



Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: A Coming of Age Novel

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Résumé – Dans son roman autobiographique, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, la romancière et narratrice autodiégétique retrace les péripéties de son enfance dans une société où racisme, domination masculine et violence sexuelle ponctuent la vie quotidienne de la femme noire. L'intérêt de l'œuvre est de montrer comment l'héroïne se bat stoïquement au cours de son enfance et de son adolescence pour résister aux agressions nombreuses et variées, gagner en maturité, se forger une nouvelle identité et conquérir la place qui lui revient dans son milieu hostile.

Mots-clés : autodiégétique, déplacement, racisme, viol, identité, dignité, formation, maturité, maternité, accomplissement.

1. Introduction

One of the most recurrent themes in African American literature is the plight that black people have always been subjected to from time immemorial. This awkward situation, which they keep passing through, is minutely recorded by all the major black writers and constitutes the core of African American literature as a canon which has imposed itself in world literature. Some black women, in particular, whose concern is to correct the distorted pictures both white and black males have painted of them, resort to writing to break their long silence and overtly talk about their experiences, predicaments, innermost feelings and secrets, convictions, aspirations, hopes and despairs as Blacks and as women. In a broader perspective, African American women writers use literature, especially feminist criticism, as a powerful weapon for resistance, subversion, self-affirmation as well as cultural and political propaganda.

Among the most widely-read black female novelists, who are at the edge of the re-evaluation and reconstruction of the black woman's identity from both a humanistic consciousness and a female sensitivity, one can mention Maya Angelou – Marguerite Johnson her real name. In her autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*¹, the first degree "homodiegetic"² or "autodiegetic"³ narrator and

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- 1 Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, London, Virago Press, 1984. References to this novel will appear in the text as *KWCBS*, followed by page numbers.
- 2 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 245.



author smoothly takes the *narratee*⁴ back to her eventful and painful early years, in the 1930s, in the South of America. Growing, thus, in a race and gender-conscious society, the protagonist faces a plethora of ills, including family split, displacement, instability, loneliness, anguish, destitution, moral violence, sexual violence, psychological trauma, xenophobia and racism. Here is how she personally authenticates the trap in which the black woman is caught for being colored, female and defenseless: “The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (KWCBS, 265).

This paper intends to examine how, in a segregated and gender-oriented surrounding, human experience contributes to enhancing resilience, developing maturity and providing wisdom. This essay especially investigates the way in which, through transplanting and a torrent of predicaments, a little girl refuses to be destroyed, demonstrates her intelligence, pugnacity, dignity and sense of responsibility and gains maturity, as is often the fate of the young hero in the *bildungsroman* or development novel.

2. Displacement: a hazardous adventure into an unknown world

Family issues pervade African American literature so much so that one may rightly infer that this community is family-oriented and this inclination, of course, finds its roots in its African origins. However, what is characteristic of the modern African American family is that it is rarely united. Indeed, very few black families stand the test of time, as can be noticed through their propensity to split. For various reasons, including unemployment, economic precariousness, drug or alcohol-addiction, adultery, emotional or physical abuse and pressure from parents-in-law, the black American family has lost the sense of togetherness, which testifies to its disconnection from its African tradition. As an immediate consequence, mothers often have custody of children or they are entrusted with their grandmothers.

In this respect, the divided family is a metaphor for a black American society that keeps tearing itself apart. Maya's childhood is a perfect illustration of the erratic and perturbed life which results from this breaking up. Such is also what life holds for the protagonists in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *Sula* (1973), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Marita Golden's *Long Distance*

3 Idem.

4 Ibid. p. 215.



Life (1989), Terry McMillan's *Mama* (1987), Alice Walker's *The Color People* (1983), etc.

The autodiegetic narrator's genius resides in her capacity to translate her gripping childhood experience into language, images and form so as to celebrate her past and to make it more perceptible, meaningful and constructive. She clearly demonstrates from various standpoints – anthropological, psychological, psychoanalytical, sociological, philosophical, religious – that not only does uprooting breeds feelings of emptiness, solitude, anxiety, confusion, fear, doubt, hatred and guilt which negatively rub off on the life of a child, but it also helps him or her to become hardened to the ups and downs of life.

As early as the opening page, the first-person narrator provides an anticipatory piece of information, insinuating that the divorce of her parents is the main cause of her troubled life. To suggest that family split is always hardest on children, she implicitly blames her parents for taking the liberty to put an end to their union when she and Bailey, her older brother, are respectively three and four years old. By wondering how a couple can venture to separate at the time when their little children need them most, the narrator really questions the sense of responsibility of adults.

