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# Activity Pack

## I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS.

BY MAYA ANGELOU



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All references come from the Bantam Books Edition of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published 1993.

*Note to Teacher:* *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* contains some controversial and sensitive subjects, such as racism, sexuality, rape, and small references to violence. Therefore, the maturity level of the class should be taken into consideration.

## Pre-Reading

### Research

**Objectives:**    Researching the author  
                         Developing a sense of the book's geographical and sociological background  
                         Researching racism during the book's time period

### Activity I

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an autobiographical book based on Ms. Angelou's life from age three to age seventeen during the Depression, Prohibition, and World War II. She had a diverse career as an author and poet, and also wrote screenplays and music for television. In addition, she produced, directed, and acted in the theatre. She was involved in government and other organizations. She was also a teacher. Research the life of Ms. Angelou to explore her background and develop a sense of how that background influenced her work throughout her life, especially in this novel.

Write a short biography of the author. Include any facts in her background that you think might have impacted her writing of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

### Activity II

Racism is a major theme in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Research the history of racism during the 1930s and 1940s. Write a brief synopsis on the aspects of racism and how it impacted the black communities in which Ms. Angelou lived.

*Note to Teacher:* Activities I and II could be combined to give students a longer writing assignment. Some possible research topics include: Relate the aspects of racism in black communities to events in the novel. In what ways has the author overcome the struggles in the 1930s and 1940s; does she still struggle with elements of racism? What aspects of her career have served as outlets for her struggles and experiences?

## Introduction

### Theme and Motif

**Objective:** Understanding the main themes or motifs of the book

### Activity

Ms. Angelou struggles with being female, unattractive, poor, and black in the South. She feels that these elements define her in a way that has nothing to do with who she really is and hinder her potential for success in the world. Throughout the book, Ms. Angelou identifies certain physical and non-physical characteristics as “good” or “bad.” These ideas help Ms. Angelou define the people in her world, shape her self-image, and contribute to her view of the world at large. As the author matures and experiences life, her perspective begins to change.

*Begin a classroom chart that will be completed during the course of reading the novel. In each chapter, there will be examples of Ms. Angelou's point of view and the theme or motif it represents. New themes or motifs will emerge throughout the book. The class should pay close attention to each chapter to identify Ms. Angelou's views. Each time a chapter is reviewed, students should volunteer new examples to add to the chart.*

Using the following chart, find passages from the novel that Ms. Angelou uses to discuss defining elements of herself. Note the passage and explain the positive and negative elements. Then, describe the motif that is being examined. As you read the novel, add passages from each chapter to complete the activity. The first one has been provided for you as an example.

**Chapter 1****Point of View**

**Objective:** Understanding the main character's point of view and how it sets the tone for the book

**Activity**

Seeing the world through Ms. Angelou's eyes is an important introduction to the book since it sets the tone, and gives the reader a perspective from which to absorb the characters, events, and emotions of the book.

Imagine yourself as the author at age three. Your parents have put you on a train to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with your grandmother. You have only your four-year-old brother to accompany you. You arrive in Stamps and encounter a type of community that you have never experienced before. Write a paragraph based on the information the author gives in the chapter to describe your trip, your emotions, and impressions of your new home.

*Note to Teacher: As an alternate activity, students could create a comic strip to depict their journey. The strip should contain at least six frames.*

**Chapter 5****Conflict and Characterization**

**Objective:** Using conflict (man vs. man) to reinforce a theme and to illustrate Momma's character

**Activity I**

The confrontation between Momma and the three "powhitetrash" girls reinforces the racism theme that is dominant in the book.

In small groups, create a dramatic scene in which conflict reinforces a theme or motif from the novel. The drama should be short (no more than 5 minutes long), with parts for everyone.

For example: If the conflict is good overcomes evil, you may choose to create a conflict between police officers and criminals.

**Activity II**

Ms. Angelou gets an insight into Momma's character when she witnesses the conflict between Momma and the "powhitetrash" girls. Since Momma shows her inner strength and dignity by not responding to the girls' taunting, she sets an example for Ms. Angelou that one should not succumb to the injustices life can present. What image of Momma would have been impressed upon Ms. Angelou had Momma retaliated in some way against the girls?

*Answers will vary. Some potential answers might be:*

*Ms. Angelou may feel Momma was justified in retaliating.*

*Momma may look immature in Ms. Angelou's eyes.*

*It is good to stand up for yourself.*

*It makes Momma look like she's not in control of the situation.*

*It gives weight to what the girls were saying and doing.*

*Ms. Angelou would think it is okay to bring oneself to their level in defense.*

**Chapter 7****Characterization**

**Objective:** Relating characters from the novel to real life

**Activity**

Maya Angelou tells us that Momma has been married three times. As a child, Ms. Angelou describes Mr. Johnson, Mr. Henderson, and Mr. Murphy.

