

What Happens when We Cage Our Fellow Humans?

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Abstract

Literature is a powerful medium for examining justice, judgment, and society's treatment of humankind. "Does justice have a dark side?" Many pieces of literature show the dark side of man's justice, such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which presents a young woman being punished as an outcast while her guilty male partner remains free. Other pieces, however, show mankind's fight for justice as the necessary protection of human rights and a guaranteed respect for all races, as in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A literary analysis of the metaphorical short story "Caged," with the author listed as merely anonymous, answers "Yes" to the question of whether or not justice has a dark side. While this story exposes the societal enslavement of women, it also examines the power of friendship. "Caged" is a story that might be set in Colonial America, when society at the time was powerfully patriarchal. But that might not be the author's true purpose in writing. In this story, the main character Charity endures the judgment of her peers and the horror of being kept in a cage, both literally and figuratively. "Caged" works best when viewed as a metaphorical lesson for all the ages, a lesson in how society misjudges one another and yet the strength of real love conquers what hurt we often heap upon other human beings in the name of justice.

Keywords: Women, Society, Judgment, Literature, Power, Love, Friendship, Patriarchal, Freedom

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Introduction

The power of literature is that each reader brings his or her own perspective to the written word. Each person's background and beliefs affect that individual's interpretation of and reaction to a piece of literature. That makes literature powerful and unique. It means that stories such as "Caged" by an anonymous author can teach many lessons to many people.

There are many aspects to this story that could be effectively analyzed. The following literary analysis uses "Caged" to examine the question: "What happens when we cage our fellow humans?" The analysis will focus on the aspects of fear, control through the abuse of power, and isolation as portrayed in the story. "Caged" tells the story of prejudice and restriction of freedom inflicted upon those who will not conform to unfair rules and values.

Setting and Background

"Caged" could present a historical look at life for women in a past rural patriarchal society. But it offers a much more meaningful message when read as a parable of sorts or a metaphorical look at how humans enslave other humans who have differing points of view, or those who do not conform to the pressures of those who misuse power.

Some instructors refer to "Caged" as a parable. As parable, a story illustrates a moral or a spiritual teaching or lesson. Dictionary.com defines a parable as "a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson."

I prefer to call "Caged" a metaphor, a metaphorical story where items and events stand for something else. A cage represents control, in this instance, control of a human being. Although a cage could be used for protection, in this story, it is used as a prison, a loss of freedom. This prison equals control over the character Charity by nearly all outside influences on her life as well as by her own inner demons – forced upon her by the harsh beliefs and rules of an unforgiving patriarchal society. When we control or cage other human beings, nothing good can happen.

"Caged" tells the story of a young married woman who flees an abusive marriage. Her only hope is to get back to the village where she was raised. The problem is that she knew those living in this village would not welcome her there as she would be considered a traitor for having left her husband. This village is a patriarchal society run by a group of church elders. The women in this village have little to no say about how they live their lives. Everything is directed by the elders and by the women's husbands. Despite knowing this, Charity has no place else to go.

Fear

The village women are filled with fear and horror from the moment Charity enters the village. The story begins after Charity has escaped from an abusive marriage and literally fled for her life. The opening words are:

“Just a little further. You can make it.” Charity heard these words over and over in her mind, her head pounding from the bruises that disfigured her face. Lips swollen and purple, every inch of her body was either scratched or beaten, until it had become grotesque, something beyond human recognition.

Charity was human though and she was alive. She must concentrate on that, just being alive. Her foot caught on a root across the path. She felt her body crash to the earth, branches grabbing at her tender flesh. Sobs caught in her throat then echoed forth into the still black night. No one was there to hear.” (Anonymous 1)

How do the village women respond? “Charity did her best to smile, but her lips only cracked and blood trickled down her chin to join the redness already gathered near her shoulder. She saw the horror rising in the faces of the two women as their eyes looked quickly away. It seemed as if they could not hear her or that their ears refused to listen, and they turned their backs as Charity’s voice croaked out, “Help me, please. Please?” (1). The fear of the village women evolves, sometimes heightened, and at other times, barely discernible, at least on the surface.

