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Maya Angelou, Richard Wright and American Autobiography

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Závěrečná bakalářská práce se bude věnovat dvěma dílům americké literatury, která lze označit za autobiografická. V úvodu práce studentka definuje pojem autobiografie a nastíní některé teoretické otázky s žánrem spojené. Zvolené autory a jejich díla zasadí do literárního kontextu a svou volbu děl zdůvodní. Jádrem práce bude analýza vybraných románů, v níž se studentka soustředí na autobiografické rysy děl, jejich zachycení specifik černošské komunity dané doby, způsob zobrazení rasových vztahů, apod. Své vývody bude vhodně ilustrovat primárními texty a konzultovat se sekundárními zdroji. Závěrem své analýzy shrne a obě díla a jejich využití žánru autobiografie porovná.

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Andrews, William L. "Introduction to the 20 th -Century Autobiography," *Black American*

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the Caged Bird Sings." *College Literature* 22. 3 (1995): 91-108.

Weintraub, Karl J. "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4

(1975): 821-848.

a další.

Prohlašuji:

Tuto práci jsem vypracovala samostatně. Veškeré literární prameny a informace, které jsem v práci využila, jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

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Souhlasím s prezenčním zpřístupněním své práce v Univerzitní knihovně.

V Pardubicích dne

Nad'a Šabartová

Poděkování

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TITLE

Maya Angelou, Richard Wright and American Autobiography

ANNOTATION

The thesis depicts the American autobiography, its history and purpose with an emphasis on the Afro-American autobiography. It tries to answer the questions concerning autobiography and it analyses two autobiographical works by Afro-American writers. It mentions the elements of autobiography and compares the lives of the authors from the view of the racial relationship depiction and the demonstration of the Afro-American community specifics.

KEYWORDS

autobiography, segregation, racism, Black Boy, Richard Wright, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou, Afro-American literature

NÁZEV

Maya Angelou, Richard Wright a americká autobiografie

ANOTACE

Práce se věnuje americké autobiografii, její historii a účelu. Nejvíce se zaměřuje na afroamerickou autobiografii. Práce se také zabývá jejími hlavními otázkami a analyzuje dvě autobiografická díla od černošských autorů. Zmiňuje významné prvky autobiografie a v analýze porovnává dospívání obou autorů vybraných děl a tím ukazuje, jak byly v knihách zobrazeny rasové vztahy a zachyceny specifika černošské komunity amerického jihu v období segregace.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

autobiografie, segregace, rasismus, Black Boy, Richard Wright, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou, afroamerická literatura

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
1 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AFRO-AMERICAN WRITINGS.....	10
2 ANALYSIS OF BLACK BOY BY RICHARD WRIGHT AND CAGED BIRD BY MAYA ANGELOU	18
3 THE ISSUE OF SEGREGATION.....	37
4 CONCLUSION.....	41
5 RÉSUMÉ	43

INTRODUCTION

The paper is dedicated to the American autobiography with the special focus on the autobiography of Afro-American writers.

The first part of the thesis defines the term autobiography, describes its features and addresses the questions concerning problems connected to this literary genre. Additionally, it also focuses on the Afro-American autobiography. In this part of the thesis, there are mentioned the works by Maya Angelou and Richard Wright and moreover, they are set in literary and historical context. These works were chosen as they were both written by Afro-Americans and they depict approximately the same historical period and events. The authors are of different genders which means that they reacted differently to the same things and because of this fact, their experiences differed a lot. That is why these two works offer a unique opportunity for comparison and demonstration of the similarities and differences of the work's contents along with an explanation of using the autobiography genre.

The comparison is presented in the analysis situated in the second part of the thesis. By analyzing the works *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, there are depicted the features of the Afro-American community in the South at the time of segregation. Another subject such as a depiction of racial relationships is demonstrated by comparison of the extracts from the primary sources. The comparison in the analysis was accomplished by dividing the analysis into following topics: family, hunger, physical punishment, religion, education, literature and generation gap. Then there are discussed the exclusive problems of a girl (Maya): sexual abuse, triple oppression, pregnancy, lack of knowledge and after that the typical struggles of a boy (Richard): respect, violence, hatred of races or the dream of going North.

The last part of the thesis is devoted to segregation and the influence that it had on the authors.

1 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AFRO-AMERICAN WRITINGS

First of all, what is autobiography? According to Britannica, autobiography is the biography of oneself narrated by oneself. There are other forms of autobiographical writing such as letters, diaries or journals but those tend to be more detailed, intimate and very often they were not intended to be published.¹ The first English usage of the term autobiography is attributed to Southey, English poet and writer of miscellaneous prose, who used the term in the article on Portuguese literature from the year 1809.² Although the term autobiography is quite suggestive, sometimes it is noted that older terms such as “hypomnemata”, “commentarii,” “vita,” “confessions,” or “memoirs” describe better the functions of a newly fashionable term.³ The exact date of the beginning of the genre of autobiography is unknown but since A.D. 1800 it has been assuming an important function. The growing significance of autobiography is a part of an intellectual revolution marked as a form of historical mindedness we call historicism or historicism as it describes not only the life of an author or the events that happen throughout his life but it also reveals the development of self-conceptions of Western men.⁴ It is generally known that some of the major features of autobiography are subjectivity, detailed descriptions, expressed attitude of an author and his confessions. Additionally, it is also typical that the author of an autobiography is also the main protagonist. All of these aspects are present in the autobiographies chosen for the thesis. Autobiographies can take various forms. For instance, they can be in a form of a confession or defense. *Caged Bird* and *Black Boy* can be both classified as defenses as they both function as a racial protest but they also contain the features of confession as Maya confessed that she was raped and Richard revealed his hatred for races but these features were used by the authors only for increasing the intentional impact that their works were intended to have. The controversial thing about autobiographies is the fact that they can be written as fiction. Fictional autobiographies give an impression of an authentic autobiography but it necessarily does not have to be real. The story can be absolutely made up or the fictitious elements can be added. The protagonist may or may not be real. He can be inspired by somebody else for example by a historical figure or he can be a modified version of a real author. Concerning the works *Caged Bird* and *Black Boy*, critics agreed that both these works were slightly customized by the authors to achieve the stronger impact on their readers.

¹ “Autobiography,” Britannica Academic, accessed December 4, 2017, <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/autobiography/125332>.

² “Robert Southey,” Britannica Academic, accessed December 6, 2017, <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Robert-Southey/68926>.

³ Karl J. Weintraub, “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness,” *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4 (1975): 821–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342851>.

⁴ Weintraub, “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness,” 821-48.

Whether it was achieved by changing the chronology of events in *Caged Bird*, the subjective selection of incidents mentioned in works, poor memory of the writers or intentional exaggerations in *Black Boy*, the authors were successful in accomplishing what they had aimed to do. “There may be deliberate deception on the part of the writer as well as unavoidable self-deception, blindness to motives, oversimplification, errors of memory, and implicit conceptualization...”⁵ Although these works undoubtedly contain the fictitious adjustments, there are no doubts that they are not complete fictions as for some of the crucial parts there exists an evidence and in comparison with historical context, the events and the dates correspond with reality (e.g. migration, segregation, stock market crash). In *Caged Bird*, the detailed description of Maya’s rape proves that she unfortunately really did experience a sexual abuse and in *Black Boy*, the imperfection of the protagonist and his confessions to horrible crimes he committed as a child imply the realness of his work. He gave also the detailed descriptions of his opinions and feelings. As autobiographies are subjective, it is irresponsible to perceive them as historical documents but they are interesting because they gave us the opportunity to experience events as somebody else and see things through somebody else’s eyes along with the presence of their feelings and opinions.

Whether it is meant historically, politically, psychologically or literarily, in the American view, autobiography is an American phenomenon and some of the well-known authors would be Benjamin Franklin or Walt Whitman. James M. Cox, an American newspaper publisher and reformist governor of Ohio, is a first man who found out ties between the American nation and autobiography in 1962. He claims that autobiography is important for America and that it is closely associated with the history of the American nation. He even suggests that the idea of autobiography stems from the political necessities of the American revolutions. When he delivered a paper on Franklin’s Autobiography, he retitled the work as “Autobiography and America.”⁶ Autobiography was created with the need of the possibility of realization or representation of a unitary self in writing. James Olney, the author of “The Autobiography of America,” wrote in his work “Who, in recent years, has not had something to say, some argument to build that does not begin or end with the act of autobiography?”⁷ This seems to be true as every expressed idea, every word, tells something about society and describes

⁵ Marianne Gilbert Finnegan, “Forms of Modern Autobiography,” *An Interdisciplinary Journal* 78, no. ¾ (1995): 611-635.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41178724.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A892e78ce145af5d0734460a215a2add2>.

⁶ James Olney, “The Autobiography of America,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1991): 377.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/490058>.

