I Know Why The Cage Birds Sing Essay, Research Paper

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I know Why the Caged Bird Sings

1) Setting ?I?:

- Stamps, Arkansas, in a black ghetto neighborhood where Maya lives with her grandmother and paralyzed uncle

- St. Louis, San Francisco, a junkyard, and Southern California; A brief incident takes place across the border in Mexico

- starting from 1930?s to mid-late 1900?s, she was born in 1928

2) Character ?I? 1: Primary Characters

- Maya? a black girl with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth; the narrator of the book; the novels based on her growing up.

- Bailey Johnson (Junior) – Maya?s older brother and a major person her life; he gives her advice, he?s good looking, intelligent, and mischievous; he loves his mother.

- Momma Henderson – Maya?s grandmother, she owns a black general store in Stamps; Maya and Bailey come to live with her when their parents get a divorce; Momma is the only black female entrepreneur in town. She is devoted to her religion.

- Vivian “Bibbie” Baxter – Maya and Bailey?s mother; a beautiful, smart, and willful lady; She is a trained nurse, but also makes a lot of money playing poker games in gambling parlors.

- Daddy Bailey – Maya and Bailey?s father; he is a vain, selfish,

and conceited man, who is not a good father.

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3) Character ?I? 2: Secondary Characters

- Grandmother Baxter – the children?s nearly white grandmother; she is a precinct leader

- Grandfather Baxter – dies a few years after Maya returns to Stamps

- Uncle Willie – Maya and Bailey?s uncle; he lives with Momma

Henderson; paralyzed since he was three

- Dolores Stockland – Daddy Bailey?s girlfriend; she is jealous of Maya and attacks her

- Mrs. Bertha Flowers – Momma?s sophisticated friend who helps Maya

find confidence through books

- Mr. Freeman – a past boyfriend of Vivian?s; he rapes Maya and is killed by her uncles

- Tom, Tutti, Ira & Billy – Vivian?s brothers; they are tough; they beat Freeman to death after he rapes Maya

- Daddy Clidell – married to Vivian; poorly educated property owner; Maya?s closest father head figure

- Viola Cullinan – Maya?s first employer, a barren white woman; her husband has two children with a black mistress; Maya hates her because she changes her name just for her convenience

- Joyce – seduces Bailey and breaks his heart by running away with a railway porter

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- Tommy Valdon – Maya?s first admirer

- Louise Kendricks – Maya?s first real friend

- Bootsie -leader of the junkyard community which Maya is a part of after running away

4) Conflict ?I? 1

Human vs. Society

As a child, Maya had to live with her grandmother because of her parents divorce. After a long period of not hearing from her parents she neglects the fact that they even live. When they come back in her life, she doesn?t get along with them. Because of this she never really feels accepted by anyone.

5) Conflict ?I? 2

Human vs. Herself

As Maya grew in age she suffered a lot of emotional damage due to her opposing views and unfortunate events while she was growing up. She was abandoned by her parents, raped at the age of eight by her mother?s boyfriend, living during a war, and being a black girl.

6) Plot ?I? 1

- Maya and Bailey are sent to live with their grandmother Annie Henderson and her son Willie in Stamps, Arkansas.

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- Momma Henderson sold lunches to the cotton laborers before they began their grueling work to be underpaid. People who stereotyped the cotton pickers as being happy and cheerful always enraged Maya.

- While black men had a very difficult time supporting themselves, Willie was paralyzed He tired to hide his handicap in front of two strangers, when Maya saw this it made her feel closer to him.

- The white former sheriff Mr. Stewart came to warn Momma that some white people were enraged because a black man messed with a white woman. Momma hid Willie in the potato and onion bins because they might take their anger out on him, luckily that was not the case.

- While Maya was insulted for her appearance, Bailey was always complimented. Bailey always protected her from the offending person.

- Three poor white children mocked came into Momma?s store and mocked her stance and gestures. One of the older girls did a handstand and showed that she wore no underwear. Momma did nothing but hum. Maya realized that she had done a good thing.

