodations nearby for the night—because it would be dangerous to be a black person walking alone in the dark on the night Joe Louis beat a white man to become the heavyweight champion of the world.

*Note how even a triumph in the black community is tainted by fear and racism: the revelers cannot walk home because Joe Louis's victory brings with it the threat of danger and violence.*



## CHAPTER 20

The summer picnic is one of the most well attended community events of the year. However, during it, Marguerite grows weary of the crowds of children, and goes into a small grove of trees to find peace and privacy. There she is joined by Louise Kendricks. At first Marguerite is irked at the disturbance but soon discovers that Louise is thoughtful and honest and willing to play with her. They play a dizzying game together where they both spin and look up at the sky. It makes them both laugh hysterically, and Marguerite knows she has made her first friend.

*Marguerite's "first friend" is Louise, who impresses Marguerite with her honesty and playfulness. Marguerite begins to build a semblance of a normal social life. This scene of innocent child's play reminds us that throughout all that she has endured, Marguerite is still just a young girl.*



That winter, Marguerite receives a love note from Tommy Valdon, who is asking her to be his valentine. Marguerite decides she must ask Louise about this—Louise explains that it is a love note, and asks Marguerite if she loves Tommy. The word love reminds Marguerite of Mr. Freeman and she says she does not love Tommy. Together she and Louise tear up the note and let the pieces blow away in the wind.

*Note the contrast between the subject matter of this scene—Marguerite's assault, guilt, and shame—and the innocent playfulness of the previous scene. Marguerite's experiences have distorted her perspective on love: a heartfelt love note reminds her of her rapist.*



Two days later Marguerite receives another note from Tommy. He says he'd seen her tearing up his last note, and doesn't believe she meant to hurt him. He still wants her to be his valentine. Marguerite is reassured by his patience and his undemanding tone. She becomes enamored of him, and cannot keep from giggling anytime she sees him.

*Tommy shows Marguerite that real love should not include fear or violence. Marguerite's crush on Tommy shows her resilience and her ability to still feel affection for others despite the emotional and physical pain she has endured.*



## CHAPTER 21

Bailey, an adolescent now, begins “playing house” with other girls around his age (11 years old) in a makeshift tent in the backyard. During these sessions, he brings a girl into the tent, instructs Marguerite to keep watch, and then imitates sex with the girl. It is innocent enough—neither of them removes their clothes and Bailey simply wiggles his hips on top of theirs. One day he invites a new girl, Joyce, into his tent, and she tells him he is doing it wrong. Marguerite tries to stop them, for she knows what Joyce intends and doesn’t want Bailey to go through that, but Joyce sends Marguerite away.

Later Bailey proudly tells Marguerite that Joyce has hair between her legs and under her arms because of how many boys she’d been with. Joyce is four years older than Bailey, and it becomes clear that she is Bailey’s first love. She hangs around for a few months, then suddenly disappears. She runs away with a much older man. Bailey is clearly heartbroken, but won’t talk about it to Marguerite or anyone else.

*Bailey, too, is beginning to experiment with sex, romance, and affection. He has never had sex before, and clearly does not fully understand how sex works. Marguerite is not made uncomfortable until she overhears Joyce trying to have actual intercourse with Bailey. Having been raped as a child, Marguerite knows the pain that forced sex entails and wants to save her brother from an experience that she believes will be traumatic.*



*Bailey’s introduction to sex and romance is another example of displacement: he falls for a slightly older and more experienced girl who leaves him to be with a much older man. This hurts Bailey especially deeply because, as a black boy, he knows all too well the pain of leaving and being left.*



## CHAPTER 22

One stormy night an old neighbor, George Taylor, comes to visit the house. George’s wife, Mrs. Taylor, died about six months ago. Momma offers her condolences to him, and remarks offhand that it’s a pity they never had children. This causes George to go into a kind of shock. He then launches into a ghostly story about how, recently, in the middle of the night an angel in the form of a baby appeared to him, and his wife’s voice came to his ears, demanding children.

Marguerite hates ghost stories and desperately wishes Mr. Taylor would stop talking. She remembers Mrs. Taylor’s funeral as the day she realized that she, too, would die one day. When Mr. Taylor finishes his story about the angel and the ghostly voice, Momma has a slightly amused look on her face. That night Marguerite crawls into bed with her, knowing that Momma is strong enough to fight away evil spirits.

