

Timeline

- 1791 Toussaint L'Ouverture leads freedom fighters in Haiti.
- 1797 The Masons, a fraternal order, is organized.
- 1800 Gabriel Prosser leads a slave uprising in Richmond, Virginia.
- 1831 Nat Turner is executed for organizing a slave revolt.
- 1866 Fisk University opens its doors to students in Nashville, Tennessee.
- 1867 Horatio Alger publishes the first of his rags-to-riches novels.
- 1868 The fraternal order of Elks is established.
- 1876 The Eastern Star is established.
- 1882 The Knights of Columbus are organized.
- 1888 Jack the Ripper terrorizes London.
- 1919 Mexican dissident Zapata dies.
- 1923 The Mexican bandit Pancho Villa dies.
- 1928 *Mickey Mouse* cartoons debut.
- 1929 Oct. 29: The stock market crashes, signaling the beginning of the Depression.
- 1930 *The Shadow* becomes a popular radio mystery.
- 1933 *Alley Oop* appears as a syndicated cartoon. March: The Civilian Conservation Corps is established to give work to the unemployed.
- 1935 June 25: Joe Louis defeats Primo Carnera for the world heavyweight championship.
- 1936 Jesse Owens wins Olympic medals in track and field. Jan. 31: Detroit radio originates the *Green Hornet*. Feb. 17: Ray Moore creates the *Phantom*.
- 1938 May 26: The House Un-American Activities Committee is formed.
- 1939 November: *Captain Marvel* comics are first produced.
- 1941 Dec. 7: Japanese bombers attack Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Dec. 8: The U. S. declares war on Japan.
- 1942-44 Japanese-Americans are interned in eleven camps throughout the U.S.
- 1945 February: American Marines wage a significant battle against the Japanese. August 14: Japan surrenders to the U. S. August 15: Americans celebrate V-J Day. Sept. 9: Emissaries sign a formal surrender on the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.

Author Sketch



Maya Angelou, pseudonym of Marguerite Johnson, demonstrates an eclectic spirit. She was influenced by the opposing forces of worldly, citified divorced parents and the traditional deep-South mothering of her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas. Born the second of two children in St. Louis on April 4, 1928, to Vivian "Bibbi" Baxter, a nurse and gambler, and Bailey Henderson, Senior, a flamboyant doorman and chef, Angelou spent her early childhood in the stifling, prejudiced rural environment of southern Arkansas. Along with older brother Bailey Junior, she returned to her mother's home in St. Louis in 1936.

Life in the city enlivened Angelou with its ease, entertainments, and charm. Vivian indulged her daughter with a glamor and motherly grace that contrasted the Bible Belt firmness of Momma Henderson. The Baxter family, including a part-German grandmother, invalid grandfather, and three fierce uncles, earned respect in political circles. After Mr. Freeman, Vivian's lover, raped and threatened Maya, she retreated into silence. To cope with her daughter's trauma, Vivian returned her to Stamps.

Through the aristocratic stimulus of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Maya overcame guilt and fear and at age twelve graduated with honors from Lafayette County Training School. Reestablished with Vivian in Los Angeles, she moved with the family to Oakland and then to San Francisco's Fillmore district. A stabilizing influence of her teen years was a satisfying relationship with her stepfather, Daddy Clidell Jackson, a real estate investor.

While attending the California Labor School, Maya began working as a street car conductor at age 18 and graduated from Mission High a few weeks before the birth of her only child, Clyde Bailey "Guy" Johnson. She worked in night clubs, a record store, and a brothel, cooked in a bistro, and danced in an exotic stage show. Her marriage to Greek-American Tosh Angelos lasted until the mid-1950s, when she joined a government-sponsored tour of Africa and Europe with a road show of *Porgy and Bess*. Guy remained with Vivian.

Returning to take charge of her son, Angelou settled in Sausalito and began writing. In New York, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild, sang at the Apollo Theatre, and acted minor roles off Broadway. In 1961, she married Vusumzi Make, a South African politician, and made their home in Johannesburg. After the marriage failed, she worked as a journalist for the *Arab Observer*, an English newspaper.

