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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Maya Angelou's

## **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Rhonda Carwell



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Genre

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a coming-of-age, autobiographical novel. Due to extensive fictionalization of some events and characters, it does not fit solidly in the genre of autobiography. Maya Angelou has woven her early life story with poetic descriptions that capture the young voice which tells the tale, but she also offers the adult perspective of the writer reminiscing about her life. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* offers solid character descriptions, a well defined plot, and is told in a voice that belongs solidly to a woman who has survived racism, abandonment, displacement, and numerous other hardships in her life. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* encompasses the first sixteen years of Maya Angelou's life. The rest of her tale spans five volumes following this first award-winning novel.

## Feminist Theory Applied to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

## Activity One

### Exploring the Positive and Negative Influences of Male and Female Characters

1. Copy and distribute handout: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: Feminist Activity One Worksheet.
2. Divide the class into six groups or a number of groups divisible by six.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following characters:
  - Bailey, Jr.
  - Bailey, Sr.
  - Vivian (Mother Dear)
  - Momma
  - Mrs. Flowers
  - Mr. Freeman
4. Have students complete the worksheet, using the novel to provide examples for each of the given categories.
5. Reconvene the class and discuss the following:
  - Which characters play more of a role in Maya's character development: male or female? Why?
  - Which characters impact her positively and negatively at the same time?
6. As a class, discuss which characters are believable or not and in what ways. How would all of the above change if the story were told by Bailey, Jr.?

## Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



2. Reference to a literary work is made in order to establish an understanding of the mind of the author. For example, judging by Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one might reasonably conclude that Harper Lee herself was sympathetic to the plight of black Americans.
3. Studying the literary work of an author is a means of knowing the author as a person. The more novels by Charles Dickens one reads, the more one can infer about the author's beliefs, values, hopes, fears, etc.
4. An artist may put his or her repressed desires on the page in the form of actions performed by characters. Pay attention to behaviors that are not socially "normal" to see if there is any evidence of the id at work. For example, an author who consistently writes stories in which his female characters are weak, dependent, or unintelligent might be expressing latent misogynist tendencies. Likewise, a female author might express her latent misandry through weak, blatantly evil, or thoroughly inconsequential male characters. ■

## Formalist Approach Applied to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



### Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



## Activity One

### Discovering the Relative Importance of Various Characters

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Formalist Activity One Worksheet.
2. Divide the class into groups of four or five students each.
3. Review the worksheet with students and then have groups examine the book and complete the information requested.
4. Reconvene the class, and allow each group to report its findings. Discuss the correlation (if any) of a character's importance and the number of times he or she appears in the novel.