*Marriage, sex, and reproduction are again rendered in a fearful light, this time by Mr. Taylor. The terrifying “angel” story is another example of how something that should be a joyful expression of love—having a baby—is depicted as frightful and disturbing by the adults in Marguerite’s world.*



*Here we see Marguerite take comfort in Momma’s courage—she sees that her grandmother is not scared and will protect her from evil spirits. We know that Momma has already protected Marguerite from much more imminent dangers, most obviously from Mr. Freeman’s repeated sexual assaults.*



## CHAPTER 23

Marguerite is graduating from the eighth grade. It is a very special occasion, and she enjoys that she is able to have her moment. She wears a gorgeous yellow dress handmade by Momma and feels pretty and important. She is deeply excited for the ceremony—on the morning of her graduation she is overcome with gratitude to God for allowing her to live to see this day.

*Marguerite’s graduation presents her with a much-needed opportunity for affirmation and congratulations. Her thanking God shows her spirituality, but also her vulnerability: she has lived in such a state of fear and danger that she thought she might die before making it past eighth grade.*



The ceremony does not go as planned, however—the students sing the national anthem, then the pledge of allegiance, then, though they are supposed to conclude the opening songs with the Black National Anthem (“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing”), the principal tells them to have a seat. It is announced that Mr. Edward Donleavy, a white man who is somehow affiliated with the educational board in Arkansas (Maya is sure he was brought in to make the white school better, and appears at her school as an afterthought) will be giving the commencement address.

Mr. Donleavy begins a condescending speech wherein he encourages boys to dream of becoming Joe Louis or Jesse Owens but says nothing of academic achievement or of possibilities for girls. As Maya Angelou describes it: “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madam Curies,” but black children could only hope to become athletes if they were boys—and the girls were completely disregarded by Mr. Donleavy. Marguerite, along with much of the rest of the crowd, falls into a dismayed silence as they realize that their brains are worth nothing in this world. Their scholarly accomplishments are a farce. She feels exposed and dismayed. She feels she has no control over her life.

Next the valedictorian of Marguerite’s class, a boy named Henry, speaks. He delivers a carefully prepared speech called “To Be or Not To Be” and Marguerite bitterly notes the irony—for Black people cannot “be” in this world at all. But as Henry finishes his speech, he surprises everyone by launching into the Black National Anthem. The voices of everyone in the audience rise to join his, and Marguerite feels proud and hopeful once again. “We were on top again. As always, again. We survived.”

## CHAPTER 24

Marguerite’s love for sweets has finally taken its toll—she has two horrible cavities and the pain is excruciating. It becomes clear that she needs to see a dentist. She walks with Momma to the white part of town, and works hard to maintain a dignified appearance and not cry once they cross out of the black area. Momma walks Marguerite to the back of a dentist’s office and knocks on the back door, asking to see Dr. Lincoln.

*The white man’s speech is yet another example of displacement: a song celebrating black culture and unity is replaced with the unwanted presence of a white speaker. Once again, we see the dominant role whites play in Marguerite’s world of the South.*



*As if Mr. Donleavy’s presence wasn’t enough of an affront to the black community, on top of that, he launches into a speech that claims—to a group of black middle school graduates—that blacks cannot be successful at school. His speech promotes the racist status quo: blacks are allowed some notoriety if they are male athletes, but otherwise cannot hope to achieve any kind of greatness. The entire audience can detect the condescension, and Marguerite feels once again the vulnerability of racist oppression: the white man at the podium is telling her what she can and can’t do.*



*Though the boy’s speech about decision-making and controlling your own destiny is undermined by Mr. Donleavy’s condescending words, his decision to sing the Anthem—to reclaim what Mr. Donleavy took from them—revives Marguerite and the rest of the audience. Displacement and oppression inspire resistance and resilience.*



*Marguerite endures physical pain of cavities and the deeper emotional pain of racism: because she is a black person in a white part of town, she must enter through the back door, yet another example of humiliating and unfair racist oppression that Marguerite encounters in her everyday life.*



Dr. Lincoln emerges. Momma explains that Marguerite has two rotten teeth and needs them pulled by a dentist. Dr. Lincoln, choosing his words carefully and calling Momma “Annie,” says he has a policy and “won’t treat colored people.” Momma politely asks him to reconsider. She reminds him that she loaned him money before, and did so without hesitation. He snaps back that he paid back that money, and he will stick to his policy. Momma tries again, saying that Marguerite is only little, and in a great deal of pain. But this time Dr. Lincoln says belligerently: “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s.” He turns his back and goes inside without ever once looking at Marguerite.

