

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by Maya Angelou

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Notes to the Teacher

This book is a personal narrative of the early life of Marguerite “Maya” Angelou in which the reader witnesses Marguerite’s coming-of-age. A personal narrative, which is a type of autobiography or memoir, but less formal and complete, frequently focuses on a selected time in the writer’s life rather than the author’s whole life. Perhaps because they are informal, personal narratives are sometimes confused with a type of novel called fictionalized memoirs.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings contains usage of racial epithets that some students may find offensive. Rarely are these epithets used vindictively; rather, they are a reflection of acceptable speech patterns of the day. These epithets lend an authenticity to the story, as much of the conversation is informal in an informal setting. Also, be aware that there are frequent references to sex in this book, including the rape of young Marguerite. You may also want to have your students research exactly where the title of the book came from. It was taken from a line in a poem called “Sympathy,” by Lawrence Dunbar. Dunbar was a Black, male poet who wrote during the 1800’s. Having students read the entire poem might help them to fully understand the significance of the title. All references come from the Bantam Books edition of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, copyright 1969.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. point out examples in this novel of segregation and the oppression of the Black community during the 1930's and 1940's.
2. find examples of metaphors and similes to illustrate the author's poetic writing style.
3. recognize and point out examples of the following literary elements in the novel:
 - flashback
 - foreshadowing
 - symbolism
4. discuss the author's use of allusion, and explain how it enhances the reader's understanding of the children's dreams for their futures.
5. discuss the symbolic significance of the title and explain how it relates to the major theme of the book.
6. contrast the Black people's definition of charity with the White people's definition.
7. trace the importance of religion in the Black community and the idea that God favors the oppressed.
8. discuss the Black people's definition of respect and the importance attached to the proper form of address.
9. explain how the sexual assault of young Marguerite impacts her childhood, her later adult life, and the lives of her family members.
10. draw a generalization about the Black females in Marguerite's life and support the generalization by citing incidents from the book.
11. cite events in the book to support the following thematic generalization:

People who want to do the right thing, will do the right thing.
12. demonstrate and support, by referring to events and comments from the book, that a major theme in this book is:

Despite the strictures imposed and the lack of power, with hope in the heart, one can survive and possibly thrive.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How was Stamps segregated from the neighboring White community? List three examples of White oppression Marguerite observed from the relative safety of the Store.
2. *About the Author* states that Maya Angelou has written five collections of poetry. Find specific examples of poetic elements, such as imagery, metaphors, and similes, in this novel. How does her use of language affect the readability of the book?
3. Support the following statement with examples from the story: The title of the book is a metaphor for the invincibility of the human spirit under oppression.
4. Discuss “respect” from the Black perspective, specifically, respect for elders, a person’s correct name, and God.
5. Trace how Marguerite comes to terms with the sexual assault and is able to go on with her life.
6. What does Marguerite learn about death from her flashback to Florida Taylor’s funeral?
7. Why do you think the author mentions the race of her grandmother? How did her grandmother’s heritage impact her mother’s life?
8. At the end of the book, Marguerite learns to care for her infant son. She instinctively protects her son because she wants to do the right thing for him. Find other events in the story where characters do the right thing for someone else because they want to do it.
9. What does the allusion to Deuteronomy tell the reader about the author’s views about religion?
10. Discuss the positive and negative roles of religion in the author’s life.
11. Using Angelou’s definition of “White charity,” discuss the pros and cons of give-away programs for the poor.
12. Draw a conclusion about the Black female figures in the narrator’s life and support any generalizations by referring to incidents or comments in the book.
13. Provide support from the book for the following statement: In this coming-of-age narrative, the central figure moves from self-hate to self-love and from a fragmented personality to a whole one.

Chapter 4

VOCABULARY

collard – green, leafy vegetable
disenchanted – disappointed
tactic – idea or maneuver used to achieve something

1. Define “anachronism.” Why is Mr. McElroy an anachronism?

2. Why does Marguerite admire her brother?

3. According to Marguerite, what is the “need” a lonely child must have satisfied?

4. Marguerite does not see the White people as “real” people. Why not?

4. Where does Marguerite get the nickname “Maya”?

5. What is the “weight of appreciation and the threat” which trouble Marguerite?

6. Why does Marguerite think Mr. Freeman is grateful for her mother’s company?

Chapter 28

VOCABULARY

arabesque – a posture or stance in ballet

pompadour – a hair style in which the hair is combed into a high mound on the top

1. Why does Miss Kirwin love teaching?

2. Describe the qualities that make her a good teacher?

3. What classes does Marguerite take at night? Why do you suppose she chooses them?

Chapter 35

1. Define “hermaphrodite.” Why is Marguerite sympathetic to lesbians?

2. Why is she worried about her own sexuality?

3. Why does Marguerite continue to question her sexuality, even after her mother explains her natural physical changes?

4. Why does she initiate a sexual encounter with the neighbor boy?

5. How does she feel afterwards?