Because Guy was injured in a car wreck, Angelou moved to Accra to attend him and worked as a college administrator at the School of Music and Drama, for which she wrote original productions. Homesickness returned her to California. Under the influence of Bayard Rustin, a civil rights activist, and of Martin Luther King, Jr., she joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In 1973, Angelou married Paul Du Feu, a white building contractor, and moved to Sonoma, California. She composed music and published novels, autobiography, poetry, and plays. She took a bit part as grandmother of Kunta Kinte in *Roots* and in an adaptation of Sophocles' *Ajax*. In January 1993, she presented an original poem at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton.

Critic's Corner

Maya Angelou sums up a resilient attitude toward work and success, "You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated." Her flexibility and enthusiasm have earned a host of accolades, including the *Ladies' Home Journal* 1976 Woman of the Year in Communications, a Candace Award, nominations for a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony, and honorary degrees from Smith College, Mills College, and Lawrence University. She has appeared on television talk shows, in a PBS series set in Stamps, and a special with Richard Pryor.

Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, remains a favorite on both feminist and multicultural lists. A moving, introspective black autobiography, it stands out as a readable, enjoyable, and valid representation of black American womanhood. The movie version, starring Constance Good, aired on April 28, 1979. The intensity of Good's performance as Maya blended well with the contributions of Esther Rolle

as Grandmother Henderson, Diahann Carroll as Vivian, and Roger Mosely as Daddy Bailey. Critics responded to Angelou's recreation of the tender years of girlhood and the brutality of Mr. Freeman, who changed Maya's outlook so drastically that she forced herself to become mute.

Other works by Maya Angelou

Adjoa Amissah (1967)
All Day Long (1974)
All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986)
And Still I Rise (1978)
Black, Blues, Black (1968)
Black Pearls: The Poetry of Maya Angelou (1998)
A Brave and Startling Truth (1995)
The Clawing Within (1966)
The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou (1994)
Even the Stars Look Lonesome (1997)
Georgia, Georgia (1972)
Gettin' Up Stayed on My Mind (The Way It Is) (1966)
Gather Together in My Name (1974)
The Heart of a Woman (1981)
I Shall Not Be Moved (1990)
Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie (1971)
King: Drum Major for Love (1990)
Kofi and His Magic (1996)
The Least of These (1966)
Life Doesn't Frighten Me (1998)
Mrs. Flowers (1986)
Now Sheba Sings the Song (1987)
Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well (1975)
On a Southern Journey (1983)
On the Pulse of Morning; The Inaugural Poem (1993)
Phenomenal Woman; Four Poems Celebrating Women (1993)
Poems: Maya Angelou (1986)
Shaker, Why Don't You Sing? (1983)
Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas (1975)
Sister, Sister (1982)
A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002)
Theatrical Vignette (1983)
Trying to Make It Home (1989)
On the Pulse of the Morning (1993)
Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now (1994)

Related Reading

William Armstrong, *Souder*
 E. R. Braithwaite, *To Sir, With Love*
 Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*
 Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories*

General Objectives

1. To define autobiography
2. To describe the physical, mental, and emotional effects of low self-esteem
3. To characterize life for Southern blacks during the 1930s and 1940s
4. To acknowledge the importance of achievement, autonomy, and self-determination
5. To contrast characters in their responses to despair, isolation, desire, change, poverty, loss, and deprivation
6. To consider the significance of work, love, prestige, and trust
7. To discuss the value of acceptance to growing children
8. To account for defiance and testing of limits in teenagers
9. To define realism and objectivity
10. To isolate the zest and variety of black culture
11. To characterize the rhythm of narrative and commentary
12. To account for de-emphasis of male roles
13. To describe vivid sense impressions

Specific Objectives

1. To outline Maya's academic growth
2. To recount changes in Maya's family structure
3. To discuss the sources of Annie's income
4. To explain why Annie wants to rescue her grandchildren from Southern racism and violence
5. To account for Maya's sexual fears
6. To describe Vivian and Bailey's faults as parents

7. To describe the influence of Uncle Willie, Mrs. Flowers, and Mrs. Cullinan on Maya's life
8. To analyze why Mr. Freeman molests and threatens Maya
9. To analyze Annie's position as spiritual leader, entrepreneur, and disciplinarian
10. To contrast Daddy Bailey and Daddy Clidell
11. To enumerate turning points, such as Bailey's discovery of Anne Francis and Maya's departure from the junkyard gang
12. To list ways in which Bailey and Maya cope with their parents' divorce
13. To evaluate the title
14. To account for Maya's love of reading and drama
15. To assess the author's depiction of the rural South
16. To contrast varying examples of Angelou's enhancement of the Maya character
17. To validate Angelou's autobiography as feminist literature
18. To explain how Maya's relationship with Bailey alters over time

