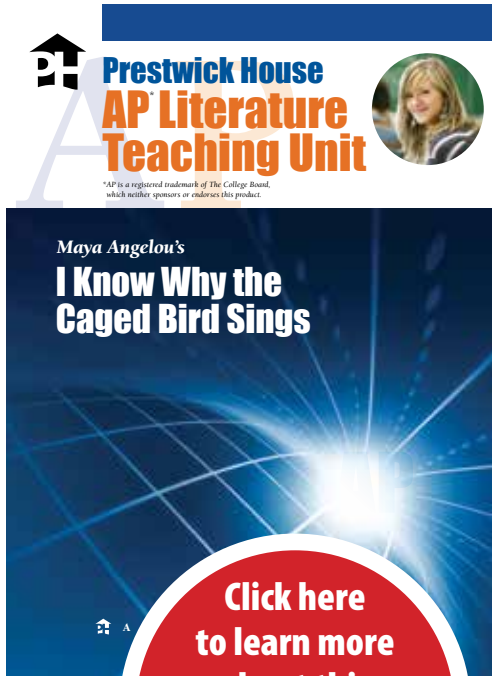




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Teaching Unit

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by Maya Angelou

Written by Rhonda Carwell



Prestwick House

Item No. 303445

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.

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 still have to face an empty page,” writing is still a process of “dragging my pencil across old scars to sharpen it.” Yet Maya Angelou has stated, “I will go anywhere at any time. No one frightens me.”

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?

Chapter 23

1. Why is the eighth grade graduation so significant in the lives of the community of Stamps?

2. What is Maya’s tone when she describes the school she attended: “Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis court, nor climbing ivy”?

3. Explain the irony of Donleavy’s using the word “praise” in his message to the graduating class.

4. What thought process is occurring in Maya’s mind in the paragraphs beginning with “Graduation, the hush-hush magic” ending with, “we were an abomination. All of us”?

Chapter 34

1. What can the reader assume are the reasons for Maya not being furious when she is first told streetcars do not accept colored people for conductorette jobs?

2. What does Maya mean when she says, “The miserable little encounter had nothing to do with me”? What does this realization do for her?

3. Why does Maya insist that she must have this job?

4. According to Maya Angelou, why should the success of a Black woman be regarded with enthusiasm rather than “belligerence” and “amazement”?

Chapter 35

1. Why would Maya sympathize with lesbians more readily than with others?

2. What simple factor in Maya’s life leads to her decision to seek a sexual relationship with the boy in the neighborhood?