*This scene, one of the most poignant and heartbreaking in the book, shows just how cruel and inhumane the racists in Stamps could be. Dr. Lincoln thinks Momma is obliged to do him favors, but doesn’t consider returning her favors. He won’t even look at Marguerite—this child and her toothache are so beneath him that he will not even glance in Marguerite’s direction. His hateful proclamation that he would rather treat a dog than a black child is literally dehumanizing.*



Momma and Marguerite catch a Greyhound to Texarkana where they can see a dentist for blacks. Momma is especially nice to Marguerite, and rubs her back and allows her to have ice cream, which is unusual. Marguerite thinks her Momma has been strong and impressive, and is full of love for her.

*Marguerite admires her grandmother’s resilience and loves her all the more for it.*



## CHAPTER 25

One day Momma tells the children it is time for them to move to California. Marguerite is fairly certain this decision came about because of an incident involving Bailey. He had been walking home from the movies and had noticed the body of a Black man being dragged out of a lake. A white man watching the scene ordered Bailey to help carry the body to the police station. The man had laughed mercilessly at Bailey’s discomfort, and said threatening things to him. Bailey was clearly scarred by the incident, and Momma knew that Arkansas was not a safe place for a black boy to grow up.

*Once again, systemic violence and racism drive Marguerite and Bailey away from home. Bailey’s treatment at the hands of the white man indicates to Momma that Bailey has reached an age where it is no longer safe to be black and male in the South. The implication is clear that Bailey could be the next body dragged from the lake if he stays in Stamps—and Momma knows they must again move away. Home and the feeling of belonging remain elusive.*



Momma has to organize the transportation. She will ride with Marguerite on the **train** about a month ahead of Bailey, so as to spread out the cost of the tickets. Marguerite knows she will miss Bailey, and all of her friends in Stamps. The only person she won’t miss is Mrs. Flowers, who had given her a gift that would not be affected by distance: books.

*Marguerite handles this relocation better than any thus far, in large part because of what Mrs. Flowers taught her: that there is refuge in literature and that stories and poetry can accompany and comfort her anywhere. Books become the only semblance of “home” that Marguerite has.*



## CHAPTER 26

Momma and Marguerite and Bailey live in Los Angeles together while the children adjust to life in California. Looking back, Maya can see how remarkable it was that her grandmother adjusted to living in LA, which was so different and so far away from the place she was used to. Eventually it is time for Momma to leave, and she hands the children over to their mother and takes the **train** back to Arkansas.

*Another example of Momma’s strength and resilience in the face of displacement. Having lived in Arkansas her entire life, Momma must have found LA to be like a foreign country. But she handled the feeling of being out of place so capably that Maya doesn’t even realize, as a child, the kind of challenge Momma was facing.*





Bailey and Marguerite drive to San Francisco with their mother (Vivien). They live in a dingy Oakland apartment. One night Mother wakes Marguerite up at two in the morning—this makes Marguerite nervous, but when she sees Bailey is up too, and smiling, she relaxes. Her mother tells them they’ve been invited to a party and serves them chocolate and biscuits. Their mother’s laugh is infectious and they grow to love her even more. Yet for all her gaiety and silliness she was also tough and uncompromising—Marguerite admires her for her strength.

*Marguerite’s mother is an example of an entirely different variety of strength—as a black woman, Vivien has also presumably had to endure a lifetime of injustice and abuse. The levity and determined positivity that she shows in this scene, we can imagine, has carried her through hard times in the same way that Momma’s practicality and resilience have helped her survive.*



Marguerite hears that America has declared war on Japan when she is walking home from the movies. She is frightened and runs all the way home, where she is comforted. Not long after this, Mother marries Daddy Clidell, who will be the first father Marguerite has ever known.

*With the start of WWII, the pace of the story shifts. Maya has moved out of the South, into a big city with her mother, in a more politically and socially progressive state. After this point, the events in Maya’s life are recorded at an almost rapid-fire pace.*



## CHAPTER 27

As World War II rages and the United States battles Japan, the Asian population in San Francisco dwindles before everyone’s eyes. Asian parts of town are evacuated, and they become predominantly black areas. Though we might expect the black community in America to have a special kind of empathy for other oppressed people, like Japanese-Americans, that was not the case. Asian people were not white people, and since they “didn’t have to be feared, neither did they have to be considered.”