⁷ Olney, “The Autobiography of America,” 377.

personalities and opinions, whether it is consciously or unconsciously. Every author of autobiography had wanted to construct his own identity and without even knowing it, he created not only his unique self-identity but a national identity too. With the growing number of autobiographies in America, the national identity increased too. This phenomenon is called the American individualism. To get the general view of American autobiography, it is essential to name some of the famous American works such as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

What can be the reason for a person to want to define himself so much? Susan Baleé assumes that this urge is rooted in American history. Looking at the themes of American autobiographies, it is apparent from them that most of them are about religious oppression, slavery, immigration, the Depression, the First and Second World Wars, the rise of industry and technology or the assimilation of immigrants. Based on this fact, the autobiographical works could be perceived as a type of response to these external pressures in American history.⁸

As the thesis discusses the works of Afro-American authors, it is relevant to comment on the history of Afro-American writing. The beginnings of Afro-American writing started in the form of slave narratives in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁹ The first autobiographies ever written by Afro-American writers were not just plain stories or fiction but they were a real description of the lives and feelings of Afro-American people. By writing such autobiography and by describing their lives, they wanted to define their personal freedom. Fred Hobson wrote in his review of the book called *To Tell a Free Story* by William L. Andrews that:

the writing of Afro-American autobiography in its first century became increasingly not only the telling of a story about freedom but itself a vital part of a process toward freedom. The act of writing, that is, was an act of liberation, at least in the cases of those writers who freed themselves from literary conventions and defied popular assumptions and expectations.¹⁰

⁸ Susan Balée, "From the Outside In: A History of American Autobiography," *The Hudson Review* 51, no. 1 (1998, Spring): 40 – 64.

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1009739777?accountid=17239>.

⁹ John Sekora, "American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies," review of *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, by William L. Andrews, The Johns Hopkins University Press, accessed January 31, 2018.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2738632>.

¹⁰ Fred Hobson, "The Centennial Review," review of *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, by William L. Andrews, Michigan State University Press, accessed January 2, 2018.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23738654>.

Imagining the difficult situation of Afro-Americans due to the American history circumstances, one can think up many reasons for writing an autobiography at that time on his own. It was an act of gaining confidence and qualifying themselves as equal. The act of manifesting for freedom. They wanted to show that they are the same people as whites and that there are no differences between them except for the color. They intended to show their feelings to prove that they are also human beings. Writing an autobiography was one of the ways of making the whites feel guilty and have pity on them. The authors of Afro-American autobiographies proved that they had been conscious of their desperate situation and there is no doubt that such a public revelation of their lives and feelings in the form of autobiography helped them to free themselves to some extent. Fred Hobson's citation from the book *To Tell a Free Story* by William L. Andrews that "autobiography became a very public way of declaring oneself free,"¹¹ hints that freeing yourself by writing an autobiography was quite popular at that time.

In the past, it was tremendously difficult for Afro-Americans to write. Disclosing their feelings to the public was not easy and so was not easy the writing of autobiography itself. Due to their social status, the Afro-American authors were victims of circumstances. The first circumstance that Hobson mentions is telling the author's story to a predominately white audience and the second circumstance is that sometimes the Afro-American author had to tell his story to a white amanuensis-editor¹² because he was not educated enough to write the story on his own. Concerning these two problems that Afro-American authors had to face, Hobson demonstrates several thoughts that needed to be taken into account:

How far should the ex-slave go in telling his truth, and in what manner? What stance and tone should he assume? For whom was he writing: himself, a black community, white abolitionists, or a general white audience? Would he be believed and trusted by skeptical white readers?¹³

Under these circumstances, they had to use different approaches to tell their stories but by using them, the autobiographies were certainly influenced to some extent. Furthermore, it is necessary to know that helping the early Afro-American writers was a political risk so the reasons for the willingness of a white printer or sponsor to support or cooperate with such a writer need to be considered.¹⁴ Sekora, another reviewer of Andrew's work, states "we need to know under what

¹¹ Hobson, "The Centennial Review," 79.

¹² Hobson, 79.

¹³ Hobson, 79.

¹⁴ Sekora, "American Society for Eighteenth- Century Studies," 109.

conditions hostile or indifferent white printers, especially before 1800, were willing to invest in an African-American subject or author.”¹⁵

According to Hobson and his review of William L. Andrew’s book, one of the first text was a brief narrative by Briton Hammon from 1760 and it had to be completed by a white reader who was superior to him. Moving on to the characteristic of the main protagonist in autobiographies, before the 1840s, he was usually as Hobson depicted him:

the humble Christian servant, the pilgrim in black, posing as an ‘artless and unaffected’ narrator who refused to be bitter or to expose his ‘dark self within,’ but rather asked forgiveness for his sins and forgave others for theirs¹⁶

. The main character was so modest and polite that he would ask forgiveness also for his actions that helped him to achieve his freedom. Around the 1840s, the Afro-American autobiographers such as Douglass, Henry Bibb, James W. C. Pennington started to be more assertive in their works. Another example of an assertive work would be *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* by Samuel Ringgold Ward. The three most successful autobiographies pointed out in Hobson’s review and written in the 1850s and 1860s are *Green’s Narrative*, *Jacob’s Incidents in Life of a Slave Girl*, and Douglas’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*. These autobiographies are viewed as the best depiction of the first century of Afro-American autobiography.¹⁷

As described above, in the 19th century, the Afro-Americans did not challenge the presumptions that white authors had created for them. They accepted these images and submitted themselves to them in order to publish their works without difficulties. This phase of pandering to white editors and white Americans ended with the Negro Awakening in the 1920s and at that time, the true features of Negro writing appeared to be evident.¹⁸ Some of the representatives of the New Negro Movement are Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes who according to Theodore L. Gross, the author of *The Literature of the American Negro*, was: “a kind of curator of Negro culture, editing and writing more than a dozen books on Negro life and art...”¹⁹ By announcing his liberation from all social strictures, Hughes started his career in the early twenties. The announcement was as follows: “We younger Negro

¹⁵ Sekora, 109.

¹⁶ Hobson, 79.

¹⁷ Hobson, 79.

¹⁸ Theodore L. Gross, “The Literature of the American Negro,” *The Antioch Review* 28, no. 3 (Autumn, 1968): 294.

¹⁹ Gross, “The Literature of the American Negro,” 296.

artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.”²⁰

As mentioned before, Richard Wright (1908-1960) was a part of the New Negro movement as well as one of its phase called Harlem Renaissance and additionally, the era in which Richard belonged to is called the Civil Right Movement era.²¹ It would be appropriate to briefly define these terms. In Britannica, Harlem Renaissance (c. 1918-37) is described as:

a blossoming of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history...participants sought to reconceptualize ‘the Negro’ apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced black peoples’ relationship to their heritage and to each other...They also sought to break free of Victorian moral values.²²

New Negro movement ushered in the civil rights movement that lasted through years of the late 1940s and 1950s.²³ If there is a label for Wright’s writing, it will be Urban Realism. Wright can be also classified into the group of artists called “Chicago writers.” Chicago was the center of migration during Great Depression which Wright experienced. The style of Wright’s writing can be assigned as avant-garde modernism but he is also associated with a social realist style or naturalist style.²⁴ Concerning his work *Black Boy*, the reviewer Harry Estill Moore states his opinion on work and gives a brief description of the content:

Although *Black Boy* is the autobiography of a Negro born and growing up in the South, it is also, in sociological jargon, the history of the development of a racial attitude; and an excellent case study of a Negro family, displaying the manner in which this fundamental unit is organized and operates among this particular group.²⁵

This statement by Moore brilliantly describes the functions of the work which are a demonstration of Afro-American history, showing the struggles of growing up in the South or

²⁰ Gross, 296.

²¹ Radovan Hovad, “Concept of Racism in the Novel *Black Boy* by Richard Wright“ (BA, University of Pardubice, 2010), 8-9.

²² “Harlem Renaissance,” Britannica Academic, accessed May 23, 2018
<https://academic.oup.com/levels/collegiate/article/Harlem-Renaissance/39283>.

²³ “Harlem Renaissance,” Britannica

²⁴ Hovad, “Concept of Racism,” 9-10.

²⁵ Harry Estill Moore, “Racial Antagonism,” review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, Southern Methodist University, accessed May 25, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43466774.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac716f69e48b5449b1c2973c6cf131150>.

fighting the racial oppression. Another reviewer named Arthur P. Davis claims that *Black Boy* is “one of the strongest works yet written by an American Negro” and notes that Wright’s main desire in the work was “to render a judgment on his environment.”²⁶ Literary critics are concerned with a question whether *Black Boy* is a complete autobiography or whether it contains fictional elements. One of them wrote that “although it is probably true that *Black Boy* contains many exaggerated and even fictitious incidents, the emotions adhere to Wright’s emotional existence.”²⁷ The work is divided into two main parts, the first part depicts his childhood in the South and the second part describes his involvement in the Communist Party.

Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was an American poet, memoirist, and actress. She was also a militant in the Civil Rights Movement since 1959-1960 and cooperated with Dr. Martin Luther King.²⁸ Same as Richard, she is associated with Harlem Renaissance since she was encouraged to write her autobiography by the Harlem Writers’ Guild. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) was her first autobiographical work²⁹ and she accepted to write it because she did not resist the challenge of writing an autobiography as literature which she was told was impossible.³⁰ However, Kathlyn Rummell wrote: “as any good reader knows, it is impossible to separate these categories completely...one must necessarily juggle literary, historical, and cultural readings.”³¹ Black women along with Maya were invisible in the second wave of Feminist Movement in the 1970s which led to their separation and creation of their own organizations. They produced black women’s autobiographies by which they drew attention to problems concerning both gender and race. Her *Caged Bird* carries out the same function- it stresses the race and gender in the context of social movements.³² To mention the form of the book, it seems to be chronological but it is not. Some of the episodes are juxtaposed and organized so they comment on each other. They come earlier in her book than they did in

²⁶ Arthur P. Davis, “Review,” review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, *Journal of Negro Education*, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2966030.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3871caeace26699bac82b2c40d599387>.