Another proof of gaping irresponsibility denounced by the victimized narrator is the fact of being condemned to a nomadic life and being educated by proxy as if her parents were bed-ridden or dead. Such carelessness explains why Maya and her brother are awfully surprised at receiving Christmas presents from their parents who have preferred to part from each other rather than stay together for the sake of their happiness. Despite their young age, they understand that this gesture is sham, insecure, mechanical and cultural. In their eyes, the presents mean nothing, mainly because the divorcees have shunned their quintessential family obligations, as can be noticed through these pressing questions to which Maya is longing for clear-cut answers and which, though asked in the past tense and not in the present tense, give a striking sense of immediacy to the narrative: "Why did they send us away? (...) What did we do so wrong? So Wrong?" (*KWCBS*, 51). This deep feeling of guilt highlighted by the repetition of "so" and "wrong" recalls Pecola, Morrison's heroine in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), whose supposed ugliness or failure to meet the white standards of beauty causes her to hate herself, and her parents to hate her as well.

The narrator also finds it strange that her parents drag her from Long Beach, California, a haven of liberty and freedom, for Stamps, Arkansas, a bastion of racism, or from an onomastic interpretation, a stamping-ground of segregated



black people. The displacement from the North to the South is highly symbolical, in the sense that it is synonymous with confinement, oppression and discrimination. Similarly, the parallel drawn between St Louis, where their father has re-transplanted them from Stamps, with "hell" (KWCB, 56) reflects that children are hankering after freedom, liberty and independence, hence the title of the novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Additionally, the instruction "To Whom it May Concern," an epistolary phrase, on the tags on the wrists of the children and the expression "father shipped us home to her mother" (KWCB, 6) are derogatory, for they suggest that their own parents reify them or treat them as if they were pariahs. The fact that neither of the parents has gone with them, cared about their safety along the trip or given them a prompt visit or call makes the reader realize their lack of interest in their progeny.

Euphemistically, family separation is also detrimental to the well-being of children, insofar as it creates geographical, emotional and psychological distances. Spatial distance, more often than not, gives rise to neglect, fear, loneliness, hatred, distrust and feelings of guilt because as the saying goes: "Far from the eyes, far from the heart". Actually, any child, whose umbilical cord with his parents has been cut all of a sudden, and who has been deprived of maternal and paternal affection, and a home as well, has good reasons to think that he/she is abandoned, even thrown away like rubbish. As his/her parents are not part of his/her daily life, the child may feel that they strongly dislike him/her and even wish they had not given birth to him/her. This explains why Maya is not drawn to her father whom she regards as an alien and neither is she sensitive to his behavior or words which ring hollow: "He was so unreal to me I felt as if I were watching a doll talk" (KWCB, 56).

The metaphor of the doll suggests that Maya looks at her father, not as a man in the noble sense of the term, but as a small person, even a baby. The description of her father as a child toy is all the more relevant since he dolls himself up, dressing smartly and driving a luxurious car to purport that he is well off and good-mannered. Such signifying or double dealing reveals that adults are complete phonies. In the same way, the fact of labelling her pretentious father a "doll" is sarcastic and explicitly illustrates that Maya has neither consideration for nor attachment to him. The irony reaches its peak when she calls him a "devil" (KWCB, 57), something weird, which inspires fear and insecurity, instead of love and safety.

The heroine's lonesome existence and her being orphaned by family break-up and displacement are all the more intense as, like her father, she sees her mother



and maternal grandmother as strangers too. Therefore, to compensate for the absence of their parents, fill an unsatisfying present and the emptiness in their lives, she and Bailey reinforce their bonds. They nurture each other, the latter assuming the roles of a father, mother, brother and friend for the former. Maya also fixes Bailey in her mind as a protector, or "an unshakable God" (KWCB, 23) to stress that her life would be senseless, even impossible, without the presence of her brother.

Also noticeable, the instability generated by displacement develops the feelings of not being, of belonging to nowhere or of being like a dead leaf at the mercy of the wind. Moreover, physical instability is a factor of loss, in that it makes one lack geographical, historical and cultural references. Indeed, if being always on the move can be saving or enriching for an adult in quest for knowledge, freedom or wisdom, for a child, it may prevent him or her from being able to identify with a family, a place and a community, from building strong relationships and from forging himself or herself a stable identity and personality. This is the reason why, in St. Louis, her new destination or stopover, Maya is not easy in her mind and soul because she has no doubt that she still leads a bohemian lifestyle, with neither a home nor roots.