- Reverend Howard Thomas visits Stamps every three months and stays with Momma on Saturdays and delivers a sermon on Sunday. Maya and Bailey don?t like him because he eats better than them at dinner.

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- Sister Monroe got overexcited in church and ruined Reverend Taylor’s suit while shouting “Preach it.” Maya and Bailey found it hilarious until Willie gave them a whipping.

- On Christmas, Maya and Bailey’s parents sent them presents. The children went outside to cry, wondering why they were sent away. Momma thought they were being ungrateful. Later they destroyed the blond, blue- eye China doll their mother sent her.

- Big Bailey, the children’s father visited Stamps. Maya was surprised how big he was, how handsome he was, him owning a car, and how he spoke like a white. He drove them to St. Louis to see their mother, Vivian. She seemed depressed. Her beauty surprised Maya too. Bailey resembled her in physical beauty and personality and is able to talk to his father well. He left three days later but Maya was not to upset because he was like a stranger.

- Grandmother Baxter was like a white person. Germans raised her. St. Louis was in the prime of Prohibition. Bailey and Maya met underground organized crime figures. Grandmother Baxter entertained these men.

- Vivian’s brothers had city jobs and had a bad reputation. They fought both whites and black. Bailey and Maya lived with their grandparents for six months before moving in with Vivian and her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman.

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7) Plot ?I? 2

- Vivian worked in a gambling parlor. Mr. Freeman always waited for her to come home at night. One day after Vivian had left the house, Mr. Freeman molested Maya. He threatened to kill Bailey if she told anyone. He avoided her for weeks before he did it again and ignored her for weeks after that.

- Maya began to read a lot of books and started wishing she was a boy because her heroes from the books she read were all boys.

- After Maya returned from buying milk, Mr. Freeman raped her and threatened to kill her if she screamed and kill Bailey if she told anyone. After suffering intense pain, Maya went home from the library that she was sent to by Mr. Freeman. She hid her underwear under her mattress. Mr. Freeman left the next mourning. Bailey found the panties under the mattress.

- Maya named the rapist as Mr. Freeman in the hospital and he was arrested. After a hearing, Mr. Freeman was sentenced to one year. Bailey and Angelou moved back with Grandmother Baxter. A policeman later told Grandmother Baxter that Mr. Freeman was beaten to death.

- Mrs. Flowers broke Maya?s silence from school by offering her books to read under the condition that she?d have to read them aloud in class.

- Maya took a job for Mrs. Viola Cullinan and met the cook, Miss Glory. One of Mrs. Cullinan’s friends enraged Maya when she suggested she?d be called Mary because Margaret was too long when her name wasn?t even Margaret. Miss Glory explained that she had changed her name too from Hallelujah to Glory.

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- Maya was still furious (from her childhood) so she deliberately broke some of Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite dishes.

- Bailey missed Vivian and boarded a boxcar, but ended up stranding himself in Baton Rouge for two weeks.

- After a church revival, everyone was listening to the Joe Louis boxing match on the radio in the store. Joe Louis was a hero for the blacks, it was almost a fight of proving that black people were just as strong as white people.

8) Plot ?I? 3

- In a summer picnic, Maya wandered into an isolated area to sit next to the tree. Louise Kendricks, a girl of the same age met Maya. They were a little shy, but soon became best friends.

- Tommy Valdon sent Maya a valentine. She showed it to Louise and they tore the note into tiny pieces and threw it to the wind. Tommy saw Maya and her friend tear up his valentine, but he still considered her his valentine. Eventually Tommy?s crush passed.

- Bailey set up a tent in the yard for sexual purposes, he lost his virginity to a girl named Joyce. He stole goods from the store for her and she left after a couple of months. Her aunt, Mrs. Goodman, revealed that she ran away with a railroad porter. Bailey was heartbroken.

- Maya felt that she was entering a new as she graduated from the eighth grade. Maya was salutatorian. Mr. Edward Donleavy was the speaker at the ceremony, he gave a speech about the progress in their local school, the new equipment the

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whites got, and about the college athletes from the Lafeyette County Training School. Maya was angry that it seemed like he was saying that black people are only good for their athletic ability.