When the women first see Charity, they are filled with horror, viewing Charity as some kind of monster there to do them bodily harm. They view the bruises covering her body as just something ugly to look at and not as proof of how brutally Charity has been treated by someone claiming to love her. Fear drives the women to hide from Charity rather than helping her. The women who recognize Charity as a former childhood neighbor or friend hide any pain this realization may cause them. The only action they are brave enough to take without the direction of the church elders is to place an apron over Charity’s face so they do not have to look at her pain and hear her pleas for help. This form of self doubt is further evidenced by the women sending for the elders to tell them what they should do. Literally, the women have hidden inside the church building and sent one woman to contact her husband, who is a church elder, to tell them what to do. This makes the reader aware of the rampant abuse of power and control evidenced in this village.

Those who display fear even more than the village women are the church elders who make and enforce all the rules. Even the elders show a fear of Charity. They are concerned that she might show other women that they do not have to let themselves be enslaved by either their husbands or by the church. The fear of these women continues as they ignore Charity’s physical needs until the cage is built and Charity is placed inside making her no longer a “threat” to the women. Now they show a false sense of bravery, even making fun of the young prisoner. They are not truly brave though, as any direct looks from Charity scare the women and they once again turn their backs on her. The elders are so filled with fear that they put an injured woman inside of a cage. This leads to the second area of analysis, control through the abuse of power.

Control through the Abuse of Power

When Charity first enters the village and the women notify the elders of her existence, they state respond: “Yeah. This could be a really good thing, if we keep our heads about us.”

“How do you figure that? She left her husband didn’t she? And she left the church too.”

“We will show what happens when you follow your own ideas.”

“That’s right!” shouted the crowd of men, raising their hands in the air.

“What do you have in mind?”

“We will build a fence around her. Build it right here in the middle of the square. That way the women will see her every morning when they come to fetch water. Let them watch her in prison. Maybe that will give them something to talk about besides their idle chatter and complaints about us men.”

“Yeah. Gossip is the devil’s work.” (3)

Fear comes from control and lack of control. The fear that they might lose the control they have over the women of the village leads to a great abuse of power by the elders, even though it is evident that they are already abusing their power to control the village women. These women are not allowed to make any decision without consulting at least their husbands. The ultimate rules of the land are made by the church elders. Charity is the victim of the biggest misuse of power by the elders. The major areas of control or abuse of power over Charity as evidenced in “Caged” as ways that humans cage other humans include the following. Please note that not all control is shown by the church elders. They are merely the ones in charge and the main impetus for all the abused control in this village.

The one person who does not seem to show any fear from this abuse of control is Charity. She accepts her situation, knowing that the rules of this village required this abusive treatment of her. Even Charity’s friend Constance, an unmarried woman of the village, allows fear to control the amount of help she is willing to offer her childhood friend. It is true that she at least accepts Charity and brings her food and water. Many of the village women knew Charity before she had married, yet Constance is the only one willing to step up to help. Perhaps this is partially due the fact that Constance is not married and thus does not have to answer to any man when she returns home at night. However, she is not free from the control of men. When Charity first arrives in the village, Constance lags behind the other women who have already gathered at the well in the center of town. “Constance dared not breath until she reached the safety of the bushes where she crouched as low as possible, craning her neck towards the men.” She is so saddened to see her friend abused that she has to run home, returning later after Charity has been imprisoned. ” Once the cage was completed to the satisfaction of the elders, the men shoved the prisoner roughly inside. They took turns walking round and round the bars, testing each one. Then, all at once, they left. Charity was alone” (3).

Constance sneaks back to the village square after dark and places some food and water into the cage, hiding her presence even from Charity. Constance knows that if the church elders were to find out that she was helping Charity, that she too would be punished. Perhaps the elders would cage her as well. Fear of the elders and their rules controls Constance and limits her actions.

Isolation

The abusive use of power leads to isolation for all involved. Charity is clearly isolated as she remains imprisoned in the man-made cage. Constance is isolated from

the other village women as she needs to hide the fact that she is helping Charity. The village women are isolated within their controlled society and remain under the control of their husbands and the elders. Even the village elders are isolated from anyone with different ideas and beliefs than theirs. They are even isolated from the women in the village because they must retain their religious control and leadership.