²⁷ Claudia C. Tate, “Richard Wright’s ,Tragic Sense of Life,“ review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, St. Louis University, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3041609.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af8e31e2f81565933a1d40a9a74b5e425>.

²⁸ Cláudia Maria Fernandes Correa, “Through Their Voices She Found Her Voice: Women in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” a review of international English literature 41. no.1 (2011): 69-90.

²⁹ “Maya Angelou,” *Britannica Academic*, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Maya-Angelou/2400>.

³⁰ Pierre A. Walker, “Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” *College Literature* 22, no. 3 (Oct., 1995): 91-108.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25112210.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A9624297f59e236d7b0257ba1f6ef6826>.

³¹ Kathlyn Rummell, “Review,” review of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou, Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1348431.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3d47f3e3624bf2726ea870e609ea7ce7>.

³² Correa, “Through Their Voices,” 78.

Maya's life. One of the juxtaposed scenes is, for example, the episode with the 'powhitetrash' girls.³³

These works by Maya Angelou and Richard Wright were specifically chosen for the purpose of the thesis as they both concern racial protest and same political impact. They demonstrate both boy's and girl's point of view. The dates of their publication are not so distant in time so they are great examples for comparison.

Many African-American texts were written to create a particular political impact. As a result, one can hardly ignore either the political conditions in which the slave narratives and Richard Wright's early works, for example, were composed or the political impact their authors (and editors and publishers, at least of the slave narratives) intended them to have.³⁴

³³ Walker, "Racial Protest," 94.

³⁴ Walker, 92.

2 ANALYSIS OF *BLACK BOY* BY RICHARD WRIGHT AND *CAGED BIRD* BY MAYA ANGELOU

Both authors grew up in the South and they experienced the effects of segregation but apart from segregation, there were other concerns. To begin with their families, they both had to bear with the absence of their parents. From Maya Angelou's autobiography, we know that at a very young age, she and her brother were sent by a train from California to Arkansas to live with their grandparents. They had not known their parents until they moved back to California to live with their mother again when Maya was 13 years old. She was raised by her religious grandmother Momma, who taught her in old southern ways to be a humble negro. Unlike Richard Wright, Maya was always taken care of except for the one month when she ran away from her father and stayed on the streets. Even at that time, she was not completely alone because she joined a gang of other abandoned children and she lived with them. Furthermore, she had an older brother in whom she felt support and moreover, he had always been there for her. Maya had never had to take care of somebody else and she had never been forced to earn money for her family. When she got the job as a streetcar conductor, it was because she decided to go to work and not because she had to: "But the need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind. I had it. The answer came to me with the suddenness of a collision. I would go to work."³⁵ At his very young age, Richard grew up with both his parents but then his father left the family and Richard stayed only with his mother and brother. As his mother spent most of her time at work, there was nobody to look after the two children. As a result of his mother's absence, he temporarily turned into an alcoholic at the age of 6: "I was a drunkard in my sixth year, before I had begun school."³⁶ Later, his mother suffered a stroke which left her partly paralyzed and Richard had to take care not only of himself but of the whole family. He was forced to take various jobs to provide food for the family because they lived in the extremely poor conditions: "My mother became too ill to work and I began to do chores in the neighborhood."³⁷ When comparing the family situations of these two authors, Richard Wright had responsibility and worries at the earlier age than Maya Angelou. It seems that a black boy confronted himself with the hard reality of the South earlier than a black girl. Another example of a black boy, who realized and was shocked by the cruelty and unfairness of the South, was Maya's brother Bailey. She wrote about the incident of him facing the brutal reality in a form of a dead black man's body which he had to carry:

³⁵ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), 186.

³⁶ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Perennial, 1998), 26.

³⁷ Wright, *Black Boy*, 76.

He was away in a mystery, locked in the enigma that young Southern Black boys start to unravel, start to try to unravel, from seven years old to death. The humorless puzzle of inequality and hate. His experience raised the question of worth and values, of aggressive inferiority and aggressive arrogance.³⁸

Another negative aspect of Richard's growing up was hunger. Before his mother suffered a stroke, she had earned a little money and she had taught Richard to be independent and mature by giving him that money and sending him to buy food. He had been beaten many times by a gang of boys who was stealing money from him but his mother sent him again and again: "Take this money, this note, and this stick," she said. "Go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, then fight."³⁹ This moment turned out to be crucial later when his mother became crippled. The whole family was dependent on Richard and his ability to find a job and earn money. His upbringing was strict because his mother knew that the life in the segregated South will be tough for him. She knew that if she does not force him to learn how to fight and stand for himself at that moment, he will never be able to successfully live through those years in the South. At that time, Richard was too young to go to work and earn money and his mother fell often ill. They did not have anything to eat. Hunger was present all the time:

My mother fell ill and the problem of food became an acute, daily agony. Hunger was with us always. Sometimes the neighbors would feed us or a dollar bill would come in the mail from my grandmother.⁴⁰

After some time when he was old enough to earn money and buy food for himself, he chose to rather starve and save the money for traveling North.

I saved each penny I came by, stinting myself on food, walking to work, eating out of paper bags, living on a pint of milk and two sweet rolls for breakfast, a hamburger and peanuts for lunch, and a can of beans which I would eat at night in my room. I was used to hunger and I did not need much food to keep me alive.⁴¹

Different from Richard, Maya had never been hungry even though there was a difference in food that she ate which depended on whether she was in Arkansas, St. Louis or California. In Arkansas, she lived with her grandmother who owned a Store in the heart of the Negro area. It was the only store owned by a negro and it provided all kinds of things apart from food for

³⁸ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 141.

³⁹ Wright, 22.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Black Boy*, 31.

⁴¹ Wright, 193.

black workers so the food was always within Maya's reach: "Customers could find food staples, a good variety of colored thread, mash for hogs, corn for chickens, coal oil for lamps, light bulbs for the wealthy, shoestrings, hair dressing, balloons, and flower seeds."⁴² Although there was enough food, she could not take whatever she wanted. Her grandmother taught her to be humble so Maya could eat only what Momma gave her. The food was mainly intended for the customers. They were not rich but they knew how to operate. In contrast to Richard's starvation, her food selection was wide:

Throughout the year, until the next frost, we took our meals from the smokehouse, the little garden that lay cousin-close to the Store and from the shelves of canned foods. There were choices on the shelves that could set a hungry child's mouth to watering. Green beans, snapped always the right length, collards, cabbage, juicy red tomato preserves that came into their own on steaming buttered biscuits, and sausage, beets, berries and every fruit grown in Arkansas.⁴³

Then Maya moved to St. Louis to live temporarily with her grandmother Baxter and the change of the city brought also the change of the food variety: "St. Louis also introduced me to thin-sliced ham (I thought it a delicacy), jelly beans and peanuts mixed, lettuce on sandwich, ..."⁴⁴ The difference between Maya's and Richard's intake was enormous. While Maya had never considered food to be important and she had never put any special emphasis on it, Richard was, on the other hand, tremendously influenced by the lack of food and the constant hunger that he felt throughout his childhood.

As mentioned before, since he was a child, Richard had to take various jobs because his family was unable to earn enough money to pay a rent due to his mother's illness. Some of his first jobs were carrying lunches to the men in the roundhouse or working in a small café where he was slaving over a big stove and where he took trays of food to the passengers. He described that he was too small and young to perform the duties: "... one morning while trying to take a heavily loaded tray up the steps of a train, I fell and dashed the tray of food to the ground."⁴⁵ Once, Richard's schoolmate offered a job to Richard. It was selling papers and magazine to black people. Unfortunately, later he found out that he was exploited by Ku Klux Klan propaganda: "'Do you know what the Ku Kluxers do

⁴² Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 8.

⁴³ Angelou, 20.

⁴⁴ Angelou, 47.

⁴⁵ Wright, 76.

to colored people?’ ‘They kill us. They keep us from voting and getting good gobs,’ I said. ‘Well, the paper you’re selling preaches the Ku Klux Klan doctrines,’ he said.”⁴⁶

Ku Klux Klan was a hate organization that was founded in the U.S. and it aimed at pursuing the white supremacist agenda. It was against the Radical Reconstruction in the South and they tried to stop it through intimidation and violence. It also attacked the newly enfranchised black freedmen. It came in two waves. The first time, the organization occurred was immediately after the Civil War in 1866, in Tennessee as a social club run by Confederate veterans. The second time when the Ku Klux Klan arose was in 1915 and from that time, it has been continuing.⁴⁷

Richard experienced hard times during the job hunting and even when he got a job, it was tremendously problematic to keep it: “I held a series of petty jobs for short periods, quitting some to work elsewhere, being driven off others because of my attitude, my speech, the look in my eyes.”⁴⁸ Same as in Maya’s case, the jobs that he could obtain were mainly low-grade and not well-paid. His superiors were predominantly white men who teased him and made the relationship between them very intense and uneasy. Racist comments or behavior were everyday issues either by his bosses or white colleagues. For instance, once he accepted a job as a porter in a clothing store selling goods on credit and this is how he described the environment of the store: “The boss, his son, and the clerk treated the Negroes with open contempt, pushing, kicking, or slapping them.”⁴⁹ Then, reasons for Richard to work changed. With time, it was not just the hunger that prompted him to search for a job but it was also the need of clothes and books that were necessary if he wanted to attend school: “The old problem of hunting for a job. I told the woman for whom I was working, a Mrs. Bibbs, that I needed an all-day job that would pay me enough money to buy clothes and books for the next school term.”⁵⁰ Later, the biggest motivation for him was saving the money for his trip to North: “As soon as school was over, I would get a job, save money, and leave.”⁵¹ Even when he had enough money and traveled to Memphis, he worked and collect money for his mother to move with him: “I centered my

⁴⁶ Wright, 114.