- Maya developed a toothache and had to see the dentist. Momma took her to Dr. Lincoln, but he refused to see black people even though Momma had loaned him money. Momma had to take Maya to a black dentist in Texarkana.

- Bailey came home shaken one day after he saw a dead black body while a white man grinned at the sight of it. He wondered what black people had done to make white people hate them so much. Shortly after this experience, Momma planned for Bailey and Maya to live in California with their mother.

- Vivian supported them by gambling because she didn?t like to labor. Vivian married Daddy Clidell and they moved to San Francisco around World War II.

9) Plot ?I? 4

- The changing atmosphere during the war in San Francisco made Maya feel comfortable in her life. Maya did exceptional in school and was one of the only three black students in the school. She achieved a scholarship to the California Labor School and studied the arts.

- Maya spent their summer with Big Bailey and Dolores whom Maya did not have any connection with, Big Bailey thought it was sort of funny.

- Big Bailey took Maya on one of his shopping trips. His jokes and personality made Maya start to enjoy herself with him, but she was scared when she couldn?t

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find him. Maya had to drive them home because he was completely drunk. He wasn?t angry at all about the accident.

- Dolores and Big Bailey argued about Maya coming between them. Maya tried to calm her down by saying that she didn?t mean to come between them, but when Dolores insulted Vivian they started to fight. Angelou noticed that she was bleeding, so she locked herself in her father’s car. Big Bailey took her to his friends after she fought Dolores to get her wounds bandaged and to spend the night. Maya left his friends even though Big Bailey said he would return in the evening. She went to a junkyard and found a group of black, white, and Mexican homeless people. Bootsie let her stay with them if she followed the rules. Boys could not sleep with girls, no stealing, and they all shared what they?d earn.

- Maya stayed for a month then called her mom to pay for her to get back to San Francisco. This event was important because she learned how to be tolerant.

- Bailey and Vivian have heated tension because Bailey?s been wearing more flashy clothing and is with a white prostitute. Eventually Bailey moves out because of Vivian?s rules and disliking to his change. They make up shortly and Vivian gets him a job in the South Pacific.

- Maya takes off from school and successfully became the first black person to work on the San Francisco streetcars. At school, Maya writes about ?teen hood? compared to adulthood and how black women have to deal with both prejudices: being black and being a woman.

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- Maya believed she was turning into a lesbian because of her prepubesant features and the well of loneliness. Vivian explained that the changes were normal growth in her body.

- Maya looked insistently for a boyfriend to confirm that she was not a lesbian. After a little trouble finding one, she spent an unfulfilling experience with a near by man and discovered weeks later that she was pregnant.

- Bailey told Maya to keep it a secret because Vivian was against abortions and so she wouldn?t quit school. After she graduated, she revealed her pregnancy. Vivian and Daddy Clidell were both understanding and accepting.

- Maya delivered her son and was fascinated in his fragile body. She stayed awake all night when she was sleeping with her son. Vivian told her that if she was for the right thing, she didn’t have to think doing it, you just do it without thinking.

10) Theme ?I?

- The primary theme of I Know why the Caged Bird Sings is that the world and growing up can be complicated and harsh. Maya has been faced with numerous unfortunate events and wasn?t born with a silver spoon either. She had the misfortune of being black in a time in which they were still constantly persecuted and a woman in a time in which they weren?t entirely respected. She was a very young child when she was forced to live with her grandmother and uncle because of her parents? divorce and the area was filled with prejudice. Then she goes to live with her mother in California where she is raped by her mothers? boyfriend. When she goes to stay with her father, his girlfriend Dolores stabs her with scissors and Maya ends up trying to survive in a

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junkyard for a month. Things pick up for Maya after she learned how to be tolerant and independent after the junkyard, she proved she could overcome the struggles of life by becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco and graduating high school. She finally feels connected after she gives birth to her son. Only due to her determination and what she had learned from past experiences did she overcome her struggles.