

Maya Angelou: Finding a Voice through her Complex Vision of Self and Shakespeare

by Lisa Giberson

In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou creates a complex model of self by enlisting her love of literature, especially the literature of William Shakespeare, to assist her in constructing a culturally unique model of self. Angelou creates this alternate identity that is rooted in literature to see herself as separate and unique from the racially biased society in which she lives. Angelou joins this isolated vision of self together with her identity that is linked to her ethnicity to form a complex vision of self that enables her to find a voice in a racially oppressive society. Once Angelou is able to view herself as an isolated individual, both removed from and connected to the collective identity of the black community, she is able to overcome the forces in her life that threaten to silence her. In finding her voice Angelou is able to put forth this complex model of self in her autobiography.

Angelou's story begins in the early 1930's when she is sent by her parents at age three, along with her four-year-old brother Bailey, to live with her paternal grandmother, Momma, in Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, the young Angelou, known as Marguerite Johnson, develops her love of literature and learning. The tale chronicles Angelou's experiences growing up in the racially segregated South and then follows her reunion with her beautiful light skinned mother, Vivian, in St. Louis. While living in St. Louis, the eight-year old Angelou is raped by

Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend. The rape, criminal trial and consequent murder of the rapist result in Angelou's silence for over a year. During this self-imposed silence she returns to Stamps and her relationship with a neighbor, who shares Angelou's love of literature, helps bring her out of her silence. Several years later Angelou returns to live with her mother, this time in California. While living in California, Angelou visits her father and encounters more violence when her father's girlfriend stabs Maya in a jealous rage. Angelou hides out with a band of runaway youths for a brief yet influential period. When she returns home to Vivian, Angelou becomes the first black female cable car conductor in San Francisco. Angelou ends her story at the age of sixteen with her graduation from high school immediately followed by the birth of her son.

As the young Marguerite Johnson, Angelou creates an identity both connected to and separate from the black community of Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou constructs a world in which, through her separate identity, she is able to view herself as unique and special. The theory of a separate or "isolated" identity is put forth by Georges Gusdorf in his essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" and examined in its relationship to women by Susan Stanford Friedman in her article, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice". According to Friedman: "For Gusdorf, the consciousness of self upon which autobiography is premised is the sense of 'isolated being,' a belief in the self as a discrete, finite 'unit' of society" (94). Gusdorf's theory is that an "isolated" identity is what enables an autobiographer to view their life as unique and worth writing about. Friedman goes on to quote Gusdorf as stating that autobiography cannot happen "[where] the individual does not oppose himself to all others [...]" (93). By removing oneself from the collective group, this

leads to a self-conscious awareness that provides the individual with the landscape necessary for autobiography. Gusdorf's theory was written with the Western European male as its paradigm, therefore Friedman takes Gusdorf's idea and turns it around to encompass women:

A slight alteration of his statement will serve the purposes of reversal: Autobiography is possible when 'the individual does not feel [herself] to exist outside of others and still less against others, but very much [with] others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community...' (95).

Friedman sees Gusdorf's theory as being complicated by the concept of a woman autobiographer and since according to Friedman women, unlike men, are connected to the community they do not need to see themselves as an "isolated" individual in order to write. Angelou as a black woman is connected to and dependent upon her community, but as a victim of the racial inequality in Stamps she must also form an identity that is "isolated" in order to view herself in a positive light. Angelou's complex model of self incorporates both the "isolated" identity of Gusdorf along with the "interdependent" identity of Friedman.

Angelou creates an "isolated" identity that is imaginary in order to endure the injustice she feels as a young black girl in the South. During her early years living in Stamps, Angelou is confronted with the racial inequality that prevailed in the South in the 1930's. Angelou often witnessed her grandmother, a property owner and storekeeper, struck powerless in the presence of "whitefolks". Angelou while proud of her grandmother is also very aware of her grandmother's lower status in society. Angelou tells us early in the memoir that she

wishes to be white, different from the black girl-child she sees reflected back at her. Angelou writes:

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light blue eyes were going to hypnotize them [...] Then they would understand why I never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil (2-3).

The nightmare of her "black ugly dream" inspires Angelou to create an identity that is separate and individual from the black people around her. In order to break free from the constraints of racial inequality in the black community, Angelou uses her imagination and creates a world in which she fits the vision of perfection that the white world surrounding her community projects. In her dream she is white with blond hair and blue eyes and Angelou sees being white as her chance to be special and different from everyone around her. Angelou wants to be like the dominant white society that she sees surrounding her black culture. She wants to feel empowered and proud of her identity, just as the white majority she wishes to emulate. Angelou changes the things about herself that she can, such as her speech and education. Despite the fact that many of the people in her black community are lacking in education, she places a priority on education and speaks in the manner of the white community. Unfortunately, she can not change who she is, so even though she dreams of being white and speaks as if she is, when she looks around her she sees the same powerless

black faces as her own reflected back. This identity struggle leads to Angelou's creation of a dream world where she is the white heroine and by identifying with the white community she feels empowered.