*Here Angelou explains the lack of camaraderie and support between disenfranchised racial and ethnic minorities in America. Because black Americans are consumed with their own struggle, and their own fear of white people, they disregard the plight of Japanese Americans.*



Blacks continued to be discriminated against in San Francisco, though the city considered itself very egalitarian and progressive. Animosity between white people and black people “festered” in San Francisco—Maya says she saw it on the streetcars and on the sidewalks. White people assumed black people were lazy draft dodgers; and Black people were still defending themselves from white aggression.

*Though racism is not as overt as it is in the South (because San Francisco residents consider themselves progressive) racism “festers” here—a word that evokes a kind of disease or infection. In the South racism is in the open—here it is disguised.*



## CHAPTER 28

Marguerite attends an integrated high school, where she is one of only three black students. Here she meets Mrs. Kirwin, a highly intelligent and caring white educator who has a great influence on Marguerite—she doesn’t treat Marguerite as though she is different from anyone else, even though Marguerite is from the south and is black. Marguerite performs well and gets a scholarship to California Labor School, a progressive high school program designed for especially talented and motivated students in economics and the arts. She continues to excel in her regular classes, and elects to take drama and dance classes in the evening, fulfilling her love for spoken poetry and performance.

*Mrs. Kirwin is one of Marguerite’s first white mentors. She is a dedicated educator who doesn’t coddle or spoil Marguerite; she simply treats her as equal to the other (white) students. Mrs. Kirwin is another vital figure in Marguerite’s intellectual and literary career. Marguerite’s success allows her to attend a progressive integrated high school program—an especially unusual opportunity for a black female student in that time.*



## CHAPTER 29

Daddy Clidell is a wily con artist who uses white people's prejudice against them. He teaches Marguerite how to play cards and tells her stories of how he and his associates play the fool, and manipulate the bigoted expectations of rich white men in order to con them out of their money. Though they are con artists, Marguerite cannot see them as criminals—in fact she is proud of them. They provide her with a certain kind of education that is different from the one she gets at school, where she is taught how to speak and act in a way that will impress white people.

*Daddy Clidell (and Marguerite's love and admiration for him) indicate that Marguerite's interest in active resistance to white superiority has changed since she dropped the white woman's casserole dish as a child. She is now "proud" of her stepfather's resistance to bigotry. The positive implications of resistance outweigh the negative implications of criminality. This is perhaps one of the reasons Marguerite considers Daddy Clidell to be a father figure.*



## CHAPTER 30

Marguerite goes to visit Daddy Bailey in southern California, where she meets his live-in girlfriend Dolores Stockland. Dolores is very well postured, and acts as though she is richer and better than everyone around her. Dolores and Marguerite do not get along; Dolores thinks Marguerite is too tall and improper and arrogant, and Marguerite thinks Dolores is stiff and pretentious.

*Once again tension arises between Marguerite and one of her parent's love interests. It's only natural that Marguerite would resent Dolores's behavior—recall that one of her first feelings of resentment toward white people is based on their lavish lifestyles. That Dolores thinks Marguerite "arrogant" suggests that Marguerite's confidence has grown.*



One night Marguerite goes with her father to a fiesta across the border in Mexico with several of his Spanish-speaking Mexican friends. Marguerite can speak some Spanish but it is clumsy. At the party she loses sight of her father and becomes panicked, believing he has left her, and worrying she has been drugged. She is relieved when she sees his car is still parked outside. She wonders why she had been so afraid of Mexicans.

*Marguerite has associated racial divisions with fear for so long, and lived with a very rational fear of white people, that she develops an irrational fear of Mexican people. Her ability to recognize her own prejudice shows that she is capable of introspection and critical thinking regarding race—something many white characters in the book fail to do.*



When she locates her father, he is too drunk to drive, and she must figure out how to get him home. She has never driven a car before but she has watched her mother drive. She triumphantly drives the car, feeling on top of the world, until she crashes into another vehicle. At first the police officers are suspicious of Marguerite, but when they understand the situation, are sympathetic. During the commotion Big Bailey comes to, and charms them both out of trouble. He drives them home in a strangely peaceful silence.