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* should include these aspects:

Themes

- poverty
- family
- humor
- abandonment
- learning
- brutality
- yearning
- child abuse
- running away
- scholarship

Motifs

- coping with Southern bigotry
- learning to function in a hostile environment
- confronting job discrimination
- acquiring a stepparent
- relieving stress through creativity

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Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Maya Angelou's style, present the following terms and applications to her autobiography:

Climax: the height of an action, a crisis or turning point from which all behaviors or attitudes are permanently altered and nothing can ever be what it once was. The turning point for Maya is the double trauma of rape by a pedophile and the post-trial murder of the villain. Maya is tender-hearted in childhood and feels responsible for her testimony, which brought about Mr. Freeman's conviction and subsequent murder by Bibbi's brothers. The resolution of the child's inner torment is the discovery of poetry and its uplifting humanism. The connection has served Angelou well throughout her life.

Conflict: the external physical struggle or internal emotional tension between opposing characters or forces in a dramatic action, as demonstrated by the shifting forces that undermine Maya's security. Approaching womanhood upsets her self-image and leaves her with questions concerning normal sexuality. Maya's sexual encounter with a volunteer male becomes extreme proof of femininity. The

incident results in the conception of a son, whom she conceals from her family until shortly before birth and fears to hold and care for. Her mother's self-assured way with infants encourages Maya to trust herself and allow normal instincts to lead the way.

Contrast: the obvious difference or dissonance that appears when disparate objects, persons, statements, themes, or situations are compared. In childhood, Maya enjoyed the love and support of a firm, religiously motivated mother figure, Annie Henderson. When Maya moves to St. Louis, she discovers strong women of another type—tough-talking politico Grandmother Baxter and the sparkling ease and grace of nurse/gambler Bibbi Bailey, the mother she had never known. The contrast accounts for variations in outlook and self-discipline as Maya reaches maturity, runs away from her father, then returns to her mother to complete the perplexing task of growing up.

The Importance of Setting

Setting is a major strength of Angelou's autobiography. In early childhood, Maya and her brother Bailey Junior live under tight constraints of Annie Henderson's fundamentalism. The children go to school and church, work in the family store, and attend to chores that keep them under the watchful eye of their grandmother and Uncle Willie. Bailey's first encounter with freedom takes him to town to the Saturday movie to see Anne Francis on the screen. His late return provokes such consternation in his grandmother that he understands the terrors of black families when their children brave a hostile racist environment.

The sudden shift to St. Louis produces other dangers amid a wealth of pleasures. Maya enjoys the citified pleasures that were unknown in Stamps, Arkansas. She gawks at her silky-smooth mother dancing and gesturing in Louie's bar and thrills to read science fiction at the public library. The terror of rape, public testimony in court, and subsequent murder of her attacker temporarily shuts down her speech. The neurotic response forces Vivian to return Maya by train to Stamps and Grandmother Henderson for the tender nurturing that the children knew from infancy.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings Maya Angelou

On return to Vivian, Maya begins to test the environs of California. Her enthusiasm for school and her observations of wartime racism against Japanese Americans derive from the multicultural neighborhoods of Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco, where Maya's perceptions about race expand beyond black and white. In Bailey's care, she ventures into Mexico and learns how her charming daddy romances Hispanic women at a rural cantina.

The roundabout conclusion to Maya's growing up takes her from trailer park to stranger's home and flight to a junkyard, where she finds other young people in search of a suitable life free of parental discipline. At the end of her flight from parents, she

knows that a place with family is right for her. Content in Vivian's acceptance and encouragement, Maya comes rapidly into womanhood by way of giving birth to Guy Johnson.

Cross-Curricular Sources

For more information about black history, race prejudice, poverty, liturgical music, rape, grief, and depression, consult these sources:

African-American Music—A Chronology 1619-1995, Ikoro Communications

Black History Month Resource Book, Gale Research

Celebrating Women's History, Gale Research

Civil Rights, Center for the Humanities

