

## Paradoxical Phrasing in the Later Autobiographies of Maya Angelou

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Maya Angelou is most famous for an early autobiographical work titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Most critical attention devoted to Angelou has focused on this particular work, which is often considered her masterpiece. Yet Angelou wrote a number of sequels to this book, many (but not all) of them gathered together in a massive volume published in 2004 and titled *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*, which includes *Gather Together In My Name* (the focus of this essay). The mere fact that a major publisher believed a volume this large could successfully sell suggests the appeal of Angelou's reflections on her life—reflections that also, of course, deal with the lives of her times and many of her contemporaries.

Angelou's autobiographies, though, are of more than merely personal or historical interest. Yes, they do reveal much about Angelou's personality and about important events in her life. But they will last *as literature* primarily because of the skill with which they are written. Autobiographies are quite common; well-written autobiographies that are worth reading for style as well as substance are much less easy to find. This essay will argue that some of the most effectively written passages in Angelou's later autobiographies are passages in which she uses a technique called "paradoxical phrasing"—that is, phrasing that leads the reader to expect one thing and then surprises the reader by offering some unexpected twist or turn. To take one minor example: at one point in her book *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou says, "I congratulated myself [//] on having absolutely the meanest, coldest, craziest family in the world" (Angelou 251). Later she comments, "I had written a juicy melodrama in which I was to be the star. Pathetic, poignant, isolated. I planned to drift out of the wings, a little girl martyr. [//] It just so happened that life took my script and upstaged me" (251).

In each of the quotations just cited, I have inserted “[//]” marks to indicate where the abrupt, paradoxical shift in phrasing occurs. This essay will argue that shifts of this sort—shifts that pull the rug out from under the reader and often the narrator as well—are often found in the best passages of Angelou’s later autobiographies. This essay will explore how these shifts contribute to the narrative interest of Angelou’s autobiographies; how they help characterize the books’ narrators; how they help suggest the nature of life in general; and the various specific ways they work on individual levels in phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and even chapters.

### ***Gather Together in My Name***

One example of the kind of paradoxical or shifting phrasing that contributes so much to the effectiveness of Angelou’s writing occurs early in *Gather Together in My Name*. That book recounts Angelou’s experiences in the immediate aftermath of World War II. In one passage, for instance, Angelou describes herself at that time by saying, “I was seventeen, [//] very old, [//] embarrassingly young” (228). Here again and throughout the rest of this essay, the // marks have been inserted to indicate moments of juxtaposition. In this brief statement, Angelou juxtaposes three different accounts of her age: chronologically, she was only seventeen; experientially, she felt far, far older; but, in fact, especially from her perspective as narrator of her own life, she realizes that she was indeed extremely immature. In a few simple words, then, Angelou manages to suggest the complexity of her life and self-perceptions. The shifts from one perception occur so quickly that they catch readers by surprise. At the same time, these sorts of multiple perceptions of the same moment in a person’s life are ones to which any reader can relate. By so quickly and deftly juxtaposing different (even contrasting) views of the same experience, Angelou not only demonstrates her skill as a writer but also implies her shrewdness as a student of human nature. One can easily imagine how a less gifted author could convey the same basic ideas in far less effective prose. One could say, for instance: Although I was seventeen, I felt very old, yet I now realize that I was embarrassingly young. This sentence

is more logically organized than Angelou's series of brief, abrupt phrases, but Angelou's language is far more effective *as language*. And it is ultimately for her skill as a *writer*—as a worker in words—that Angelou's texts must be judged from a literary point of view.

Sometimes Angelou goes out of her way to emphasize juxtaposed opposites, as when she reports that her mother could never have been called “lenient” (230). She then continues: “Generous she was; [//] indulgent, never. [//] Kind, yes; [//] permissive, never” (230). Here the heavy punctuation and short, punchy phrasing calls explicit attention to the complexity of the mother's personality. The phrases in each sentence are carefully balanced, and then the two sentences are themselves similarly balanced. In phrasing of this sort, Angelou shows that she knows exactly what she is doing as a writer and rhetorician. A similar sort of explicit balancing occurs in the final sentence of the first chapter of *Gather*, where Angelou writes that she intended to “. . . show the whole world [//] (my son's father) that I was equal to my pride [//] and greater than my pretensions” (231). The idea that her “whole world” was simply her “son's father” catches us by surprise. The first phrase seems full of broad implications; the second seems tightly circumscribed. Likewise, the implied contrast between “pride” (implying positive self-respect) and “pretensions” (implying pride in a foolish sense) is not only highlighted by the alliterative “pr's” but also suggests, once again, Angelou's willingness in these books to be brutally honest about herself. She doesn't hesitate to admit her failings, whether those failings are her pretentiousness or her immaturity or her somewhat childish (but very human) impulse to impress another person. The more one examines the details of Angelou's phrasing, the more complex that phrasing can often seem. And the complexities of the phrasing imply the complexities of the mind that produced it and the experiences that mind remembers.