*This is a kind of familial role-reversal. Marguerite has been a child for the entire book, and she is finally called upon to look after her father—she is notably in control here; she is the caretaker, and her father is helpless. The car crash makes her newfound power fleeting, however. The peace following the incident could be a result of Marguerite and Big Bailey taking comfort in the fact that they've returned to the original power structure.*



## CHAPTER 31

That night, Marguerite feels bad for Dolores when she comes home. Dolores had waited all night for Big Bailey, but he hardly paid her any attention when he finally did return. They fought, and Marguerite overhears Dolores say that Marguerite has come between her and Big Bailey. Marguerite decides to talk to Dolores. She apologizes for coming between Dolores and Big Bailey. Dolores accuses her of eavesdropping. The argument escalates until Dolores ends up calling Vivien a whore, which sends Marguerite into a rage. She slaps her and tackles Dolores. They wrestle for a while, until Marguerite throws Dolores off of her and leaves the house.

Marguerite is bleeding from her side, and when her father sees her, she explains (with some satisfaction) that Dolores cut her. He takes her to the house of a friend who sews her up. But Marguerite becomes convinced that she might have ruined her father's life—he would be humiliated if news got out that his lady had cut up his daughter. She recalls Mr. Freeman and feels guilt well up in her. She decides to run away.

*It is important to keep in mind all of the times that Marguerite has been forced to stand idly by when her family has been insulted: Momma at the dentist, the incident with the “powhitetrash” children, the threatening of her brother Bailey. Here Marguerite can finally stand up for her family, and it is perhaps not surprising that she does so with so much anger. This scene demonstrates how constant and systemic oppression can foster rage and violence.*



*Though Marguerite is by no means to blame for her injury (remember, she is only about 15 years old), she feels she is responsible for the incident in the same way she felt responsible for Mr. Freeman's abuse. Though Marguerite has much more confidence now, her guilt from being abused still weighs heavily on her mind.*



## CHAPTER 32

Maya (who begins to identify herself as such—this new name comes from a nickname Bailey gave her; she was “Mya sister”) sleeps in a car in a junkyard, and wakes up to find several other curious boys and girls about her age (14 or 15) watching her. They agree to accept her into their group as long as she follows their rules (which stipulate that no people of the opposite sex are allowed to sleep together.) Marguerite lives for a month in the yard, where she learns to drive and dance. She feels at home with her peers for the first time, and develops a real tolerance for difference that she hadn't had before. After her wound is healed, she calls her mother and returns to her. When she sees her she knows her mother is a fine lady, and that Dolores is a liar.

*Maya takes refuge in her childhood nickname when she feels the most alienated from her family she's ever felt. Her attempt to avoid going home to her mother with a scar shows the depth of her guilt. Though Marguerite knows what it's like to be victimized for being different, she has not experienced much difference herself. She believes her month spent in the Junkyard changes this—she met, knew, and understood people who had lived dramatically different lives than hers, a vital experience for any young writer or artist.*



## CHAPTER 33

Bailey and his mother's relationship has become fraught and contentious. They push each other's buttons and drive each other away only to apologize and reestablish good relations and restart the whole process. Maya knows that eventually Bailey will leave, and one night she overhears a great fight during which Bailey says he has had enough of living with his mother and needs to move away. Though Maya and Bailey have grown apart, before he leaves he tells her she can have his books—a touching gesture that saddens Maya.

*Bailey was once the very center of Maya's universe; now, she is able to accept and understand his leaving. That Bailey leaves Maya his books demonstrates his love and understanding of her—he knows that, absent other comforts, Maya has always been someone who can find a refuge in books. His departing gesture affirms that.*



Bailey moves to a motel. After a while, Maya goes to visit Bailey in his dingy motel room to offer him support. He insists he is doing fine, and begs her not to worry about him. She leaves when she realizes they've said all they can say.

*This is the last time we see Maya and Bailey speak to one another. It is a sorrowful departure, but not a bitter one—Maya is no longer dependent on Bailey.*



## CHAPTER 34

Maya decides that she can't stay at home all day with nothing to do over winter vacation. She wants to get a job. She becomes determined to be a streetcar conductor, even though no black person has ever worked on the streetcar before. She set her sights on this work, however, and tells intelligent lies to her interviewers about her past experience. She is granted a job as the first black person ever hired on the San Francisco streetcars.