⁴⁷ “Ku Klux Klan,” Britannica Academic, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Ku-Klux-Klan/46315>.

⁴⁸ Wright, 157.

⁴⁹ Wright, 155.

⁵⁰ Wright, 147.

⁵¹ Wright, 153.

attention now upon making enough money to send for my mother and brother.”⁵² In contrast to Richard, Maya’s job hunting and her reasons for getting a job differed a lot. She did not start because it was necessary to earn money but because it was an additional part of her education. As Maya mentioned in her book, all the negro girls in the South were taught how to do the household chores but some of the skills needed to be learned somewhere else:

It went without saying that all girls could iron and wash, but the finer touches around the home, like setting a table with real silver, baking roasts and cooking vegetables without meat, had to be learned elsewhere...During my tenth year, a white woman’s kitchen became my finishing school.⁵³

As mentioned above, Maya worked for a white superior called Mrs. Cullinan. Similarly to Richard’s case, the behavior of her superior was racist and ignorant. Maya had to learn all the chores and did them carefully and in return, she was called out of her name: “The very next day, she called me by the wrong name.”⁵⁴ As it was not an isolated incident but Mrs. Cullinan kept calling her Mary, Maya decided to quit: “I had to quit the job, but the problem was going to be how to do it.”⁵⁵ Opposite to Richard, Maya could leave the job when she did not like it. The only person that would not allow it was Momma but with the help of Bailey, Maya found a way of quitting the job. Despite the fact that Richard did not like the most of his jobs, he could not leave as Maya did because of the financial difficulties he had but even though he tried to keep every job, he got often fired because he was not able to learn where his place is in the world of whites. He was not humble enough but he was lucky that his friend told that to him because otherwise, he could have got killed:

‘You act around white people as if you didn’t know that they were white. And they see it.’ ‘Oh, Christ, I can’t be a slave,’ I said hopelessly. ‘But you’ve got to eat,’ he said. ‘Yes, I got to eat.’⁵⁶

The process of degradation, which Richard went through while he was working, was even worse than Maya experienced and because he needed money a lot, he decided to rather learn how to act in front of whites instead of losing the opportunity for obtaining a job:

⁵² Wright, 192.

⁵³ Angelou, 77.

⁵⁴ Angelou, 80.

⁵⁵ Angelou, 80.

⁵⁶ Wright, 159.

I was reminding myself that I must be polite, must think before I spoke, must think before I acted, must say “yes sir, no sir,” that I must so conduct myself that white people would not think that I thought I was as good as they.⁵⁷

Moving on to education, unlike Maya, Richard did not go to school regularly. It depended on whether he had money or not. Although he started school a year later than other boys, he could count and he learned to read. The process of learning to count was a random act realized by a coal man who revealed Richard’s lack of knowledge and it was purely his willingness to teach Richard to count. The coal man thought of it as of a shame that a six years old boy could not count. Richard was a quick learner and from that time his desire for seeking knowledge got stronger:

He counted to ten and I listened carefully; then he asked me to count alone and I did. He then made me memorize the words twenty, thirty, forty, etc., then told me to add one, two, three, and so on. In about an hour’s time I had learned to count to a hundred and I was overjoyed.⁵⁸

When his mother noticed his interest in learning, she started to teach him to read: “After that she taught me to read, told me stores. On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words.”⁵⁹ When he was seven years old, Richard’s mother saved enough money to buy the decent clothes for Richard so he could begin school. When coming to school for the first time, Richard was terrified, shy and desperate: “...when I reached the edge of the school grounds I became terrified, wanted to return home, wanted to put it off.”⁶⁰ He was so shocked to be in school that although he understood everything, he was incapable of speaking. The first day school experience was more about talking to other boys and social gathering: “...I attached myself to a group of older boys and followed them about, listening to their talk, asking countless questions.”⁶¹ The biggest difference in the education of a black boy and a black girl was that it was presumed that all the black girls in the South managed to do all kinds of household chores:

We were required to embroider and I had trunkfuls of colorful dishtowels, pillowcases, runners and handkerchiefs to my credit. I mastered the art of

⁵⁷ Wright, 161.

⁵⁸ Wright, 27.

⁵⁹ Wright, 27.

⁶⁰ Wright, 28.

⁶¹ Wright, 28.

crocheting and tatting, and there was a lifetime's supply of dainty doilies that would never be used in sacheted dresser drawers.⁶²

As mentioned before, Maya went to school continuously. In comparison with Richard, she did not lack books or clothes. She was lucky to have her grandmother who made her the clothes and took care of everything: "Momma bought two bolts of cloth each year for winter and summer clothes. She made my school dresses, underslips, bloomers, handkerchiefs,..."⁶³ She interrupted her education only once when she decided that she needed a change and wanted to go to work: "I would go to work. Mother wouldn't be difficult to convince; after all, in school I was a year ahead of my grade..."⁶⁴ Unfortunately, Richard did not have the supportive family background as Maya had and he was forced to interrupt his education every now and then whether it was because of his mother's illness: "For a time I remained out of school to wait upon my mother..."⁶⁵, a job that he tried to keep while attending school:

I had fallen down in my studies at school. Had I been physically stronger, had not my new tensions sapped my already limited energy, I might have been able to work mornings and evenings and still carry my studies successfully. But in the middle of the day I would grow groggy...⁶⁶

or because of his inability to find a job at all: "The summer waned. Hope for school was now definitely gone. Autumn came and many of the boys who held jobs returned to school. Jobs were now numerous."⁶⁷ At least, this situation gave him a new opportunity to finally obtain a job. Based on the text, it was common that black people in the South were often uneducated and since Richard could count and read, the absence of school was not relevant to him: "Though I was nearly nine years of age, I had not had a single, unbroken year of school, and I was not conscious of it. I could read and count and that was about as much as most of the people I met could do, grownups or children."⁶⁸ Maya was a brilliant student and later, she even accepted a scholarship and went to the California Labor School to study drama and dance: "At fourteen I accepted a scholarship and got one for the next year as well."⁶⁹ After finishing their studies in the South, both authors graduated and during the graduation ceremony, they experienced the

⁶² Angelou, 77.

⁶³ Angelou, 37.

⁶⁴ Angelou, 186.

⁶⁵ Wright, 31.

⁶⁶ Wright, 130.

⁶⁷ Wright, 169.

⁶⁸ Wright, 52.

⁶⁹ Angelou, 154.

racist behavior. Richard was selected as a valedictorian of his class and he should deliver a speech at a public auditorium. His professor wrote the speech and wanted Richard to present it but Richard was too proud to do that and refused. As the speech was for both white and colored people, the professor was afraid what Richard wanted to talk about. He was afraid of losing his job so he threatened Richard with failing the school:

“You’re just a young, hotheaded fool,” he said. He toyed with a pencil and looked up at me. “Suppose you don’t graduate?” “But I passed my examinations,” I said. “Look, mister,” he shot at me, “I’m the man who says who passes at this school.”⁷⁰

The professor also assured him of not being able to be a teacher in the future but nothing seemed to threaten Richard enough. The professor was not the only one who tried to persuade Richard. His friend Griggs also warned him: “‘Look, Dick, you’re throwing away your future here in Jackson,’ he said. ‘Go to the principal, talk to him, take his speech and say it.’”⁷¹ Despite all the persuading, Richard delivered his speech with the feeling of doing the right thing. He wanted the speech to reflect his knowledge. Although Maya did not have to deal with the speech as Richard, for her, the graduation was also destroyed but in another way. Before they were called to receive their diploma, a white politician who was running for election came on the stage and gave a speech which was a part of his propaganda. He degraded the colored students and indicated that they were not at the same level as white students: “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises.”⁷² He devastated all their aspirations and dreams. Maya, same as Richard, felt horrible after the ceremony: “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense.”⁷³

Another thing that the authors had in common was a passion for reading books. For both, it was a kind of an escape from the ordinary and boring black and white world that they lived in. To Richard, reading books was like discovering an unfamiliar world that was prohibited. When he was small, he lived temporarily with his grandmother who employed a young schoolteacher Ella to help her support the household. Ella was always reading books and Richard was curious what is in them. Once, despite the fact that his grandmother had forbidden them from that, Ella

⁷⁰ Wright, 151.

⁷¹ Wright, 152.

⁷² Angelou, 128.

