GENRE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

An autobiography is a literary work about a person’s life that is written by that person. It may

be solely based on the writer’s memory. This genre differs from a memoir in that a memoir is

typically more intimate and provides more focus on the emotions and feelings of the subject.

Angelou’s work falls into a relatively new and unexplored genre, the “autobiographical novel.”

The autobiographical novel is distinguished from autobiography by the fact that it is, at least

in part, fiction. Autobiographical novels can be loosely based on the author’s life and times;

however, names and locations may be changed and events may be altered, condensed, or created

to seem more dramatic. One such example is the incident with Dentist Lincoln. Although the

incident did occur, the name of the dentist was changed and is a symbolic expression of the

mockery made of President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation by the whites who practiced

discrimination. In Angelou’s novel, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, critics have stated that

her work has strong similarities to fiction including development of characters, establishment

of setting and plot, and use of dialogue. Critics also point out that Angelou’s descriptions of her

childhood are particularly vivid in detail, given her age at the time of writing.