What would happen to the women of the village if they no longer followed the elders' rules? The end of the story offers insight into this. "Charity still stood, looking through the bars as a new day began. Once again the women returned. They chatted and gossiped as though nothing had changed. An occasional glance towards the prisoner was a reminder of her place. No one spoke to her.

Day after day started the same way, but the reactions of the women slowly began to change. The jeering had stopped. Charity would wait in silence for the protective night time and the welcoming package she knew would arrive. As the days passed, the women often looked right through the bars of Charity's cage, but never directly at the prisoner. To them, Charity did not exist. She was just the woman in the cage." (Anonymous 7)

Conclusion

There are many other aspects to this story that deserve to be analyzed, symbolism and character development being just two of these. Even the points presented in this research analysis could be delved into in much greater detail. The power of this story lies in its ability to allow its readers a glimpse into the darker side of justice and the answers offered to the question of what happens when humans cage their fellow humans. I am attaching a copy of "Caged" so that you may decide for yourselves.

Caged

By Anonymous

“Just a little further. You can make it.” Charity heard these words over and over in her mind, her head pounding from the bruises that disfigured her face. Lips swollen and purple, every inch of her body was either scratched or beaten, until it had become grotesque, something beyond human recognition.

Charity was human though and she was alive. She must concentrate on that, just being alive. Her foot caught on a root across the path. She felt her body crash to the earth, branches grabbing at her tender flesh. Sobs caught in her throat then echoed forth into the still black night. No one was there to hear.

Charity dragged herself behind some bushes at the side of the path. Stars shone brightly overhead as she lay on her back, squinting through slits which were once sparkling blue eyes. “Charity.” She wondered if anyone knew how hard she had worked to live up to that name. Did they know how often she had sacrificed, what she had sacrificed for him, never asking, never receiving anything in return? That wasn’t quite true. She had received his ridicule, had felt his belt across her back.

Gritting her teeth, Charity gently wiped her face with the edge of her blouse. “Keep moving,” she whispered, “Keep moving. You have to reach the village before morning. Have to creep in before the elders wake up.” She pictured the women in the village. Could they accept her nightmare escape? Would they welcome her into their midst? Her eyes closed, tears once again rising to the surface. She knew what their reactions would be.

Each day the women of the village gathered at the well in the square just as the sun rose over the hills. They carried buckets to fill with water for the morning meal. Mostly they came to the square as their one chance to venture out of their homes, beyond the control of their husbands.

At the well you could visit friends, share recipes, even gossip if you dared. As long as you stayed on guard for the women whose husbands were elders, you could feel free to smile, laugh, and talk. How quickly the younger women would learn: “Never complain openly about your husband” and “Never ever speak badly of the church or one of the elders.” A word to the wrong person would mean a visit from the church leaders with a reprimand sure to follow. The wrath of a husband could be very great if he felt humiliated by a woman, especially by his wife.

Charity watched the sun peek shyly over the tree tops as the village came into view. Around a bend, two women carrying buckets stepped into the path. If only she could get their attention. As she lifted her arm to wave, several deep cuts re-opened and trails of new blood ran down her arm onto her blouse.

The women paused as if they might have heard a sound. Charity took advantage of this and limped forward. As she drew nearer, the women moved their buckets in front of their chests, creating a barrier between their clean bodies and this filthy, wounded creature. The two women shuffled from one foot to the other. Charity did her best to

smile, but her lips only cracked and blood trickled down her chin to join the redness already gathered near her shoulder. She saw the horror rising in the faces of the two women as their eyes looked quickly away. It seemed as if they could not hear her or that their ears refused to listen, and they turned their backs as Charity's voice croaked out, "Help me, please. Please?"

The usual crowd gathered at the well that morning. Their chatter rose to hysteria as news of the "horrible monster" spread rapidly throughout their midst. A creature covered with blood, mangled and dirty was coming their way. Obviously she meant to kill them all as they drew their water from the well. Seized with fear, each one fled to the nearby safety of the church, but not before looking over shoulders for this anticipated horror, or curiosity.