⁷³ Angelou, 128.

read a story to Richard and after the grandmother saw them, she bawled them out. Afterward, Richard's excitement for reading books increased: "I vowed that as soon as I was old enough I would buy all the novels there were and read them to feed that thirst for violence that was in me..."⁷⁴ From that time, he was occasionally stealing books from Ella: "But when no one was looking I would slip into Ella's room and steal a book and take it back of the barn and try to read it."⁷⁵ and later when he had a job, he could eventually buy them: "I now had more money than I had ever had before, and began patronizing secondhand bookstores, buying magazines and books...I would buy them for a few cents, read them, then resell them to the bookdealer."⁷⁶ Maya fell in love with reading at her early age while still living in Stamps. In contrary to Richard, Maya had never been prohibited from reading as long as the author of the book was black: "...Momma would question us about the author and that we'd have to tell her that Shakespeare was white, and it wouldn't matter to her whether he was dead or not."⁷⁷ In contrast to Richard, she was even supported to read and learn about books and about the way of expressing herself by attending the private lectures from Mrs. Flowers. Mrs. Flowers was an educated negro woman who belonged to a social elite in Stamps and Maya admired her: "Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat of Black Stamps...She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be."⁷⁸ Unlike Richard, Maya was lucky to receive books from her. She did not need to secure them on her own: "She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read them, I must read them aloud."⁷⁹ Richard, on the other hand, had to secure all his books by himself. When he was looking for answers, he got an idea of visiting a library. The problem was that black people could not visit the library by reason of segregation but Richard did not feel discouraged because of that. He pretended to pick up the books for a white man in the same way in which he had actually done it several times before when he had brought the books to the white men on the job: "I had gone into the library several times to get books for the white men on the job."⁸⁰ The book titles on the note were written by him and the librarian believed that a white man wrote them. It was a successful method of getting books and it further promoted his

⁷⁴ Wright, 40.

⁷⁵ Wright, 40.

⁷⁶ Wright, 193.

⁷⁷ Angelou, 13.

⁷⁸ Angelou, 69.

⁷⁹ Angelou, 72.

⁸⁰ Wright, 207.

affection for reading: “I forged more notes and my trips to the library became frequent. Reading grew into a passion...Reading was like a drug, a dope.”⁸¹

Similarly, both authors encountered a misunderstanding by older generation over the importance of reading and education. The evidence of the misunderstanding demonstrates the generation gap that existed between children and their parents and grandparents in the segregated South. In Maya’s case, it was the level of her grandmother’s education that concerned her. She noticed the difference in the Momma’s way of expressing while listening to her conversation with educated Mrs. Flowers: “Momma responded with ‘How you, Sister Flowers?’...Momma left out the verb. Why not ask, ‘How are you, Mrs. Flowers?’...It didn’t occur to me for many years that they were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education.”⁸² Likewise, Richard’s grandpa was also uneducated and illiterate. In his book, he described the situation of his grandpa receiving a letter from the War Department. As he could not read the letter, he handed it to Richard to read it:

He would stare at the black print for a long time, then reluctantly, distrustfully hand the letter to me. ‘Well?’ he would say. And I would read him the letter—reading slowly and pronouncing each word with extreme care—telling him that his claims for a pension had not been substantiated and that his application had been rejected. Grandpa would not blink an eye, then he would curse softly under his breath. ‘It’s them goddamn rebels,’ he would hiss. As though doubting what I had read, he would dress up and take the letter to at least a dozen of his friends in the neighborhood and ask them to read it to him;”⁸³

Richard’s grandmother called books “the Devil’s work” and she forbade him from reading them in her home. She was sure that the books had ruined him and had taught him bad manners: “The next day Granny said emphatically that she knew who had ruined me, that she knew I had learned about “foul practices” from reading Ella’s books...”⁸⁴ Evidently, not only the approach to education but also to religion differed from generation to generation and it widened the generation gap. Richard’s family, especially his grandmother and aunt Addie strongly believed in God and at home, they all had to follow a strict religious regime:

⁸¹ Wright, 211.

⁸² Angelou, 69.

⁸³ Wright, 121.

⁸⁴ Wright, 44.

In the home Granny maintained a hard religious regime. There were prayers at sunup and sundown, at the breakfast table and dinner table, followed by a Bible verse from each member of the family. And it was presumed that I prayed before I got into bed at night.⁸⁵

Richard's response to the religious practices was negative and he tried to think up as many excuses as he could to avoid them: "I shirked as many of the weekday church services as possible, giving as my excuse that I had to study; of course, nobody believed me, but my lies were accepted because nobody wanted to risk a row."⁸⁶ His disbelief resulted in many violent arguments in which Richard persist in rejecting God and his grandmother threatened him: "I have nothing to do with whether you go to school or not," she said. 'You left the church and you are on your own. You are with the world. You're dead to me, dead to Christ.'"⁸⁷ They insisted on him joining the church and despite his negative attitude towards religion, he was eventually forced to become a member of Methodist church. Richard depicted the compulsion that he was under:

It was no longer a question of my believing in God; it was no longer a matter of whether I would steal or lie or murder; it was a simple, urgent matter of public pride, a matter of how much I had in common with other people. If I refused, it meant that I did not love my mother, and no man in that tight little community had ever been crazy enough to let himself be placed in such a position.⁸⁸

Hakutani confirms the pressure on the black youngsters: "Throughout his youth he witnessed how deeply superstitious religion had trapped the minds and hearts of black people."⁸⁹ Maya also experienced a revival meeting where people of no religion were asked to join a church. In the South, it was socially expedient that every black person is a member of a church. Maya depicted the pressure on people of no religion from the religious groups that was very similar to the pressure that Richard underwent: "all those under the sound of my voice who have no spiritual home, whose hearts are burdened and heavy-landened, let them come. Come before it's too late...if you join this evening, just say which church you want to be affiliated with..."⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Wright, 98.

⁸⁶ Wright, 98.

⁸⁷ Wright, 125.

⁸⁸ Wright, 133.

⁸⁹ Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Creation of the Self in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*," review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, St. Louis University, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2904009.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac8de1911d5b5beeae671ffd88fd5b20b>.

⁹⁰ Angelou, 95-96.

In the works, the aspect of religion is nearly identical. Both authors had a very strict religious grandmother who raised them in an orthodox way which provoked disputes.

Such disputes over the spiritual subjects often led to physical punishments which were not rare and both authors mention them multiple times in their works. In her work, Maya described an incident of her being hit with a switch for an unknown sin:

...later in the evening I found that my violation lay in using the phrase 'by the way.' Momma explained that 'Jesus was the Way, the Truth and the Light,' and anyone who says 'by the way' is really saying, 'by Jesus,' or 'by God' and the Lord's name would not be taken in vain in her house.⁹¹

Maya experienced the physical punishments mainly by her grandmother and they were for purposes related to her upbringing. When there was an argument, Momma used a switch or a bare hand to teach her grandchildren a lesson but she had never been too violent with them. Maya faced a violent act that included a real fight only once and it was in Mexico when Dolores, a girlfriend of her father, stabbed her with a knife. It was an actual fight during which she or Dolores could have died. The reason for the quarrel was a matter of pride. Dolores called Maya's mother a whore and Maya provoked the physical fight by slapping Dolores:

What did she expect if she called my mother a whore? I walked out of the house. On the steps I felt something wet on my arm and looked down to find blood. Her screams still sailed through the evening air like skipping stones, but I was bleeding...I was cut.⁹²

In comparison to Maya, Richard's life was full of cruel fights and attacks. He experienced violence not only at home when he was little but also at work or randomly on streets. Most of the violent situations resulted from segregation. These situations were extremely dangerous and he could not escape them. Beginning with the physical punishments that he experienced at home, he was an outstandingly disobedient child and the reasons for his punishments by his parents were valid because setting a house on fire or killing a kitty are both horrible crimes. Differently from Maya, these reasons had nothing to do with religion. After setting his house on fire, he was beaten with a tree limb:

⁹¹ Angelou, 75.

⁹² Angelou, 173.

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear.⁹³

When he grew older, the physical punishments were not about his disobedience anymore. Not about the disobedience as he knew it. This was the moment when it started to differ from Maya and her punishments. Religion started to play an important role in Richard's life whether he wanted it or not. He was often punished by his aunt Addie who was also his teacher in the religious school. As she was a firm religious believer and Richard refused everything related to God, the relationship between them was complicated and cruel:

Aunt Addie was the only teacher and from the first day an acute, bitter antagonism sprang up between us. This was the first time she had ever taught school and she was nervous, self-conscious because a blood relative of hers—a relative who would not confess her faith and who was not a member of her church—was in her classroom. She was determined that every student should know that I was a sinner of whom she did not approve, and that I was not to be granted consideration of any kind.⁹⁴

Her religion was more to her than her relative and with this hatred that she felt for him, she once beat him in school for the reason that was not right and Richard knew it. The incident continued at home and because Richard had decided that it would not happen again he defended himself with a knife and he was prepared to use it when necessary: “Leave me alone or I’ll cut you!”⁹⁵ Maya experienced such a cruel act with a weapon only once but in Richard's case, it was one act out of many. Another violent situation in which Richard decided to defend himself and use a weapon included him and his relative uncle Tom: “I’ve got a razor in each hand!’ I warned in a low charged voice. ‘If you touch me, I’ll cut you!’”⁹⁶ In contrast to Richard, Maya had never even considered opposing her punishments even when they seemed unfair and she had never defended herself with a weapon. It seems that Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is built on violence theme. Arthur P. Davis tries to think of why:

⁹³ Wright, 14.

⁹⁴ Wright, 92.

⁹⁵ Wright, 96.

⁹⁶ Wright, 137.

