

EDUCATION AND COMING OF AGE

“A Cave and A Cage”

Jenn Stolle

When you're little, Band-Aids make everything better. They seem to make a mosquito bite itch less, a cut bleed less, and a bruise bruise less. As we grow older, we come to realize that perhaps it isn't the Band-Aid performing magic; it is our mind. The brain is our most powerful and mysterious instrument. Knowledge is acquired throughout life through both schooling and experience, a process which, according to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," is difficult but more than worthwhile. Maya Angelou's coming of age in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings supports many of Plato's theories and exemplifies a character-building childhood.

The circumstances into and with which we are born are often the dictators of how we originally perceive the world. Plato says that we all begin in a state of ignorance, falsely defining shadows on a wall to be everything that is real. Maya Angelou begins life with rejection as both of her parents abandon her. She is also convinced at a young age that she is ugly, something that yanks her self-esteem toward the dirt for the majority of her adolescence. She describes herself as "a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space

between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (Angelou 2). These pre-existing thoughts and emotions act as a lens through which Maya observes the world. In the beginning of her story, Maya sees only a shadow of herself, believing it is all there is to see, and calls it ugly. Shadows of her parents are cold, unloving, and practically invisible. To her they are more ideas than people. The shadow of the world is negative. The only good she can define is within the shadow of her brother, Bailey. He is her joy, safety, and love. The backdrop of Maya’s wall of perception is painted with her surroundings, which change as she moves from place to place, restarting in a new town with a new family, new churches with new hypocrites, a new school, and new friends or lack thereof, a new Maya.

School is a concentration of education, and it helps to bring us to a better understanding of the world. It is necessary to eliminate the ignorance that locks our eyes on illusory things. Teachers are often the light-givers that pull us out of Plato’s cave and into what is real. Maya is enlightened through the schools she attends. She finds joy in reading and broadens her imagination.

“When spring came to St. Louis, I took out my first library card . . . I spent most of my Saturdays at the library (no interruptions) breathing in the world of penniless shoeshine boys . . . the little princesses who were mistaken for maids, and the long-lost children

mistaken for waifs, became more real to me than our house, our mother, our school or Mr. Freeman”
(Angelou 64).

Maya discovers that she can become completely lost in a book. As one of four African American students, she was one of the first to attend an integrated Californian high school, where she begins to more fully understand the difference in White and Black education. Having initially been taught in an all Black school, she had always been at the top of her class. Her love of reading and willingness to learn helped her to achieve all she could within her boundaries. Within the integrated school system, she is no longer the brightest, and she continues to understand that African American children are deprived of the same quality of education offered to children of lighter skin. However, she is grateful for the opportunity to learn more, and this desire leads her to discover the “light” of knowledge to which Plato refers.

However, learning is not always painless. We are originally reluctant to learn. Plato explains the light as blinding, and we desire to turn back into the cave where we can be comforted by what we think we know. Much of what Maya learns is difficult to accept or understand, so naturally, she is reluctant to acknowledge it. An African American childhood in the 1930s and 40s is occupied with discrimination and racism.

“Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy

nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later.' Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light" (Angelou 14).

Maya is exposed to the cruelties of the KKK at an early age, and the presence and threat of this devilish force is very real in her life. Maya watches the cotton pickers work twelve hour days only to grow deeper in dept. Experiencing something as detrimental as rape, especially at such a young age, Maya is introduced to the idea that not all adults are trustworthy. Reality is even harsher when her rapist is found dead. She feels guilt, remorse, and confusion. Angelou is aware of the limits society puts upon her from an early age. She is not expected, and in fact discouraged to become anything but a servant to the rich and pale. When she visits a dentist, he refuses to help her, claiming her status lower than a dog's. These kinds of harsh realities are difficult to accept, and thus are like the blinding light of knowledge. To be brought into reality is to be presented to an imperfect world.

Once the eyes have adjusted to the newness of the sun's light, one is able to see all the beautiful things that knowledge has to offer. As Maya embraces the world around her, comes to a newfound liking of herself, and unearths pride in her background, she is embracing the sun's light. Dancing

becomes Maya's pastime, and she finally does not feel self-conscious of her looks. In fact, she sees herself as being beautiful and graceful. At the age of fifteen, she becomes the first Black streetcar conductor. She feels delighted and dignified to be a member of the African American race as Joe Louis wins the first heavyweight championship. She begins to learn that there is more than just White and Black. In California, Maya commences to discover other nationalities. "Through food we learned that there were other people in the world" (Angelou 175). By eating egg rolls, lasagna, tacos, and schpetzle, she was able to come to see that the world is rich with diversity, and diversity is lovely. Maya also begins to discover her sexuality, and although she irresponsibly becomes pregnant at sixteen, she finds further happiness within herself as she becomes confident of her ability to be a mother. She sends a song out to the world, and therefore escapes her cage.

Plato's cave is similar to Maya's cage. The cave is where we begin, bound to a false reality, wearing blinders, and fixed on illusion. Maya's life begins in a cage. She is apparently fated to remain trapped, as the people in the cave.

"But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage
can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens
his throat to sing."

(Maya Angelou).

The world's expectations and limitations are the shears with which the caged bird's wings are clipped. Singing is a form of escape. Just as the ignorant people of the cave are brought out into the sun, the caged bird sings. To sing a beautiful song is to make a beautiful life, and appreciate the true light.

“The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.”

It is important to go back and free others from the cave, to open other's caged doors and teach them to sing. Everyone has the right to knowledge, and learning makes us free.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. NY: Bantau, 1969, 1993.

Plato. The Republic of Plato. *The Allegory of the Cave*. 1968, 1991.

Questions for discussion: While Jenn argues along with Plato that education is a coming to the light, where do you see her writing “coming to the light”? In other words, do you think there are places in this paper that were painful for her to discover? Why or why not? To what extent has this paper been an “education” for her, as she and Plato have defined it?