On the educational plane, moving children frequently from one place to another is also damaging, because they are exposed to different types of education, which may result in confusion. In this situation, they become a receptacle, where beliefs, ways and customs get mixed up. Worse, children, who are permanently on the road, may turn into social misfits insofar as they are never given a chance to complete their education. As if they had not read Rousseau, Maya's biological and surrogate parents ignore that the child's mind is not a *tabula rasa* or virgin page, where everyone writes what they want as are their convictions and whims.

Equally worth stressing, transplanting requires the ability to adjust to an unknown land with its hazards, unfamiliar weather conditions and unknown people, who may be welcoming or inhospitable. Also, to lead an unsettled life, it is necessary to be able to adjust oneself to a new culture and way of life, improvise and face adversity. When she becomes poverty-stricken and homeless as a result of her fight with her step mother, the heroine develops survival strategies, associating with a gang and sleeping in the carcass of an old car. The car becomes her new home, where she finds liberty, but not comfort and security, and the gang a new community in which she learns to be humble, take life in stride and socialize. Instead of being a source of anxiety, she turns solitude into a propitious condition



for meditating and for reading, that is, for cultivating herself in order to better withstand her misfortune.

Maya's decision to leave her father's house after her fight with her step mother in order not to puzzle him proves that she is very thoughtful. It is also true that her decision not to return to her mother's house for fear she should try to avenge her shows that she has come to maturity and is ready to take responsibility for herself.

3. Transplanting as an incursion into the underworld of man's cruelty

Through her autobiographical novel, Maya Angelou proposes to be the voice of the voiceless, that is, the spokesperson of all the women who are muzzled while their body, flesh, mind, pride and identity are seriously wounded. Such is the reason why the novel can be read from both humanistic and feminist standpoints as an earnest appeal for the defense of women's integrity and honor.

By making the protagonist move to the South, the narrator insists that one can still notice the marks of slavery in America. She demonstrates that despite the familiar rhetoric about America as a democratic land, most white people cannot get rid of their racial prejudices, pretending to ignore that slavery and its by-products are irrational social constructs which best express man's inhumanity to his fellow creature.

As an innocent victim of despicable discrimination, Maya satirically exposes how, breaking an oath, a white dentist refuses to examine her, simply because she is black. The irony about this scene is that by stating without mincing his words that he would rather put his hand in the mouth of a dog than in that of a black person, this white dentist fails to realize that he is even worth less than a dog, for he is arrogant, heartless and unthinking. The irony is particularly sharp since, contrary to the doctor's ungratefulness, the dog is a pet animal, known for "his" gratefulness to "his" master. The dentist's refusal to pay the heroine's grandmother, who has lent him money, a moral debt unveils his evil nature. By calling the dentist Lincoln, the novelist ironically implies that this name does not suit him because, contrary to him, President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), to whom his name refers, was an abolitionist who issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

What a paradox! How can one consider someone a human being only when one is in need? This selective, narcissistic and inconsistent attitude testifies that racism is contingent upon circumstances. By the same token, if being racist can be equated with being ignorant, it is surprising to notice that even the intellectuals, whose role is to free people from ignorance, misunderstanding or false beliefs, are



so. The discrimination, humiliation, indifference and freezing out which the bright black girl is the victim of at the dentist's, during the Graduation ceremony and while looking for a job, indicate that racism is a serious disease that corrodes the eyes, the mind and the soul.

One more illustration of extreme racism is the execrable scene about a dead black man left rotten on the street, leading Bailey to possibly ask himself direct thought-provoking questions: What harm have black people done to the Whites? Why do white people hate the Blacks? Are the Whites superior to the Blacks? Is it true that white people are elected by God and black people cursed by Him?

One way of answering these embarrassing questions, which reflect the child's deep angst, is to make it clear that racism cannot possibly be interpreted as an act of revenge insofar as black people have never done any harm to white people. Oddly enough, the Whites, on the contrary, committed an unforgettable felony by bringing the Blacks as slaves from Africa to America by force. Another way of examining the issue from a sociological perspective is to argue that white people hate black people, simply because they do not know them, and the reason for this failure is that they are neither able to accept other peoples nor their cultures, languages and ways of life. The other approach consists in explaining, from a Marxist angle, that racism is devoid of rationale, in the sense that it is an ideology based on false representations, images, myths, ideas, prejudices and stereotypes meant for perpetuating the domination of one race over another.

The conviction that racism is the most perfect expression of ignorance, selfishness and intolerance urges Bailey to ask deeper questions. From a naturalistic standpoint, he goes so far as to interpellate God for having delivered many oppressed peoples, but never the Blacks. Does this validate the widespread opinion according to which He has cursed black people for being descended from Ham? Does God have a heart of stone like white people, or is He unfair and irrational like them? For example, why has He delivered "the children of Israel out of the bloody hands of Pharaoh and into the Promised land"? Why has he protected "the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace"? Why has he "delivered Daniel" (*KWCBS*, 191-193) and let white people victimize black people?

The first-degree homodiegetic narrator also adopts the same critical attitude when it comes to sharing with readers her sexual experience. Contrary to most women, who maintain a stubborn silence when they are subjected to physical, moral or sexual violence, she violates the taboos by putting on the stage the most troublesome event of her life, namely her being raped by her mother's boyfriend.



In dealing with such “female-centered themes”⁵ as menstruation, motherhood, delivery, and sexual abuse, she assumes her social and political functions as a committed feminist writer, anxious to voice men’s blows to women’s physical and moral integrity, identity and dignity.

Written from the point of view of a real victim of rape, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a pictorial record of the serious consequences of sexual abuse. The first evidence is that rape is premeditated violence, in that it is sexual intercourse forced on a woman, which implies pain, particularly when the victim is physiologically immature. The following metaphor underscores rape as a sadistic act that only a brute can perpetrate: “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (KWCBS, 74).

Maya is so traumatized by her first and unexpected sexual experience that she transfers her emotional shock on her innocent brother, to speak like psychoanalysts. She fears that Joyce, for whom sexual intercourses are no secret, rapes him so violently that he breaks his back or even castrates him. As “once beaten twice shy”, the trauma also causes her to distrust and fear all men, identifying them with sexual villains like Freeman.

More devastating, rape is a blow to the victim’s inner life and human dignity because not only does it hurt the victim in the flesh and in the mind, but it also displays man’s savagery. The hysterical reaction of Maya’s uncles indicates that this sexual crime terribly shocks the victim, her family and all those who are eaten up with morality. Needless to emphasize that in Puritan American society in particular, rape, as the most perverse form of sexual delinquency, cannot be tolerated.

Equally true, rape is a serious assault against sexual identity that may lead the victim to hate her biological condition or sexual identity as a woman because she associates manhood with strength, virility, violence and domination, and womanhood with weakness, submission and masochism. With rape, woman is seen as a sexual object and an outlet for psychological balance, while the phallus is represented as a symbol, not of generative power, but of destructive power. Very often, the shock is so brutal that not only can the victim get over it, but she may

5 Cf. Ellen Fine, “Women Writers and the Holocaust: Strategies for Survival”, in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *Reflections of the Holocaust in Art and Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 82.



also have haunting nightmares, develop a phobic horror of heterosexual intercourses, have an unnatural sexual orientation or, worse, become asexual.

The fact that rapists use violence – physical, verbal, psychological, moral – to satisfy their libido reveals their cold-heartedness. For instance, Freeman, who knows that her brother is everything to her, uses him as a prey to make her give in to his instincts. Through this strategy, which is worthy of a psychologist or a terrorist, the maniac blackmails the defenseless little girl, threatening to kill Bailey if ever she reveals what has happened.

Freeman's *fait accompli* is all the more reprehensible since it is incestuous. In fact, how can a morally sound man have sexual intercourses with both a mother and her daughter? Incidentally, the misdemeanor tallies with the rapist's name because, correctly interpreted, "freeman" means that he is totally free from moral, religious and social values. Through accurate physical characterization, the reader is brought to notice that "his cold face and empty eyes" (KWCBS, p. 78) accurately express his being cynical, emotionless and shameless.

But the most upsetting thing about rape and incest in the black community is that these evils have become a social plague. For example, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) too, Pecola has been raped twice by her father. Equally, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie has had two kids with her adoptive father. Altogether, the first-person narrator plunges the narratee into the indifferent world of adults, while putting emphasis on the irreversible unfolding of her process of growth.

4. From the depths of nonbeing to the light of rebirth and self-realization

The interest in Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel is to show that to remember is to learn and to teach that not only is her loathsome childhood a curse, but it is also a positive, an enriching experience. Such is the reason why, in addition to bringing up to date her ordeals, she equally magnifies the ways and means which she has used to reconstruct herself and revive her hopes. As a feminist novelist, the first strategy consists in translating into words and images her being raped as well as her refusal to be gagged, to wrap herself up in her thoughts or to hide her pain and frustration so as to free her own conscience and that of all the victims.

Still more constructive, the discourse on rape is used for a psychotherapeutic cure, in that it offers sexually-abused women a medicine to purge themselves, i.e., to accept their fate, get rid of their complex of inferiority, shout and fight out their anger. This cathartic approach is salutary because the victims, who keep their



disgusting sexual experiences secret, are more likely to suffer from their most destructive psychic, psychological, emotional or social impairments.

The novel can also be seen as a pulpit from which the autodiegetic narrator sermonizes parents for them to be more aware of their family responsibilities, since one can presume that had her father and mother been protective and care-giving enough her life would have taken a different turn. For instance, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe, who lives for and through her children, figuratively kills her daughter in order to protect her from slavery and sends the other children to another place for them to be safe. In the same vein, in Marita Golden's *Long Distance Life*, Naomi, who embodies motherhood and morality, is furious to learn that her daughter, Esther, has had a love affair with a married man.

Surely, the heroine's speech equally sounds as a warning to women, whatever their age, for them to realize that they are potential targets for men because the two sexes are "erotic objects"⁶ which mutually attract each other. This biological reality justifies the necessity for parents, especially women, to provide sexual education to their daughters for them to be better prepared to look after themselves. Arguably, Maya's obsession with deeply-rooted gender constructs and the failure of her parents to provide her with the right social, moral and sexual education account, in part, for her being raped and being doubtful about her real sexual identity or orientation.

Though she is young, Maya is lucid-minded, which enables her to demonstrate that racism is but an unfair social construct which black people need to dismantle and turn into an incentive, if they mean to impose themselves in the intellectual, cultural, political and economic spheres. In other words, the heroine firmly believes in education as a lifting power or magic weapon for emancipation, self-accomplishment and social integration. Echoing Hamlet's soliloquy, "to be or not to be", the valedictory speech pronounced by one of the best black pupils eloquently stresses that for black people to live full and worthy lives, they have no other alternative than break racial barriers and diversify their competences so as to be valuable assets for the whole American nation. To fulfill the purpose in view, they should not only attend vocational schools in order to acquire pragmatic know-how, as advocated by Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915) in his *Up from Slavery* (1901), but also have access to good higher education like white children for them to get sound knowledge, rewarding positions or become

6 François-Charles Gaudard, « La Femme comme figure de l'Autre ou le fatidique attachement « à la fosse de l'Idéal » dans *Le Spleen de Paris* de Beaudelaire », in André Mansau (éd), *Des Femmes: images et écritures*, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires de Mirail, 2004, p. 109.



influential opinion-makers, as is the ideology of William Edward Burghart Du Bois (1868-1963) in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

From this perspective, the facts that Maya is top of her class and Joe has won his white opponent represent two commendable achievements symbolically loaded with meaning. First and foremost, they become heroes and a source of pride for the Blacks because they have shown their mettle and demonstrated that in intelligence, tact, hard work, perseverance, courage, determination and dignity, they are second to no one. Then their praise-worthy performances can be interpreted as an act of revenge of the black race on the white race or its victory over the latter. This is all the more relevant as if Joe were defeated and Maya the bottom pupil in her form, this would reinforce the degrading *clichés* about black people.

It must be stressed that the trials which have paved the heroine's journey into life have not driven her to resign herself to her fate. On the contrary, they have added fuel to her determination to exist because she understands that they represent unavoidable stages in her long, difficult, but enriching cycle of initiation or rite of passage which has ended in her awakening, coming to maturity, assuming full and heavy responsibilities and being " a proud member of the wonderful beautiful Negro race" (KWCBS, 179).

No wonder then that the young girl strives to break up the lingering prejudices, the purpose of which is to accelerate the mind-destroying process of the black woman. Through her commendable school performance and her attempt to find a job, she challenges the racists, who want to limit her ambitions by inducing her to believe in the factitious ideology according to which black people are naturally ill-equipped for work requiring intelligence. The narrator's seeking a job in a transport company suggests, too, that she is a staunch feminist for whom in a true democratic society all citizens, regardless of sex, race and class, are of equal value and have an unfathomable potential for self-development.