It may be that Richard Wright sees in violence the most revealing symbol of Negro living in America; or to be more cynical, it may be that he has discovered that literary violence brings in more royalties than gentler approaches.⁹⁷

All these topics, which have been mentioned and compared so far, were experienced by both authors but there are other subjects in their writings that were typical only for one author based on his or her gender. As indicated above in the thesis, there existed the similarities but also huge differences in growing up in the South based on whether you were a girl or a boy. Among the most diverse problems, that Maya as a girl was confronted with, were, for example, a sexual abuse, pregnancy, triple oppression or a gap in her knowledge of her body. These problems were obstacles that Richard could not come across as they were strictly linked to the gentle sex. The first incident that Maya had to overcome was a sexual abuse by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman when she was eight years old: "Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart...The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot."⁹⁸ As Maya had been growing up without her father, she at first liked Mr. Freeman holding her. That is why she was afraid to tell the truth at the court. After the trial, Mr. Freeman was killed and she felt responsible for it. Mary Vermillion wrote in her review of Maya's autobiography:

Freeman's pleading looks in the courtroom, along with Maya's own shame, compel her to lie, and after she learns that her uncles have murdered Freeman, she believes that her courtroom lie is responsible for his death."⁹⁹

With this belief, Maya decided to rather stop speaking because she did not want to kill somebody else. Vermillion states in her review: "Rape in Angelou's text, however, primarily represents the black girl's difficulties in controlling, understanding, and respecting both her body and her words..."¹⁰⁰ Concerning this fact, the power of words was emphasized a lot after the rape. Maya feared the power of words but as another reviewer Pierre A. Walker mentions, "..."but throughout the second half of the book she acknowledges that the imagination can

⁹⁷ Arthur P. Davis, "Black Boy by Richard Wright," review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, *Journal of Negro Education*, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2966030.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aa8a8a1ecbf3a677c11005530182227d0>.

⁹⁸ Angelou, 58-59.

⁹⁹ Mary Vermillion, "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,'" review of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou, University of Hawai'i Press, accessed May 18, 2018.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23539450.pdf?refreqid=search%3A8c4f797517e414ef8e898e33661leafb6>.

¹⁰⁰ Vermillion, 10.

harness the power of words to great ends.”¹⁰¹ A similar concept of the power of words was developed also in *Black Boy*: “Black Boy demonstrates the negative power of words each time Wright is abused for not saying the right thing, yet the book concludes on a positive note when Wright realizes that he can harness the power of words to his own artistic and political ends.”¹⁰² His problem was not just not saying the right thing but Claudia C. Tate wrote: “In his daily dealings with people, he reveals, often without thinking, the presence of his consciousness—and as a result disturbs every facet of the Southern social framework.”¹⁰³ The theme of silence is present in both works and according to Claudia Tate, “silence had a special significance with the Black community; it indicated acceptance, submission to the conditions of life, especially those caused by racial practices.”¹⁰⁴ Lucky for both authors, they found out that keeping silent was against their fundamental nature. Apart from the sexual abuse, another thing that Maya had to deal with was a misinterpretation of information about her body which led to her pregnancy: “Reading Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) leads Maya to mistakenly interpret these changes as signals that she is becoming a lesbian.”¹⁰⁵ When she tried to confide this to her mother, she was confronted with complete inability to express herself due to the limited vocabulary for describing the physical parts of her body: “‘Mother...my pocketbook...’ ‘Ritie, do you mean your vagina? Don’t use those Southern terms. There’s nothing wrong with the word ‘Vagina.’ It’s a clinical description.’”¹⁰⁶ Not knowing her body and not having the relevant vocabulary were undeniably results of Maya’s puritan southern upbringing: “...Momma had drilled into my head: ‘Keep your legs closed, and don’t let nobody to see your pocketbook.’”¹⁰⁷ As Maya wanted to assure herself of not being a lesbian, she resolved on having sex with a boy who, during that intercourse, got her pregnant. At that time, Maya was sixteen-year-old. This situation that she got herself into showed how foolish she was. It was not only her poor judgement but also the lack of sexual education together with the strict discipline that she had. On the other hand, by asking the boy straightforward to have sex with her, “Maya

¹⁰¹ Pierre Walker, “Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” review of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou, The Johns Hopkins University Press, accessed May 18, 2018.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25112210.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ada2a8dc8343c4712ea06546748ed39b8>.

¹⁰² Walker, 97.

¹⁰³ Claudia C. Tate, “Richard Wright’s ‘Tragic Sense of Life,’” review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, St. Louis University, accessed May 28, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3041609.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A64f7712be2354e060fba4961cde9ba54>.

¹⁰⁴ Tate, “Tragic Sense,” 118.

¹⁰⁵ Vermillion, 254.

¹⁰⁶ Angelou, 193.

¹⁰⁷ Angelou, 53.

claims control of her body and her identity for the first time in the text.”¹⁰⁸ Moving on to other themes that can be couched in one term and that is triple oppression. Maya had to “break all the obstacles and shackles of the society which is beset by the narrow domestic walls of sex, caste, and racism.”¹⁰⁹ In her book, she illustrates how she coped with being a black woman in segregated South where she had to face racial insults and prejudice. Later she became a single mother in her teenage years and she had to confront social discrimination too.

African American girl attempted to survive against male prejudices at social and psychological levels, even in absence of any power and authority and endured all the hardship with her positive zeal and confidence.¹¹⁰

Maya wrote in her book: “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.”¹¹¹ She mentioned this at the beginning of her book to stress one of the main motives that is present in the entire text and that is “a question of what it means to be a Black female in America.”¹¹² The best description of oppression gave Maya herself in *Caged Bird*: “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.”¹¹³ As a result of racial oppression, for Maya, an ideal of beauty was a white girl with the long blond hair and light-blue eyes and because she did not look anything like that she hated her appearance and saw herself as “a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.”¹¹⁴ She stated this about herself at the beginning of her autobiography but throughout the text, Maya became more confident. The important point in the book that stressed her confidence was when she met Mrs. Flowers who made her “proud to be Negro...”¹¹⁵ Eventually, she developed a new-found confidence during her pregnancy and she accepted her appearance and felt empowered. “By detailing how

¹⁰⁸ Vermillion, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Dr. Usha Jain and Nobert Solomon, “Ego Resistance, Oppression and Resilience of Self Esteem in ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ By Maya Angelou,” *International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Current Research* 2, (April 2014): 2.

¹¹⁰ Jain et al., *Ego Resistance*, 2.

¹¹¹ Angelou, 6.

¹¹² Jain et al., 2.

¹¹³ Angelou, 191.

¹¹⁴ Angelou, 6.

¹¹⁵ Angelou, 70.

the pregnant Maya copes with her isolation, Angelou pays further tribute to Maya's increased autonomy and acceptance of her own body."¹¹⁶

These aspects were typical for a girl growing up in the South. Now moving on to the next topic which concerns exclusively the typical boy struggles of Richard. There are going to be mentioned the aspects of Richard's life such as gaining respect among other boys, his hatred of races, his dream of traveling north and escaping the racial oppression or the fights that he got himself into due to his refusal and inability to submit to white race. The first topic is earning respect among other black boys. As he changed school several times, he was often confronted with a new unfamiliar environment. He had to firmly state his position otherwise he knew that he would be bullied. The admittance to the boy's company laid in the acceptance of the same racial opinions. "The touchstone of fraternity was my feeling toward white people, how much hostility I held toward them, what degrees of value and honor I assigned to race."¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, it was not always about opinion acceptance. Sometimes he had to fight out his position: "...trial came not in books, but in how one's fellows took one, what value they placed upon one's willingness to fight."¹¹⁸ Similarly as Maya, Richard suffered the racial oppression not only at the hands of whites but also of blacks. Yoshinobu Hakutani, the reviewer of the *Black Boy*, wrote in his review: "In scene after scene both the black and the white community kept piling crushing circumstances upon him, but no matter how unbearably they were pressed down on him, he refused to give in."¹¹⁹ Richard hated whites and blacks equally. According to the text of Hakutani, Richard Wright was even addressed as "'a black Nazi' and 'one of the biggest spreaders of race hatred."¹²⁰ The reason for his hatred "was not the failure of many blacks and whites alike to see the facts of racism, but their inability to recognize malice in the minds of white racists."¹²¹ Hakutani adds:

Critics, both black and white, have complained that Wright in *Black Boy* lacks racial pride. It is true that he is critical of the black community in the South, but it is not true that he places the blame on the black community itself. His intention is

¹¹⁶ Vermillion, 14.

¹¹⁷ Wright, 71.

¹¹⁸ Wright, 82.

¹¹⁹ Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Creation of the Self in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*," review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, St. Louis University, accessed May 20, 2018

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2904009.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad468d8c5c6b7eb10a13aa1c2cb12ab86>.

¹²⁰ Hakutani, "Creation of the Self," 71.