Angelou's use of an alternate identity is a result of the image of her black community that she sees reflected back at her. Angelou's view of her immediate world is tainted by the racial disparity that is always present. Angelou is unhappy with the image of her black community because she sees herself and the black community through the eyes of the prevailing white culture. In her article Friedman highlights the theory of W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote in "The Souls of Black Folk":

The Negro ... is gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self - consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the type of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness (qtd. in Friedman: 95-96).

Du Bois is saying that it is impossible for a member of a minority to not see oneself in the way that the dominant white culture views them. As a member of a racially oppressed society the black man or woman is forced or "gifted" a view of themselves through the eyes of those who control his or her world. This "double consciousness" occurs when one is forced to view the self as it is defined by the controlling culture and because of this there is always a sense of "twoness". Angelou is influenced by the vision of the white world that surrounds Stamps, and she looks at her own community as inadequate and therefore the people within that community as inadequate as

well. Stamps and Angelou lack powerful black role models to identify with. Angelou is proud of her strong grandmother, but she recognizes that in the white world her grandmother's power is diminished. In order to view herself in a positive light Angelou must create an identity that is different from the oppressed black world in which she resides. She must be able to see herself as separate and unique.

In Angelou's autobiography she searches for a way to portray her ethnic and racial roots along with the isolated and unique vision of self that she has formed. Angelou cannot separate herself entirely from the black community. She brings her self that is connected to the black community together with her isolated self. In Michael M.J. Fischer's article, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory", he writes, "[...] the ethnic search is a mirror of the bifocality that has always been a part of the anthropological rationale: seeing others against a background of ourselves, and ourselves against a background of others" (6). Fisher's "bifocality" is the experience that one has as a minority in search of an identity representative of one's ethnicity and individuality. The autobiographer must be able to recognize the differences and similarities between the prevailing, segregating culture and the underlying ethnicity. Angelou sees herself not only as a member of the black community but also as an individual isolated from that community. She may appear to be black but she does not speak in the black vernacular of Stamps and she sees past the limited existence offered to her by the black community. Despite the imaginary world that Angelou has created she is acutely aware that she is a member of the oppressed society. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (Angelou 4). It is bad enough to

grow up in a society where you are categorized as inferior, but to be conscious of the lack of opportunity for you to move beyond this limited scope makes it almost impossible to endure. Angelou looks for a way to see past the image of ethnicity that is projected back at her, therefore she creates an imaginary identity where she is white and therefore powerful. This alter ego allows her to think she has opportunities and makes the insults possible for Angelou to endure.

Maya Angelou develops another facet to her imaginary world at a very young age; her love of literature and Shakespeare help her to escape the ugliness of reality. It is this love and consequent identification with Shakespeare that allows Angelou to find her voice in the racially segregated town of Stamps. Angelou finds a way to look past the oppression experienced by her family and the other black families in Stamps by creating a "dual consciousness". Angelou develops a world where she identifies with the writing and the characters of literature. This new consciousness affords Angelou an identity that is removed from the racial inequality of the South. By burying herself in books Angelou can escape the reality of her existence. This "dual consciousness" is a concept in "Woman's Consciousness, Man's World", by feminist theorist Sheila Rowbotham and outlined in Susan Stanford Freidman's article:

...cultural representations of women lead not only to women's alienation, but also to the potential for a new consciousness of self (26-46) . Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription (95).

Friedman interprets Rowbotham, saying that women (and this would apply to other minorities as well), not seeing themselves in the prevailing culture that surrounds them, must create a "dual consciousness" that incorporates the self connected to their group identity and the self that is separate and unique from the group. Rowbotham's theory of "dual consciousness" complicates and parallels that of Du Bois' "twoness", because a woman or a member of a minority must see themselves also through the eyes of the oppressors, this can inspire them to create a separate identity apart from the group. When the prevailing culture places a group identity on women or minorities, not seeing themselves in the group can result in the creation of a different and "isolated identity" which affords them a new "consciousness". Angelou uses literature to create this separate identity. Her consciousness that is linked to literature can provide her with the power and opportunity that she does not have as a black minority in Stamps. Creating a world within her books provides Angelou a new isolated vision of herself. Angelou's "dual consciousness" frees her from the limited collective identity of the black community.

Angelou enlists her love of literature and Shakespeare to form her new consciousness and to free her from the oppressed society that holds her down. Literature provides Angelou with a more diverse view of the world, including her own ethnicity. Angelou is able to read and be influenced by the literature written by and about blacks outside of Stamps along with the classic white literature. Angelou writes:

During these years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James

Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois' 'Litany at Atlanta.' But it was Shakespeare who said, 'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes.' It was a state with which I felt myself most familiar (13-14).

Unable to express herself in her own bailiwick, Angelou finds refuge and validation in the world of literature. Angelou is able through literature to find black voices and role models unavailable to her in Stamps. Angelou is loyal and passionate about the literature of the authors of the Harlem Renaissance period, however she most identifies with Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, because what he writes mirrors how she feels as a young black girl in Stamps. Wishing to be "white" with long blonde hair and blue eyes isolates her from the rest of the black community and she feels "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes". Her "dual consciousness" is reflected in her choice of literature. Angelou is connected to the literature of the black authors, however Shakespeare lends a voice to the ideas that Angelou is unable to express. Shakespeare is the part of her identity that she has isolated from her cultural roots, the desire to be "white" and all that being "white" entails. The voice she finds in literature and especially Shakespeare is what forms the basis of her "isolated" identity.

This "isolated" identity is heightened when she returns to Stamps, in a self-imposed silence, after living for a short time in St. Louis with her mother. Experiencing the trauma of being raped at the age of eight, Angelou finds solace in the world of silence. According to Angelou:

I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet

around me. I walked into rooms where people were laughing, their voices hitting the walls like stones, and I simply stood still- in the midst of the riot of sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds (87-88).

Angelou writes of her silence as if it were a way for her to gain verbal control. By not speaking it allowed her a better opportunity to listen and perhaps to hear something previously unattainable. When she was silent she felt as if she "had eaten up all the sounds", this made her silence powerful and afforded her a control that the eight-year old Marguerite lacked. Angelou's silence was a new "consciousness" that provided her with a way to deal with her rape and her inability to control her own life.

Angelou's silence is critical to the development of her identity. According to Richard Teleky, of York University, in his article "'Entering the Silence': Voice, Ethnicity, and the Pedagogy of Creative Writing": "Writers live poised between the power of silence and the power of language. Silence is essential not only to the writing process itself but to the process of building an identity as a writer. In a quite literal sense, claiming and transforming silence is a crucial aspect of finding a voice" (207). Teleky is saying that to form an identity, a writer must begin with silence and then find a way to reclaim and change the voice. For a writer, silence can be just as powerful as language. Angelou's silence is her way of dealing with the rape and certainly it reflects the inability of the black community to speak out against the injustices they endure. However, Angelou must find a way to take back her voice after the rape and in so doing find an identity separate from the helplessness of the black community.

Angelou's relationship with a neighbor in Stamps helps further develop her love of literature and at the same time draws Marguerite out of her silence. Angelou's grandmother encourages the young and silent Angelou to form a relationship with a neighbor, Bertha Flowers, who shares Angelou's love of literature. When describing Mrs. Flowers, Angelou writes, "Mrs Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat of Black Stamps. She had the grace to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her...She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town" (93). Mrs. Flowers affords the young Marguerite an image of a black woman she was unaccustomed to seeing in Stamps. Mrs. Flowers was able to exude grace and control under any circumstances. According to Mary Vermillion, in her essay, "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings":

Angelou [...] is not content to let the mute, sexually abused, wishing-to-be-white Maya represent the black female body in her text. Instead she begins to reembody Maya by critiquing her admiration for white literary discourse. An early point at which Angelou foregrounds this critique is in Maya's meeting with Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Presenting this older black woman as the direct opposite of young Maya, Angelou stresses that Flowers magnificently rules both her words and her body (162).

Vermillion is portraying Mrs. Flowers as the opposite of the young Maya and therefore a critique on her wishing to be white and her love of white literary discourse. Vermillion is correct that Mrs. Flowers provides Angelou with a strong black female image, however it is Mrs. Flowers connection to the "white"

world that attracts Angelou. It is Angelou's penchant for white literature that is her way of giving a voice to her silence and life back to her identity that has been crushed by sexual abuse and racial oppression. The young Maya is unable to control her body or what happens to her, but Mrs. Flowers controls her body and her words. Mrs. Flowers is unlike any of the other black women in *Stamps*, she speaks and carries herself as if she were "white". Angelou identifies with the unique Mrs. Flowers and basks in her attention. What they share is a love of literature that allows Angelou to open up. Angelou writes of her attraction to Mrs. Flowers:

She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roaring fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets. Women who walked over the 'heath' and read morocco-bound books and had two last names divided by a hyphen. It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself (95).