Think about the type of person that you want to marry. Make a list of all the qualities that you would like your partner to have. The list should include the following elements:

- personality traits
- values and morals
- physical description
- lifestyle preferences
- occupation and social status

These are just a few examples. Feel free to create other categories that are important to you. Your list should include at least three examples for each category.

When you have finished your list, write a paragraph describing why these traits are important to you.

Look at the list you have created. Which of these elements are evident in characters from the novel? Write a second paragraph that compares your ideal partner to one or more characters in the book. If the traits you choose do not match any of the characters, use your paragraph to contrast your ideal partner with characters in the novel.

*Note to Teacher: As an alternate activity or expansion to the above, have students create a collage of their ideal partner. Students could use clips from magazines or newspapers or use hand-drawn or computer-generated images to symbolize the traits they feel are important.*

**Chapter 13****Writing a Newspaper Article**

**Objective:** Identifying dramatic moments and relating them in the manner of a newspaper

**Activity**

Mr. Freeman's trial and mysterious death draw a morbid fascination to the trial from the people of St. Louis. It was an event that would have drawn headlines from the local newspapers.

Write a front-page newspaper article on the events of the trial and Mr. Freeman's death.

Write the story in the factual, detached, unbiased style commonly used by newspaper reporters. The article must contain the following elements:

- A bold headline that sums up the content of the article.
- The first paragraph should contain the basic facts: who, what, where, why, when, and how.
- The subsequent paragraphs should logically and honestly add detail and substance to the story for readers who want more information.
- The last paragraph should indicate how this event was resolved.
- Include at least one quote from a character in the novel.

*Note to Teacher: After students have completed the project, the articles can be posted on a bulletin board for other students to read. For a shorter assignment, ask the students to bring in a newspaper, magazine, or Internet article of an event, written in an eye-catching headline.*

**Chapter 17****Stereotyping**

**Objective:** Recognizing stereotypes

**Activity:**

The author and her brother encounter a look-a-like of their mother on the movie screen. She has all the qualities that people during that time associated with whites: beauty, wealth, and a black staff to wait on her.

Many of the movies of that time period stereotyped white people that way. The black stereotype was one of servitude to whites, having poor English and little education or intelligence.

In small groups, come up with a list of as many movies as you can that include stereotypes of all kinds, not just black and white. The movies can be current or old. List what kinds of stereotypes are in each movie. After the lists have been compiled, share your lists with the class.

*Note to Teacher: Compile a master list of stereotypes from what the students present.*

*It might be interesting to discuss the subject further by comparing older movies with some of today's movies to see how some movies break away from stereotypes and some do not. Do the students think that stereotypes can be overcome with time? Why or why not? Are new stereotypes emerging as time passes? Is there anyway to avoid this in the movies?*

**Chapter 22****Creative Writing**

**Objective:** Writing creatively to evoke a specific response from the reader

**Activity**

The author uses Mr. Taylor's version of being haunted by his dead wife to create a very visual ghost story. Note how Ms. Angelou sets up the story with details such as the weather, and Mr. Taylor's spooky entrance. By the end of the chapter, one can get a feeling for why the author and her brother were so scared by Mr. Taylor's visit.

In small groups, create ghost stories to read aloud to the class. Each of you should contribute lines and details to the story. Make sure to include a lot of creepy details. The more creative you are, the more vivid your images will be. Read your ghost story to the rest of the class. Then, as a class, discuss what aspects of the story evoked fear, creepiness, apprehension, etc....

*Note to Teacher: It can be an even more creative exercise if one member of the group contributes a few lines, then the next one picks it up and contributes a few more lines, and so on until all members have participated, and a ghost story is completed. You might want to give students the option of reading their stories aloud in this manner as well.*

**Chapter 24****Irony**

**Objective:** Recognizing irony

**Activity**

There are two examples of irony in this chapter. Take note of them and be prepared to be called upon in class for the answer. Discuss why these are considered irony, and volunteer your own examples of irony (they do not have to be true, just examples of something ironic.)

*Answers:*

*The name of the dentist who refuses to treat Ms. Angelou is Dr. Lincoln. One associates the name of Lincoln with President Abraham Lincoln, whose interest was in trying to free the slaves.*

*Momma had loaned money to Dr. Lincoln (a white) without question or fanfare during the Depression, when he needed it most. Yet, he treats her and Ms. Angelou as if they were lower than dogs. Momma eases the humiliation and degradation by extracting \$10 in "interest" from him to take Ms. Angelou to a black dentist.*

*Note to Teacher: As an additional exercise, ask students to find a powerful example of irony in chapter 11: Ms. Angelou retreats to the "safety" of her mother's bed to feel secure against the nightmares that plague her. Sleeping in Vivian's bed, however, places her in danger from Mr. Freeman, who begins to sexually abuse her.*