¹²¹ Hakutani, 71.

to show that a racist system produced the way of life that was forced on black people.¹²²

This judgement made by Richard resembles Maya's attitude toward blacks as she denounced their failure of opposing the racial oppression and inability to speak for themselves. Next concept formulated in Wright's autobiography was his desire to move North. The desire was deep and motivated all Richard's decisions and actions. It stemmed from the racial oppression which he faced in the South and he was convinced that this step would solve all his problems. Harry Moore, a reviewer, adds: "Just as Richard Wright left the South in his efforts to solve his personal problems, so has the 'race problem' moved out of the South and become a matter of national concern."¹²³ On the contrary to this, Maya had never considered going North or somewhere else. She was forced to travel South when she was little and then she moved back to her parents to California but in all cases, it was not her idea to move to another city. She was a victim of circumstances. As a consequence of Richard's "determination to refuse to accept his "place" in either his household or society"¹²⁴, he lived through many hazardous situations during his life. He was afraid to adjust to whites because he feared losing his individuality, self-respect and dignity and as Hakutani states, blacks adjusted mostly for the reason of survival and Richard did not want to adjust just because he felt suppressed.¹²⁵ As he had been giving the indications of not submitting, he was fired from many jobs as his white employers were afraid of his self-awareness and his understanding of being mistreated.

Another degrading assumption white men hold about black men is that, since they are treated as animals, they are not supposed to possess intellectual capabilities. The reason for the young Wright's losing employment is often related to his intelligence, which he poses a threat to the white man's sense of superiority.¹²⁶

Throughout the book, Richard described controlling his every action and word as it did not come naturally to him to behave to whites as to superiors. "The black adults had grown up in the world in which they were permitted no missteps in a white-dominated society."¹²⁷ He did

¹²² Hakutani, 72.

¹²³ Harry Estill Moore, "Racial Antagonism," review of *Black Boy*, " by Richard Wright, Southern Methodist University, accessed May 22, 2018
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43466774.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A59155c4991bf58724e6f7c847184aa6a>.

¹²⁴ Claudia C. Tate, „Richard Wright's „Tragic Sense of Life,“ review of *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, St. Louis University, accessed May 22, 2018
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3041609.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A14e9822914292f69af18edd96cf819ba>.

¹²⁵ Hakutani, 72.

¹²⁶ Hakutani, 72.

¹²⁷ Hakutani, 73.

not understand and did not want to understand the rules of racial oppression and instead of accommodating to them, he disregarded them and planned to escape them. The only time when he was trying to fit in was when he needed to save money for his trip. When compared this to Maya, she was aware of the discrimination and its unfairness but despite the fact that she hated it, she had never resisted as much as Richard. From the book, it is obvious that Richard's main concerns were related to segregation.

3 THE ISSUE OF SEGREGATION

According to Britannica, segregation is a “separation of groups of people with differing characteristics, often taken to connote a condition of inequality.”¹²⁸ There are more types of segregation but only one is relevant for this thesis and that is racial segregation.

Racial segregation, the practice of restricting people to certain circumscribed areas of residence or to separate institutions (e.g., schools, churches) and facilities (parks, playgrounds, restaurants, restrooms) on the basis of race or alleged race. Racial segregation provides a means of maintaining the economic advantages and superior social status of the politically dominant group, and in recent times it has been employed primarily by white populations to maintain their ascendancy over other groups by means of legal and social colour bars.¹²⁹

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to depict that in South there was a legal segregation in public facilities that lasted from the 19th century into the 1950s. To put an end to racial segregation, blacks in the South organized the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. This action urged the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.¹³⁰ The Civil Rights Act “contained strong provisions against discrimination and segregation in voting, education, and the use of public facilities.”¹³¹ Racial segregation determined both the lives of the authors and the development of their autobiographies from the beginning to the end. One of the attributes of the segregation is a separation of schools and difference in education. Maya described how her training differed from a white girl’s training: “While white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them.”¹³² She also pointed out that “naturally, the white school was Central.”¹³³ At that time, she attended Lafayette County Training School which was segregated and not as equipped as school for whites:

Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy. Its two buildings (main classrooms, the grade school and home economics) were set on a

¹²⁸ “Segregation,” Britannica Academic, accessed May 23, 2018
<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/segregation/601029>.

¹²⁹ “Racial Segregation,” Britannica Academic, accessed May 23, 2018
<https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/racial-segregation/62373>.

¹³⁰ Britannica, “Racial Segregation.”

¹³¹ Britannica, “Racial Segregation.”

¹³² Angelou, 77.

¹³³ Angelou, 127.

dirt hill with no fence to limit either its boundaries or those of bordering farms. There was a large expanse to the left of the school which was used alternately as a baseball diamond or a basketball court.¹³⁴

Not many blacks continued on college and if they did, they went to the “South’s A & M (agricultural and mechanical) schools, which trained Negro youths to be carpenters, farmers, handymen, masons, maids, cooks and baby nurses.”¹³⁵ Naturally, Maya hated this fact and she hated it even more during her graduation when a white politician dared to point out the difference between blacks and whites future: “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on in) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises.”¹³⁶ Maya felt as somebody else decided her future instead of her and she had no chance to become what she had wanted to be. Then, Maya was transferred to another institution which was exclusively for girls and she mentioned it only briefly as she did not like the pupils there: “They strutted with an aura of invincibility, and along with some of the Mexican students who put knives in their tall pompadours they absolutely intimidated the white girls and those Black and Mexican students who had no shield of fearlessness.”¹³⁷ Fortunately, she was transferred to George Washington High School. The school was not segregated but there were not many black students: “For the first semester, I was one of three Black students”¹³⁸ and the difference between white and black students was remarkable: “The white kids had better vocabularies than I and, what was more appalling, less fear in the classroom.”¹³⁹ Richard felt in the same way as Maya when he began school at Howard Institute: “The students around me seemed so sure of themselves that I despaired of ever being able to conduct myself as they did.”¹⁴⁰ In Richard’s text, it was implied that he went to segregated schools and he depicted the poor conditions in which pupils were. They had to work to be able to go to school in presentable clothes and own everything they needed: “Most of my schoolmates worked mornings, evenings, and Saturdays; they earned enough to buy their clothes and books.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ Angelou, 121.

¹³⁵ Angelou, 122.

¹³⁶ Angelou, 127.

¹³⁷ Angelou, 152.

¹³⁸ Angelou, 152.

¹³⁹ Angelou, 152.

¹⁴⁰ Wright, 28.

¹⁴¹ Wright, 110.

Another institution that was affected by segregation was a library. Richard could visit the library but he could not borrow books for himself. “There was a huge library near the riverfront, but I knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves...”¹⁴² The only way of getting books was to pretend to get them for the white men. Whenever he wanted to read books on the job, he learned to wrap them in a newspaper as otherwise, his white co-workers would question him. Even when he moved North, people were surprised by him reading. “‘What on earth are you reading?’ she demanded. ‘Oh, just a magazine,’ I said. ‘Where did you get it?’ she asked...’Do you understand it?’...’Yes, ma’am.’ ‘Well,’ she exclaimed, ‘the colored dishwasher reads the American Mercury!’”¹⁴³ Both authors were affected by segregation at work. One would say that Richard’s experiences at work were much crueller and violent than those which Maya described in her work. Richard was attacked both verbally and physically just by reason of being Negro. Once, he was bullied and teased when his white co-workers persuaded him that another black boy wanted to kill him. Just for white men to have fun, this “game” resulted in a real fight between Richard and the black boy Harrison who needed money that was offered to them by the white men. As Richard then found out, this was a common practice. White men took advantage of young black boys who needed money and arranged fights for amusement. “I heard of other fights being staged between other black boys, and each time I heard those plans falling from the lips of the white men in the factory I eased out of earshot.”¹⁴⁴ Maya, on the other hand, was not bullied, neither was she forced to fight but she had problems to obtain her dream job which was a streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Her mother warned her: “‘They don’t accept colored people on the streetcars’”¹⁴⁵ but Maya was stubborn and determined to win the racial battle. At first, she believed that the fact that she could not get the job was not about racism but it was a consequence of the Afro-American’s history. Nevertheless, after some time of struggling and still not being able to obtain the job, she stopped being naïve: “The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white.”¹⁴⁶ Eventually, she obtained the job and became the “first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars.”¹⁴⁷ Another topic that worth mentioning is a separated health care for blacks and whites. One time, Maya had a horrible toothache and because there was no Negro dentist in Stamps, Momma, hoping that he would

¹⁴² Wright, 207.

¹⁴³ Wright, 230.

¹⁴⁴ Wright, 206.

¹⁴⁵ Angelou, 186.

¹⁴⁶ Angelou, 188.

¹⁴⁷ Angelou, 189.

help her, took her to white Dr. Lincoln. Despite him owing her a favor, he refused: “’Annie, you know I don’t treat nigga, colored people.’”¹⁴⁸ Richard did not describe any experiences with the healthcare or doctors in his work but he talked about the racial cruelty that was inflicted on him by white people. The group of white men offered him a ride and Richard accepted as they looked friendly. Naïve Richard did not see any potential risk. They were drinking and laughing and suddenly Richard was hit with an empty whiskey bottle. The cause of the attack was again the racial hatred.

The car stopped and the white men piled out and stood over me. ‘Nigger, ain’t you learned no better sense’n that yet?’ asked the man who hit me. ‘Ain’t you learned to say sir to a white man yet?’ ... ‘Nigger, you sure ought to be glad it was us you talked to that way. You’re a lucky bastard, ‘cause if you’d said that to some other white man, you might’ve been a dead nigger now.’¹⁴⁹

From these examples, it is clear how badly were these authors naïve and did not understand all the danger and injustice that segregation and racial oppression took along with them.

¹⁴⁸ Angelou, 134.

¹⁴⁹ Wright, 157-158.