Mrs. Flowers reminds Angelou of the "white" characters in English novels. Characters that lead interesting and romantic lives. Her associating Mrs. Flowers with these characters enables Angelou to envision a different sort of life than is presented in *Stamps* and at the same time a black role model in Mrs. Flowers. Mrs. Flowers presents an image of romance that is different and more powerful than the rest of the black community. Young Marguerite sees Mrs. Flowers as having control of her own destiny. Angelou makes the association that by controlling her words she like Mrs. Flowers can also have control of her own body. Through Angelou's connection to

Mrs. Flowers and the literature they share she is able to control and find her voice again as well as provide herself with a positive image within the black community.

The fact that literature helped Angelou find a voice, which enables her to create an isolated self, is further evidenced in how she deals, in her autobiography, with the issue of her rape. Vermillion writes, "A study of a woman's written record of her own rape can illustrate the dual consciousness which Susan Stanford Friedman identifies as a primary characteristic of female life-writing" (153). Vermillion goes on to say that, "Angelou's most complex and subtle examination of Maya's attachment to white literary discourse occurs when she lists as one of her accomplishments the memorization of Shakespeare's "The Rape Of Lucrece" [...] I believe, Angelou's reference to Lucrece subtly indicates that Maya's propensity for the verbal and the literary leads her to ignore her own corporeality" (163). Vermillion is saying that how a woman writes about her own rape can also show how that woman creates another consciousness that enables her to write about the rape in a detached manner. In the case of Angelou, Vermillion sees Angelou's reference to Lucrece as a way of removing her body from the actual act of the rape. Angelou, by identifying with Shakespeare's Lucrece is able to examine the rape as an outsider rather than the victim.

Choosing Shakespeare's Lucrece is Angelou's way of transforming her voice and building an identity. According to Christine Froula, associate professor of English at Yale University, in her article, "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History", "[f]itting her voice to Shakespeare's words, she [Angelou] writes safe limits around the exclamations of her wounded tongue and in this way is able to reenter the cultural text that her words had formerly disrupted".

(60) Froula is making a connection between Angelou's use of Shakespeare and the claiming and transformation of her voice. Froula's theory parallels and further enhances that of Richard Teleky. Teleky's assertion that writers use the power of silence as a way to reclaim and transform that silence is echoed in Froula's idea of Angelou using Shakespeare to guard her "wounded tongue" and enable her to reclaim her voice within her own cultural identity.

The choice of Lucrece is also important to Angelou's creation of an individual consciousness within the black community, because Shakespeare's poem is full of references to the whiteness and purity of Lucrece contrasted by the dark and tainted rapist, Tarquin. Angelou's reference to Lucrece, is again a way of identifying with the white literary world rather than the oppressed black culture that surrounds her. According to Arthur L. Little, Jr., author of Shakespeare: Jungle Fever, "[t]he classical Lucrece, a template for representing and narratively situating the early modern raped woman, participates in an 'ethnographic allegory,' the scrutinizing and allegorizing of Other cultures as a way of writing about one's own; in addition to being a writing about cultural Others, [...] ethnographic allegory represents the culture of an Other as a way of redeeming or chastising the self" (4). Little is stating that the raped woman, Lucrece in this case, represents the white culture and her rape by a "cultural Other" is a way for the white culture to redeem itself. Little goes on to say that:

[...] the issue of rape, which, even when committed by someone from within the community, is often ascribed to a racial Other - a stranger, someone from outside the community. In early modern drama the black man frequently stands in this place, at least the symbolic place, of

the rapist. Western imperialism has forged and continues to forge natural racial and gender bonds between the black male and rape (4).

Little is commenting on the propensity of the Western world to attribute the rapist with the qualities of a racial other, and most often a black man. Angelou memorizes "The Rape of Lucrece" in order to create a way to rationalize what happened to her. Angelou wishes to see herself as the pure, white, and chaste Lucrece. Angelou, by referencing "The Rape of Lucrece" is redeeming and chastising herself along with creating a new consciousness by identifying with Lucrece. Despite the fact that she was raped by a black man from her own community, Angelou by identifying with Lucrece has complicated Shakespeare's intent and created her own "ethnographic allegory" which allows her to redeem herself and see herself as the victim of a "cultural Other". By reciting Shakespeare's poem she is able to give voice to her own pain as a victim of the white culture that surrounds her.

In conclusion, Maya Angelou through her love of literature and Shakespeare creates a "dual consciousness" which enables her to construct a unique vision of self that is both isolated and connected to the black community. This identity Angelou forms also lends a voice to her autobiography. As a writer she enlists silence to find and transform her own voice. Living in a racially oppressed black community and being the victim of a rape at a young age threaten to silence her, but Angelou finds her voice in the white literary discourse she admires. In Shakespeare's "Lucrece", Angelou is able to form an "ethnographic allegory" that allows her to redeem her voice and her identity thus enabling her to put forth a complex model of self.

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