Peeking out windows or around the door casing, the women watched as Charity shuffled into view. Slowly she put out her hand to steady herself against the well. She tried untying the bucket to lower it into the well, but her hands, stiff from bruises, fumbled and the bucket fell. Charity leaned over the edge, listening as it crashed into the water below. A muffled groan caught in her throat and she felt a strange burning behind her eyes. She was suffocating in the still, heavy air. All was blackness.

After watching the still body for quite some time, the women decided it was safe to come outside. They glided noiselessly, ever watchful in case the mystical creature might somehow change form and sneak up on them, doing God only knew what. Some recognized Charity despite the disfiguring welts and scars. Pain gripped their faces, yet loyalty forced it back, drove it down deep inside, hidden, controlled. It must be controlled, lest it control them, lead them to action, empathy, even love for this fallen creature.

The younger women turned to those older with questions and fear. Should they help? Was this woman one of them? Why didn't anyone move? Could she really harm them? Finally someone spoke.

"Sister, run and get your husband. He's an elder; he'll know what to do. You young ones don't touch her. Find something we can use to move her away from the well before the water is contaminated. Hurry now."

The woman who had spoken took off her apron, held it at arms' length, and walked bravely towards Charity.

"Sister, be careful. It might wake up and jump at you," someone whispered.

"Shh!" was her only reply as she skillfully placed the apron over Charity's head so that it hung down enough to cover her face and shoulders, now drenched with blood. With the ugliness hidden, the women breathed more easily. All they needed to do now was wait.

Constance, late as usual, hummed out loud as she walked, breathing in the fresh morning air. She had a great story to tell the women at the well this morning. Her pace quickened. The closer she got, the more evident it became that something out of

the ordinary was happening. She could sense a change in the air, almost smell the panic. Her heart beat loudly in her chest.

Up ahead a group of elders was shouting instructions. The women must return home immediately. No questions were to be asked and no water taken. Constance veered off the path behind some tall pine trees, peering cautiously around a tree trunk. Having no husband at home to whom she must answer, she decided to stay. What were these men hiding? What was so terrible that only they were allowed to stay?

Their voices grew muffled and Constance could only make out the words “woman” and “traitor.” She had to get closer. It was risky leaving the cover of the pine trees, but to the left of the well stood a stone bench with bushes on three sides. If she could make it there, she would be safely hidden from their view yet still able to hear clearly. Dropping to her knees, she slid her hands forward across the mossy earth. Silently she edged her way from behind the trees, her eyes never leaving the backs of the men who stood only a few yards from her reach. Constance dared not breathe until she reached the safety of the bushes where she crouched as low as possible, craning her neck towards the men. Their words tumbled together.

“What shall we do with her? She can’t stay here, she will contaminate our women.”

“Not if we handle this right.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can make an example of her. Let the women know what happens when you disobey.”

“Yeah. This could be a really good thing, if we keep our heads about us.”

“How do you figure that? She left her husband didn’t she? And she left the church too.”

“We will show what happens when you follow your own ideas.”

“That’s right!” shouted the crowd of men, raising their hands in the air.

“What do you have in mind?”

“We will build a fence around her. Build it right here in the middle of the square. That way the women will see her every morning when they come to fetch water. Let them watch her in prison. Maybe that will give them something to talk about besides their idle chatter and complaints about us men.”

“Yeah. Gossip is the devil’s work.”

The men smiled with evil grins. The group was getting rowdy, so Constance shrank further back behind the bushes. “You three men go and find materials to build a fence strong enough to keep her prisoner. Brother Elder and I will stand guard. We’ll make

sure this woman doesn't get any ideas about escape. We'll show Miss Charity you don't break the rules and get away with it."

Constance clasped her hand to her mouth, smothering the gasps threatening to escape. Charity? Could this be her long-time friend? Why would Charity need to escape? She must have heard wrong.

After the crowd of men left, Constance's eyes searched frantically for a glimpse of the prisoner. Charity lay crunched in a heap against the base of the well. The apron had been removed from her face. She didn't move. The head elder prodded her roughly with his foot and his partner did the same. Constance wondered if Charity were even alive. Perhaps it would be better if she were not. Tears fell uncontrollably onto the moss at Constance's feet. She knew she must return home quickly or risk being discovered.

All that day the prisoner lay still where the elders had dragged her, away from the well, but still in clear sight. She was aware of all that went on around her, however, but roused herself only occasionally to beg for water when anyone would pass near. She watched the men building their cage. It was no different here. She had always been imprisoned. Once the cage was completed to the satisfaction of the elders, the men shoved the prisoner roughly inside. They took turns walking round and round the bars, testing each one. Then, all at once, they left. Charity was alone.

As the afternoon approached, the women came out of their houses. Some ventured near the well and ultimately near the newly constructed cage. The prison bars soon made them brave and they sneered at the woman behind them who had once been one of them. Many circled her, wanting a closer look, yet still wary that she might do them harm. Her appearance was frightful, eyes red and swollen, the left one nearly shut. Deep purple bruises colored her cheeks, making them hideous like a monster's. Her dress was torn, exposing her thighs, covered with scrapes and dried blood. Embarrassed by this sight, several women turned away.

Charity crawled towards the bars. This was not some unfamiliar village. She had grown up here with many of these now apparent strangers. She stretched out her arms, pleading for help. "Water." She needed just one small sip. Wouldn't anyone lift the dipper and just pour it over her? Charity opened her mouth to beg, but the women quickly fled, leaving her once again a wounded bird in its cage.

Evening approached with dusk masking everything. A woman slowly crept from behind the bushes, her eyes shifting nervously from side to side. Within feet of the cage she stopped. She watched the outline of her friend searching helplessly for a way to reach the bounty of water just a few feet away. Constance stood, deadened in her tracks. Guilt held her in her place, unable to help this innocent being, someone close to her heart. Her eyes fixed, watching Charity struggle. Weak from exhaustion and hunger, the prisoner sank to her knees. She pressed her skin against the cool, damp earth, stretching her body flat. It was somehow soothing. She slept.

Something touched her arm and she awoke with a start. It was dark now, but her frightened eyes discovered a cold, hard object on the ground close to her. Charity lifted the metal lid and saw a pool of sparkling water inside. She listened to the

footsteps softly entering the woods then quietly whispered, "Thank you." There was no reply.

The following day passed much as the first had. Charity slept most of the morning, waking only when the late morning sun crept to noon, leaving her with an unquenchable thirst. She again begged for water, but none would listen. The heat made Charity unaware of time passing. The sun glared and she was forced to close her eyes to the sights around the village square. It was only nightfall that provided a little relief as the shadows wrapped her in coolness.

Birds were chirping when Charity next awoke to the sound of footsteps moving softly. Focusing her eyes in the pale light of dawn, she saw a slim figure disappear behind the trees. Her head bowed in sorrow as she searched the cage. Perhaps this figure might be the friend who had brought the water she had so needed. Tucked neatly beneath a wild rose bush at the edge of her prison, she found a small package. Peering around to make sure no one was watching, Charity cautiously picked up the package. She hid it in her lap, protectively crouching forward as if one in pain. Inside the brown paper lay an apple, some bread, and a container of water. Her heart now warmed with the assurance of who had left this treasure. Charity recognized the homemade bread she now held in her hands. She had watched her friend Constance knead and shape the dough many times, folding it until it formed her own special design.

Charity moved to the corner of her cage furthest from the well to enjoy her feast. The water soothed her lips and tongue as she swirled it around her mouth, letting her teeth and gums soak in the refreshing coolness. Gently she tore the bread into bite-size pieces. One by one, she pushed them carefully over her cracked lips onto her tongue, savoring the sweet goodness. The apple she would save. Returning to the rosebush, Charity clawed at the earth with her cracked fingertips until she had dug a hole large enough to hide the apple and she placed it softly inside.

Women's voices echoed once again as they made their morning trek to the well. Charity quickly sat down on the spot where her treasure was hidden. She knew what danger it would mean for Constance if anyone found out what she had done. The women, braver now, mocked her openly. Glaring eyes fixed themselves upon her every move. It was only when Charity's eyes met theirs that the ridicule changed to fear.

