

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by Maya Angelou

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I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Objectives

By the end of this unit the student will be able to:

1. distinguish between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel
2. trace the motifs of:
 - ignorance
 - self-esteem
 - racism
 - displacement
 - defiance against racism
3. analyze the novel's title in relation to the themes expressed
4. analyze the impact of literary conflict on the development of characters
5. analyze narrative voice as used throughout the text
6. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam
7. respond to free response items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam
8. offer a close reading of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Introductory Lecture

Background Information

In an interview with the *New York Times* in January, 1993, Maya Angelou stated, “In all my work, what I try to say is that as human beings we are more alike than we are unlike.” This statement characterizes Angelou’s life as well as her writing. Her work has been compared to that of the freed slave, Frederick Douglass. Both have been called “articulators of a collective heritage” and are said to have been charged with the task of interpreting a collective culture for all races.

Angelou often describes her time in Stamps as the time she learned what it was like to be a black girl with boundaries that were set by whites. Her first experiences with racism were in Stamps, working in the family store. During the “Jim Crow era,” from 1876 to the mid 1960s, one law governed southern whites while a very different law governed southern blacks: black people were to show deference to whites through their actions, words, and manners. Black women were called “Auntie” or “girl” and were never addressed as “Miss” or “Mrs.” In polite society, men were referred to as “niggra.” Black people had separate seating areas for public performances and could not sit with whites in restaurants. There were signs for “Coloreds” and “Whites” posted on drinking fountains and bathrooms. There were also signs that equated Negroes to animals, denying rights to Negroes and dogs on the same sign. Although the Jim Crow laws dominated the southern way of life, racist attitudes were widespread throughout the country. Those were the times that shaped the poet and philosopher Maya Angelou.

It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that legalized segregation was ended for African-Americans.

In the 1950s, Angelou worked as a dancer and singer. This is when she eventually adopted the stage name “Maya Angelou.” She traveled extensively with a troupe in Europe, but eventually returned to New York City where she was involved in many artistic endeavors. In the 1960s, she became more involved in political activities, at one time working with activists Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Throughout her life, Maya Angelou has faced displacement, racism, segregation, ignorance, drug addiction, and betrayal. Despite all of this, she has risen above her troubles to become a champion of civil rights, as well as a notable American poet and writer. In 1993, she was asked to read her poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration. Although she has received several honorary doctorates, and has taught on the faculties of several colleges and universities, Angelou has never received a formal college education.

Angelou remains a private person despite the six volumes of her autobiography begun with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She stated, “I have nothing to rest upon. Every time I write I

Chapter 1

1. What mood is established by the first two paragraphs of the chapter?

2. Does the Black Community aggravate the feelings of displacement felt by the siblings? Why?

3. Why is the Store written with a capital "S"?

4. What is learned about Momma, and why was she an anomaly in the community?

5. Compare the Store in the AM and the PM during picking season. What is the reason for the difference?

Chapter 10

1. According to Maya's description, how is life in the North different from life in the South?

2. Does Maya view one way of life better than the other? Explain your answer.

3. How does Maya feel about her new teachers? How does her diction and imagery convey this opinion?

4. How does the behavior of the teachers illustrate a distinct class system within the Black Community living in St. Louis?

5. Grandfather Baxter tells his sons, "if you ever get in jail for stealing or some such foolishness, I'll let you rot. But if you're arrested for fighting, I'll sell the house, lock, stock, and barrel, to get you out!" Why might Grandfather Baxter feel stealing is worse than fighting?

6. How does Uncle Tommy raise Maya's self-esteem? How does this affect the woman she becomes toward the end of the novel?

Chapter 20

1. What is the narrator suggesting at the beginning of this chapter by expressing Maya's fear of being thought "womanish"?

2. Explain the significance of Louise on Maya's life.

3. In what ways is Maya affected by her past?

4. What does Tommy provide Maya?

Chapter 30

1. Structurally, why does this chapter immediately follow the previous one?

2. What does Maya mean when she says of Dolores, “she had all the poses of the Black bourgeoisie without the material basis to support the postures”?

3. Why is Maya “another link in a long chain of disappointments” for Dolores?

4. What is the significance of Maya’s trip to Mexico with her father?