4 CONCLUSION

The aim of the analysis was to compare the works by Maya Angelou and Richard Wright and explain the choice of the autobiography genre for their writings. In the analysis, there was also depicted how the authors described the life in the South and how they were influenced by segregation. These depictions were also analyzed and compared. By analyzing and comparing them, there were shown the similarities and differences in their lives which helped to portray the racial relationships and the impacts that segregation had on them. The results of the analysis are following.

As indicated in the theoretical part of the thesis, for Afro-Americans, writing an autobiography was a tremendously important act. This fact was given by the role of the Afro-Americans in the American history. Writing an autobiography was an act of freeing themselves and showing that they were not different from whites so that they did not have to fear them. This is true also for Maya Angelou and Richard Wright. Although the slavery was abolished a long time ago, segregation and racism were still present. They used their works as racial protests and choosing the autobiography as the genre of their writings helped them to achieve their aims. By describing their life, they could demonstrate how difficult their upbringing was and they could express their feelings. Autobiographies should be true life stories but there are speculations that both authors had used certain fictional and other adjustments so that their works had a more powerful impact on its readers.

Both authors gave us the depictions of their youth in the South. After analyzing them, there was found out that the childhoods of these authors were nearly identical except for the differences that were related to the genders of these authors. Their families were incomplete which indicates the horrible family backgrounds of the black children in the South at that time. Many of them were raised by their grandparents in an orthodox way under the strict religious regime. From the analysis, it is obvious that religion was an indispensable part of the lives of blacks and it was socially undesirable if someone did not join a church. Blacks in the South lived in poor conditions which was clear from the description of the constant hunger in *Black Boy* and economizing on food in *Caged Bird*. There are no doubts that for blacks, the life in the South was problematic and cruel. Both autobiographies are full of physical punishments mostly for the reasons of religion or disobedience. Especially the autobiography of Richard Wright uses violence as its important concept but in *Caged Bird*, violent acts are included too. The problems of black girls and boys in the South slightly differed. Based on the analyzed texts, the girls had to deal with the issue of triple oppression- the fact that they were women in oppressed black

society and sometimes they were also single mothers who had to face the social prejudice. They were also concerned by their looks. Due to segregation, they thought that they were not worthy as they assumed that the ideal of beauty was a white blond girl with light blue eyes. Boys were more concerned with gaining respect from other boys and earning money. Their lives were full of violence as they were often forced to fight. They were bullied by whites and they had to behave as they were subordinate to them which was not easy due to their sense of pride. Richard Wright was engaged with the politics and dealt with the question of races. He mentioned his hatred not only for whites but also for blacks. He portrayed the inability of blacks to oppose whites.

The autobiographies are great for describing various historical periods. In autobiographies of Richard Wright and Maya Angelou, there is depicted the issue of segregation. The main consequences of segregation mentioned in their works were segregation of schools which determined the future of the students, then the fact that some of the institutions such as library were accessible only to white people. Healthcare was segregated too. As Maya Angelou wrote in her work, white doctors did not treat Negroes. The jobs that blacks could obtain were low-grade and very difficult to keep. White employers were often racists and they degraded black employees.

Finally, there should be mentioned that autobiographies such *Black Boy* and *Caged Bird* are great for describing a historical background but one had to bear in mind that the autobiography genre is subjective and the information mentioned in these works should not be perceived as facts. There should be also pointed out that the books *Black Boy* and *Caged Bird* are worth reading even today because they concern the topics that are and presumably always will be relevant.

5 RÉSUMÉ

V úvodu této práce se píše, že se tato bakalářská práce věnuje americké autobiografii se zaměřením na autobiografii černošskou. Je rozdělena na dvě hlavní části. První část práce je převážně teoretická a více obecná. Druhá je analýzou dvou amerických afroamerických děl *Black Boy* od Richarda Wrighta a *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* od Mayi Angelou.

První část začíná vysvětlením pojmu „autobiografie.“ Popisuje její základní prvky, mezi které patří subjektivita, detailní popis situace, zpověď autora, nebo vyjádření jeho názoru.

Poukazuje na to, že autor je většinou zároveň i hlavním hrdinou díla. Zabývá se problematikou fiktivní autobiografie a zdůrazňuje, že by autobiografie měla být skutečným popisem autorova života. Na druhé straně však uvádí, že tento žánr je velice subjektivní, a proto nikdo nemůže o jakékoliv autobiografické práci s jistotou říci, že je reálná, i když tak může působit. Podotýká, že i u děl *Black Boy* a *Caged Bird* se kritici shodují na tom, že tyto práce obsahují určité fiktivní prvky. A podle povahy těchto prací a okolností jejich vzniku je více než pravděpodobné, že autoři použili tyto prvky záměrně.

Další část práce se zabývá tím, jak autobiografický žánr přispěl k budování americké národní identity. Poukazuje na to, jak autor v autobiografii neutváří pouze svoji identitu, ale i identitu amerického národa, jehož je nedílnou součástí. Práce pokračuje snahou zodpovědět otázku, co vlastně vedlo autory k napsání autobiografie. Práce hledá odpověď na tuto otázku pohledem na obsahy amerických autobiografií, které pojednávají především o různých historických událostech. Z toho je zřejmé, že jejich autoři je nejčastěji psali z toho důvodu, aby se k těmto událostem vyjádřili a zaujmuli k nim nějaký postoj. Jednou etapou, která dala podnět k napsání autobiografie mnoha afroamerickým autorům, bylo otroctví. Tím se práce přesouvá k historii afroamerické autobiografie a zmiňuje například, jaké problémy měli afroameričtí autoři při psaní knih, vzhledem k jejich negramotnosti a postavení ve společnosti.

Dále práce zmiňuje rozdíl mezi černošskými autobiografiemi v 19. a 20. století. Vysvětluje pojmy „New Negro movement“ nebo „Harlem Renaissance“ a uvádí představitele těchto hnutí, mezi které patří například i Richard Wright. V této části práce jsou on i Maya Angelou zasazeni i s jejich díly do literárního a historického kontextu. Nechybějí zde ani recenze děl *Black Boy* a *Caged Bird* a důvody k jejich napsání, kterými jsou například boj proti rasismu, útlaku a předsudkům, nebo útlaku žen. Závěr první části bakalářské práce zdůvodňuje výběr děl pro analytickou část této práce.

Druhá část práce, jak už bylo řečeno na začátku, obsahuje analýzu děl *Black Boy* a *Caged Bird*. Jejím cílem bylo porovnat obě díla a ukázat, jak autoři pomocí autobiografického žánru vykreslili problematiku dané doby, zobrazili rasové vztahy a zachytili specifika černošské komunity. Díla byla analyzována z různých hledisek. Například podle rodinného zázemí autorů nebo podle prostředí a podmínek, ve kterém afroamerické děti vyrůstali (koncept hladu). Dále podle práce – u tohoto hlediska je popsáno, jaké druhy práce byly pro Afroameričany dostupné a jaké byly jejich vztahy na pracovištích. Je tam také zmíněno, jak propaganda Ku-klux-klanu využívala černošské děti. Důležitým porovnávacím hlediskem bylo i vzdělání a způsob ukončení studia. Práce ukazuje, jak si oba autoři zamilovali četbu knih především pro možnost vzdělávání, nacházení nových informací, ale také pro snadný únik z reality. Dalším hlediskem bylo i náboženství, které nejlépe pomáhalo vykreslit rasové vztahy a specifika černošské komunity. Nelze opomenout ani hledisko fyzických trestů a generačních rozdílů. Dále se práce zaměřuje na typické problémy, odvíjející se od pohlaví autorů. Tyto problémy skvěle znázornily situaci dané doby. U Mayi Angelou se tyto problémy dají zahrnout pod pojem „triple oppression,“ což lze přeložit jako „trojitý útisk“ a v jejím případě to znamenalo, že patřila do černošské utlačované komunity, čelila, jako žena, sexuálnímu obtěžování a jako svobodná matka, bojovala s předsudky ze strany společnosti. V její knize se přímo svěřuje o jejím sexuálním zneužití a o tom, jak se v mladém věku musela vypořádat se zjištěním, že je těhotná. Dále práce jmenuje problémy Richarda Wrighta, které vyplývaly především ze segregace a týkaly se peněz, rasismu či podřizování se bílé rase. A právě segregaci a jejímu znázornění v dílech autorů se věnuje celá finální část analýzy této práce. Píše se v ní například o rozdílech ve vzdělávání, segregaci škol a zdravotní péče, netoleranci gramotných Afroameričanů a o bránění jim v přístupu k informacím, například při vypůjčování knih z knihovny. V této fázi práce jsou zmíněny také kruté a násilné situace, kterými musel Richard Wright právě kvůli segregaci projít.

V závěru této bakalářské práce se nachází shrnutí a popsání výsledků analýzy děl *Black Boy* a *Caged Bird*. Nechybějí zde ani nejdůležitější poznatky, které byly při zpracování práce objeveny. Jedním takovým poznatkem například je, že ačkoliv je autobiografický žánr skvělým pomocníkem při popisu dané doby nebo určitých historických událostí, nikdo by vzhledem k obrovské subjektivitě tohoto žánru neměl chápat popisy v autobiografických knihách jako fakta. Tyto popisy jsou jenom subjektivní pohledy autora, který se snaží čtenáře, ať už vědomě nebo nevědomě, ovlivnit.

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