

Shades of Being Human

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are two contemporary African-American writers. Although almost a generation apart in age, both women display a remarkable similarity in their lives. Each has written about her experiences growing up in the rural South, Ms. Walker through her essays and Ms. Angelou in her autobiographies. Though they share similar backgrounds, each has a unique style which gives to us, the readers, the gift of their exquisite humanity, with all of its frailties and strengths, joys and sorrows.

Tragedy struck both of these women at the age of eight. Ms. Walker lost her sight in one eye. Ms. Angelou was raped. Each described the incident as part of a larger work. Ms. Walker related her experience in the body of an essay published in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Ms. Angelou told her story as a chapter in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Although both wrote about their traumatic experience, the way each depicted the incident was distinct and seemed to be told for very different purposes.

Alice Walker reports the facts to the reader with short sentences written in the present tense. She chooses words which elicit a forceful emotional response from her audience. For example, in telling how her brothers were given BB guns and she was not, Ms. Walker writes, "Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly, I am relegated to the position of Indian." The word "relegated" causes the reader to be irate and indignant. Most people do not like being "relegated" to anything. Another illustration of Ms. Walker's use of dynamic words can be found in her description of the encounter with her parents following the accident. She speaks of being "confronted" by her parents. "Confronted" is a combative word. When people are confronted by others, they want to launch an attack. Her style and choice of words make the reader aware that she is alone and fearful. She is left to fight her battles by herself.

Maya Angelou narrates her account in a conversational tone. She uses the past tense which tells her audience "it's over" for her. Her words are free from severity. They encourage the reader to see hope in the midst of sadness. Instead of trying to elicit a particular emotional response, Angelou invites her audience to share in her thoughts and feelings. For instance, having given an account of the rape, she writes, "I thought I had died--I woke up in a white-walled world, and it had to be heaven." The reader feels a connection with her pain, yet realizes redemption lies close at hand. Whereas Walker tells how she was confronted by her parents, Angelou explains, "she [mother] picked me up in her arms and the terror abated for a while." There is no impression of combativeness. There is only tenderness and care. Once again, she invites the reader in. Walker wants the reader to feel for her; Angelou wants her audience to feel with her. They achieve their objectives by directing the reader's attention to specific emotions.

The emotional focus of Alice Walker's story is rage, red-hot and isolating. As I read this piece, I became livid, not only at the thought of her devastating injury and her family's apparent disassociation, but also at Ms. Walker herself. It appeared to me that she never let go of it. Instead, she seemed to embrace her anger. On the other hand, Ms. Angelou's anger is subtle and short-lived. Though I was incensed by what happened to her, she quietly insisted that I leave it behind. She concentrated less on her anger and more on the warmth and support of her family.

It would be impossible not to address the ways in which both women refer to the intense physical pain each of them suffered as little girls. Ms. Walker gives little description of her anguish, but I clearly felt it. When I read, ". . . I feel an incredible blow in my right eye . . ." and, "my eye stings, and I cover it with my hand," my immediate response was to quickly cover my eye with my hand. My body reacted to her pain.

Ms. Angelou's description produced another effect. She wrote, "Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart." Instead of a physical reaction, I felt a wrenching of the heart. Ms. Walker focused my attention on the injury to her body, while Ms. Angelou focused on her emotional scars.

My most powerful emotional response throughout both stories was one of incredible sorrow. I felt the tremendous weight that sadness and despair can fold around a heart, not only for a child's trauma, but also for the devastating repercussions that tragedy can produce - loss of dignity, self-esteem, and childhood itself. I wanted to comfort them both. However, by the end of Ms. Walker's account of the incident, I not only wanted to comfort her, I wanted to shield her as well. Her wounds were still open. At the end of her narrative, she wrote, "Now when I stare at people - a favorite pastime up to now - they will stare back. Not at the 'cute' little girl, but at her scar. For six years, I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head." I wanted to intervene and help her.

Although in Ms. Angelou's story I yearned to comfort the child, it was obvious that the adult Maya Angelou did not need my protection. She ended her account with these words:

"I would have liked to stay in the hospital the rest of my life. Mother brought flowers and candy. Grandmother came with fruit and my uncles clumped around and around my bed, snorting like wild horses. When they were able to sneak Bailey in, he read to me for hours."

Her family loved her all the way through her trauma, and she moved from despair to hope with their help.

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are both extremely courageous writers. From each we receive a rare and poignant gift. As her book suggests, Alice Walker challenges us to search for resolution in the face of loneliness and despair. Maya Angelou, who "knows why the caged bird sings," reminds us that loneliness and despair never have the last word. She gently points us to a window of hope. Both women bless us with shades of being human.