The crowd was larger today and they lingered long, risking the rage of husbands who were made to wait for their morning meal. Finally they turned to leave. Charity's heart jumped into her throat. She pushed herself to stand, moving as quickly as her stiff legs would carry her to the other end of the cage. The bars pressed firmly against her breast as she stretched to see over the crowd. At the edge of the group a face was looking back. The woman kept on moving, but her eyes were fixed on Charity. Why didn't she stop? How could she just leave? Charity sank hopelessly to the ground, her eyes lingering upon the well-known figure until she had moved out of sight. The now lost face in the crowd was Charity's mother.

Day dragged into night. The elders visited, questioning Charity over and over about her intentions. They recited her responsibilities, her guilt for leaving, the shame she

should feel and punishment she must receive. After they left, Charity clasped her arms around her body to stop the shaking. Nearby a twig snapped. She listened in fear that one of the men had returned to torment her further, but the steps were too light. She knew it was a woman.

On the other side of her wall a face moved nearby. In the faint moonlight, Charity made out the familiar features. Soft blue eyes, a gentle smile, skin softly crinkled about her mouth and at the corners of her eyes. Wisps of brown hair lately turned gray fell over new wrinkles on her forehead. It was Constance.

Charity's hands instantly felt their way through the bars to the welcoming warmth of those on the other side. Constance cradled the worn fingers in her own and the two women stood in silence. Charity's eyes searched the face of her friend, feeling secure for the first time since she could remember. The years, which had passed so quickly, raced through her mind. Their friendship had been closer than even the love between two sisters. It felt the same now.

Constance gently loosened her grip, dropping her hands to her side as she sank to the ground. "I shouldn't be here, but I had to find out the truth. I know you better than anyone. I know you wouldn't just leave. Was it really terrible? No, wait. You don't need to answer that. Your beautiful face says everything. I can't blame you for leaving. I'm surprised you stayed this long. Everyone knew he was cruel to you, but this!" Her voice wavered; she couldn't continue. Warm pools of tears lingered on her cheeks before dropping to the earth, sinking out of sight. The two women talked long into the night, laughing gently, holding each other through the rough wooden bars. Shortly before dawn Constance rose.

"I can't help you escape; you know that don't you? If anyone knew I was here . . . I'd like to help you, really, but I can't. I mustn't. It would be wrong . . . in their eyes and I . . ." Constance lowered her head. "Is there anything I can get you?"

Charity pointed weakly towards the well. Her friend rose quickly, tiptoed to the well, and looked inside the bucket. A small puddle of warm water sat in the bottom. She couldn't risk the noise of lowering the bucket into the well this late at night. Constance scraped the water into the dipper and, walking cautiously so as not to spill even a drop, smiled warmly at her friend.

Constance finally broke the long silence, but she had to look away. "I have to leave now." Charity nodded. She knew her friend was risking grave punishment just by talking to her. Yet she had come. Charity's heart flooded with warmth. Constance whispered, "If I can't see you again, please know I'll always love you."

Charity's eyes were blinded with tears. She closed them to stop the flow. "I love you too," quietly escaped through her swollen lips. She opened her eyes. Constance was gone.

Charity still stood, looking through the bars as a new day began. Once again the women returned. They chatted and gossiped as though nothing had changed. An occasional glance towards the prisoner was a reminder of her place. No one spoke to her.

Day after day started the same way, but the reactions of the women slowly began to change. The jeering had stopped. Charity would wait in silence for the protective night time and the welcoming package she knew would arrive. As the days passed, the women often looked right through the bars of Charity's cage, but never directly at the prisoner. To them, Charity did not exist. She was just the woman in the cage.

Author's Note:

I wrote "Caged" to express what it is like to experience marital abuse as a young mother of three small children, the rejection of my church family who considered me responsible for my husband's behavior, and most heart breaking of all, the estrangement of my family.

Because I often use this short story in my literature classes, I have chosen to list the author merely as anonymous. It would not be fair to expect students to analyze a piece of literature that they knew was written by their professor. I want them to approach "Caged" as they would any piece of literature and feel free to respond openly and honestly.

Thus – I remain "Anonymous," at least to my students.

Dr. Janet Crosier

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