Understandably, Maya's coming of age is facilitated by the fact that she has absorbed the key values which shape the American mind and provide escape routes from hardships. The brave girl understands that life is a permanent struggle, therefore her duty consists in "straighten[ing] up and fly[ing] right" (KWCBS, 254) to influence her destiny positively. So, taking advantage of the human and intellectual resources which she is naturally endowed with, she successfully manages to clear a way for herself through her tough world, which testifies to her moral and intellectual strength, wisdom and hope in the future: "In



the struggle, lies the joy.... I had to exhaust every possibility before giving in" (KWCBS, 261).

Maturity also simulates the heroine to surpass herself and to display great tolerance towards racist people. The reason for her forgiving them – but not forgetting their sordid deeds – is her understanding that one is not born racist, but one becomes racist. Maya emphasizes that racism is tinged with irony, in that it is a socially and politically-made up system which victimizes both the racists themselves and the Blacks: "I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted him as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer" (KWCBS, 260).

Also significant, the reconstruction or reconstitution of the family in Los Angeles has a therapeutic function in so far as it has helped the children to live again with their mother and occasionally see their father, which enables them to recover a stable life, filled with love, joy, harmony, assurance, care, intimacy and amusement: "Nothing could have been more magical than to have found her at last, and have her solely to ourselves in the closed world of a moving car" (KWCBS, 198).

To forge ahead, the heroine's obsession with gender constructs prompts her to be anxious to know whether she is a real woman or a lesbian, particularly as her breast, a metonymy of femininity like menstruation, is not yet fully developed. Ironically enough, such a deep concern drives her to test, at all costs, her fecundity, "raping", in turn, a virgin boy by luring him into sexual intercourses. This deliberate decision, her enduring the pain of pregnancy and delivery at the age of seventeen and her finding a job in order to support herself signal that Maya has actually become of age.

As for the baby, it represents, like Antonia's children in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918), the completion of the rugged and painful process of maturity. Then, it testifies to Maya's readiness to be a loving and caring mother, an attitude which sharply contrasts with her parents' insouciance. Of paramount importance, the baby stands as a sign of re-birth, self-affirmation, liberty, freedom, fulfillment and optimism for both the narrator and the black race, in opposition to Pecola's baby, in *The Bluest Eye*, who metaphorically dies because she symbolizes incest, which is unacceptable in a Puritan society.

5. Conclusion

After all, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is, to paraphrase Stendhal, a mirror which the heroine carries along the roadway of her life to present what it really means to be female and black in a racialized and gendered white-dominated



society. Written out of her childhood experience, the novel, which can be read as a journey into the author-narrator's inner life and into the heart of America is not only a high form of social criticism, but it is also an original example of novel of development which filters through the physical, mental, psychological and moral growth of the heroine during her "youthhood" or "adulthood". The novel especially highlights how, after a long period of pain and loss, the protagonist gradually changes into a strong-minded, worthy and self-assured woman, suited to meet all the ordeals that life holds for her.

The heroine and narrator entrusts herself with a pedagogical mission which consists in teaching that it is possible for a human being, regardless of his or her age, sex, race or social status, to go through a load of heart-breaking hardships, while maturing socially, sexually and spiritually and conquering his or her due place in the indifferent world, as is the destiny of innocent heroes in the "gothic novel"⁷. The plot-directed structure shows that all the predicaments which the protagonist has lived through are a means to an end. These have helped her to discover herself and her limitless potential, strengthen her character, reinforce her faith in her power to forge her destiny and, thus, become fully visible, contrary to the invisibility of the protagonist which Ralph Ellison describes in *Invisible Man* (1952).

Another beneficial lesson to be learnt from the autodiegetic narrator's experience is that no one can make you feel inferior or hate yourself without your consent. Her combativeness, stamina and refusal to be subdued demonstrate that the Blacks, particularly black women, set a high value on the universal values which are particularly fitting to a race in search of identity, self-respect and a meaningful life. The fact that the heroine understands that to live is to struggle, and that tragedy lies, not in defeat, but in surrender spiritually transforms her into a Faulknerian heroine, meaning an "unvanquished"⁸ one. This understanding definitely reveals her multi-faceted dimension as a Civil Rights activist, a feminist and an artist.

7 Cf. Alice Labourg, « Zofloya ou la subversion gothique de « genre », in *La Fabrique du genre*, Sophie Maret et Claude Le Fustec (dir.), Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008, p. 106.

8 Arthur Mizener, "The Lost Generation", in *The Voice of America Forum Lectures. Modern American Literature*, Washington D. C., United States Information Agency, 1977, p. 66.



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