*Here we see Maya's strongest resistance to racial discrimination and segregation. She does not play by the rules (she lies) because the rules have never allowed her to play at all. Her success is a testament to her intellectual maturity and her determination in the face of obstacles.*



When Maya's high school classes resume in the spring at California Labor School, Maya becomes disenchanted with education—she feels she has nothing in common with her classmates; that her strange experiences have set her apart and made her “aware.” Maya believes she knows more about the way the world works than they do. She cannot tolerate the frivolity of student life. Maya reflects that the emergence of strong and defiant Black American Women is often met with disdain or discomfort or surprise. But she believes it is the inevitable outcome of a long and difficult struggle, and should be treated with respect, if not enthusiastic acceptance.

*Maya retrospectively identifies herself as a “strong black woman.” She notes that defiance in black women is often met with fear and frustration, but Angelou's story has shown that defiance in black women is inevitable—their struggle naturally makes them defiant. Maya has grown from an insecure black child in the South to an intellectual black woman blazing trails in a northern city in California—her defiance has been an integral part of her growth.*



## CHAPTER 35

Maya, as it typical of a teenage girl, becomes interested in sex and sexuality. One night she confesses to her mother—with great difficulty—that she believes something is “growing” on her vagina. She explains what she's noticed, and her mother sits her down and has her read about female anatomy in the encyclopedia. Maya is deeply relieved to realize she has been experiencing normal sexual maturation—she confides in her mother that she thought she was becoming a lesbian. This makes Mother laugh, but not in a mean way. Marguerite feels relieved and comforted.

*Though Maya has broadened her horizons recently she still knows a strikingly small amount about sex, sexuality, and femininity. She thinks “lesbianism” is some kind of disease one develops over time, and she is frightened by her own sexual maturation. Recall that Momma instilled feelings of shame in Maya regarding her womanhood. Vivien counteracts this teaching by approaching sex with honesty, openness, and even some levity.*



However, some weeks later, Maya has a friend sleep over and catches sight of her breasts while she is changing. She feels moved in some way by the sight of it, and worries again that she is attracted to women. She decides she needs to have sex with a man, and propositions a boy who lives down the street. He agrees, and they have awkward, unromantic intercourse. Maya doesn't feel different afterwards, and still questions her own sexuality. Three weeks later, however, things do change: Maya discovers she is pregnant.

*Maya is still frightened of being sexually different—which is understandable, given how race and gender have ostracized her before. She views lesbianism as yet another thing that could result in her victimization, and though she clearly doesn't really understand what the word means, she sets about trying to “correct” it by having sex with a male neighbor. Maya's fear of what she considers “lesbianism” results from her lifelong struggle with racial and sexual oppression.*



## CHAPTER 36

Maya hides her pregnancy from everyone, though she avoids lying outright about it. Though her body is changing, her mother asks her no questions, seemingly unaware of Maya's more feminine figure. Maya suddenly finds school to be a comforting refuge again, and digs back in to her studies. After about six months, Marguerite receives her secondary school diploma in a high school gymnasium, and when she returns home tells her mother and Daddy Clidell that she is pregnant.

*Maya's life begins changing at an even faster pace. Faced with a new struggle (pregnancy) she once again returns to books to help cope. Note how different this graduation ceremony is from Maya's last one in eighth grade. Since Maya is now an expectant mother, she is looking towards the future and is determined to succeed.*



Vivien and Daddy Clidell respond capably—they assure her everything is going to be okay, and buy her maternity clothes. Three months later, after a rather easy labor, Maya's son is born. She is terrified to touch him, afraid she will hurt him. After about three weeks, Vivien brings the baby into Maya's bedroom and says he will sleep with her. Maya begs her not to—she is sure she will crush him or hurt him. But the baby falls asleep peacefully at Maya's side, and Maya sleeps without injuring him. Vivien wakes her to point out how they are lying together safely. Vivien says “if you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking.” Maya pats her son's small, sleeping body and falls back asleep.

*Bailey's experiences in Stamps taught Maya how dangerous it can be to be a black male in America, especially in the South. Now the mother of a black male, Maya treats her son as if he's unusually vulnerable and fragile. Maya's son's birth and her peaceful nap at his side are signs of progress and hope: Maya has begun to overcome the fear, oppression, and victimization of her past. She joins the other successful maternal figures in this book (Momma, Vivien) in approaching her new life with determination and courage.*





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