Often the juxtapositions Angelou uses are short, sweet, and blatant, as when a potential employer says she is sorry that she cannot hire Angelou. Angelou writes: “She was sorry? [//] I was stunned” (231). Later she is told to talk to a “. . . boy in the kitchen” (232). Soon she reports that “the boy” was in fact “a grandfather”—

phrasing implying the racism of the person who directed her to speak with him (232). Sometimes, though, Angelou uses juxtapositions for comic effect. Applying for a job cooking at a restaurant called “The Creole Café,” she is asked if she can cook Creole cuisine. She responds, “Yes, of course. That’s all I know how to cook.” Two sentences later, however, she remarks, “I knew I could cook Creole, [//] whatever that was” (232). Here the juxtapositions suggest the speaker’s ability to think on her feet, to adapt to circumstances, to fib when necessary, to give anything a try, and, once again, to admit her foibles by showing that she was far from honest about her cooking skills. If one test of good literature is its ability to suggest multiple meanings all at once, then sentences like these qualify as effectively literary. By constantly surprising her readers with unexpected shifts, Angelou keeps her writing interesting, unpredictable, witty, and honest. A reader can never confidently guess what sudden alteration might be coming next. Angelou creates suspense at the level of individual sentences or even phrases. The effect of moving through her best passages, then, is much the same as the effect of moving through life itself: one never knows what is coming next. Told that the restaurant is closed on Sunday, Angelou replies: “‘That’s fine with me. I like to go church on Sunday.’ . . . ‘It’s awful to think that the devil gave me that lie, but it came unexpectedly and worked like dollar bills’” (233). The lie comes unexpectedly to the reader, too, but so does the blatant admission of lying. It is difficult not to laugh at an honest confession of dishonesty, especially when the speaker’s basic motives are fundamentally ethical despite her occasional, and rather unimportant, unethical behavior.

Sometimes Angelou’s juxtapositions suggest not so much the complexities of her own personality as the complexities of other persons’ characters. At one point she mentions, for instance, a person who “couldn’t abide cursing [//] unless she was the curser” (234). Later she mentions some advice she overheard one customer give another: “Take it easy, [//] but take it” (236). Sentences such as these suggest how Angelou uses her autobiographies not only to reveal herself but to imply the unpredictability of people in general. One reads her life writings not only to learn about her and the eras

she lived through but also to learn about others—and also ourselves. Thus when she mentions a person who “couldn’t abide cursing [//] unless she was the curser,” readers smile at the person’s inconsistency and self-indulgence even as they recognize those traits as their own. Part of the pleasure of reading Angelou’s autobiographies is that they tell readers as much about humans in general as they tell them about Angelou in particular. And what they tell readers is often both initially surprising but quickly convincing.

Paradoxes, sudden reversals, and ironic juxtapositions are some of the main and some of the most effective tactics in Angelou’s autobiographical writings. They sometimes appear on practically every page of these works, giving the texts a consistent sense of surprise. In the space of a few pages of *Gather Together in My Name*, for instance, one finds a reversal describing a woman who goes from appearing to be an “. . . ugly fat ogre . . .” to becoming “. . . the prototype of mother” (253). A few sentences later, Angelou writes, “I decided to let her think I was homeless. Then I thought, ‘Let her think nothing. [//] I was homeless’” (253). Shortly thereafter, her infant son behaves in ways that suggest anger but may actually indicate fear (253). Then, the chapter almost ends with this splendid juxtaposition: her son “yelled louder, splitting the air with screams. She [the woman who had initially seemed an ogre] contrived a wordless song” to comfort him (254). Just when Angelou seems to have emphasized one mood or perception, she will often quickly switch to its opposite.

Sometimes the juxtapositions come quickly, one right after another, with a kind of swift, machine-gun rapidity. Two short paragraphs in *Gather*, for example, consist of twelve total sentences packed with six juxtapositions. Describing prostitution in San Francisco, Angelou reports that most of the customers were criminals, but some were “young sailors” (255). She describes the “air” as having “smelled of Lysol [//] and perfume” (255). The hardened prostitutes are depicted as “mistresses [//] of decorum” (255). They seem at first as “ageless as their profession” but, around the men, become “modest girls” (255). At first, the narrator’s perspective on them seems distanced: “I watched them. [But then she comprehends

them.] “I understood” (255). The same kind of shift is then repeated: “I saw them [//] and envied” (255). Then, in a kind of rapid-fire series of alterations, the paragraph concludes as follows: “They had men of their own. Of course [//] they bought them. They laid open their bodies [//] and threw away their dignity [//] upon a heap of come-filled rubbers. [//] But they had men” (254). The alterations here are particularly suggestive of Angelou’s larger purposes. Especially when describing people who might seem outcasts or disreputable, she implies that the truth is more complicated than readers might assume. Her juxtapositions often implicitly challenge conventional stereotypes, making us look (and think) again before readers even try to arrive at a final assessment of the people or events she describes.

Sometimes Angelou crams multiple juxtapositions into single sentences, in a kind of tour de force of sudden switches. Consider, for instance, this sentence: “Depending on the evening’s take [//] and the sweet man’s mood, [//] the thieves were given money [//] by the pimps [//] which had been given to them by the girls [//] which they had saved by lying down first [//] and getting up last” (255). Here the alterations simultaneously imply the complexities of people’s motives, the complexities of social roles and social relationships, and even the complexities of physical positionings. Ironically, the women who lie down longest are the ones who get up the wealthiest and most powerful, but their power soon circulates in a complex system of alternating roles and motives. Meanwhile, outside this complicated world of prostitutes, johns, thieves, and pimps are the rather boring waitresses who work for the club—women whom Angelou describes as “for the most part dull married women, who moved among the colorful patrons like slugs [//] among butterflies” (255).

Often Angelou uses a series of juxtapositions in summary fashion, to emphasize the full complexities of a situation she has been patiently outlining point by point. Having become the proprietor of a house of prostitution, for instance, she sums up her situation and attitudes as follows: