



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2003 Volume III: Teaching Poetry in the Primary and Secondary Schools

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## **Analyzing Maya Angelou's Poems as a Window into Her Character**

Curriculum Unit 03.03.06  
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### **Background Information**

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The school in which I teach is Hyde Leadership School. Hyde is organized differently from other schools, so it is important to examine our unique characteristics. Hyde is a character based magnet high school. Our focus is on character development. We place an emphasis on students' effort over their achievement. Students' learning is centered on self-analysis and the development of their unique potential. While at Hyde, students are guided through the process of self-discovery. When a student is acting out, instead of focusing on eliminating the misbehavior, the student is forced to examine their underlying attitude. It is Hyde's belief that inappropriate forms of behavior are just symptoms of a problematic attitude. The belief is that if a student's character and attitude are as fully developed as they need to be, then the achievement will naturally follow.

The Hyde Leadership concept is based on five guiding principles: humility, conscience, truth, destiny, brother's keeper, and five guiding words: leadership, courage, concern, integrity and curiosity. The different subject curriculums are meant to encompass these words and principles. The purpose is to give students several opportunities to find their strengths and different venues for them to show their strengths.

Hyde Leadership is a small high school, with 200 students. Our statistical breakdown is similar to that of most New Haven Schools. The majority of our students are black. Most of our graduating seniors are accepted to college; however, many do not have the academic or coping skills necessary to be successful.

This curriculum will draw together the main focuses of our school concept, character development and basic academic skill improvement. By examining Maya Angelou, students will be able to examine some coping strategies of a successful, strong individual. They will also have the opportunity to practice their reading and writing skills.

The Maya Angelou curriculum will be taught in our mandatory PM Program. It will be taught to a mix of ninth, tenth and eleventh graders. The group will be comprised of students with special needs, students in regular education and students with English as a second language.

## Introduction to Unit

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Poetry can be intimidating. This is my perspective. Although an avid reader, I still dreaded poetry units in school. Since I have become a teacher, I have watched with interest how students respond to poetry. Some students respond with great reluctance. Others who have little or no inclination to read or write suddenly come alive when given a poetry assignment. One student who historically has avoided all written assignments came into my classroom the other day to proudly show off a poem he had written. I was amazed. He used a poem given in class as a model and wrote his own. The poem now hangs on my bulletin board, a reminder that all students have imagination and creativity, but have not necessarily learned the manner in which they can display their talents. My view has been forced to change since becoming a teacher. I hope to present a curriculum that will capture students' attention and allow them a venue, with which they may not have much experience, to express themselves.

Typically one of the roadblocks students face in writing is using the correct mechanics. If their spelling and grammar are weak, then instead of spending time on the content, the students become overwhelmed with the editing process. Allowing students to reduce the focus on proper grammar and syntax allows them in turn to focus on the emotion they wish to express. However, the mechanics of writing are important to know. The juggling act is allowing students to enjoy the experience of writing, while they learn the mechanics. Writing poetry in free verse gives the feeling of freedom from rules even while it encourages an appreciation for language.

## Purpose

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The purpose of my curriculum is two-fold. First, students will have the opportunity to examine Maya Angelou's life and her methods of coping through the difficult times in her life. Maya Angelou has lived an incredible life. She has overcome seemingly insurmountable odds and is one of the leading African American women of our time. Her life story is inspirational. Everyone who learns about Angelou can take something from her experience and transfer it to their own lives. Many students feel overwhelmed by their personal lives and that feeling carries over and interferes with their education. Students will benefit from examining some of the coping strategies used by a strong individual such as Maya Angelou. Instead of letting life's circumstances cripple her, she gained strength from all of the obstacles she faced. This curriculum will provide students insight into Maya Angelou's life and her strategies for coping by analyzing her poetry. Angelou's success in overcoming odds corresponds closely with our school goals for students' character development.

Second, I hope to show students how to utilize poetry as a form of creative self-expression, as Maya Angelou does. The form of 'poetry' most of my students are familiar with is rap lyrics. I chose Maya Angelou's writing because her incantatory style and boldness of address sometimes does resemble a rap lyric. Working off their prior knowledge about writing and poetry, coupled with the examples of Angelou's writing, students will learn to analyze her poetry. After they have an understanding of poetry, students will be able to create their own form of written expression.

Angelou has written in a variety of formats, including poems, novels, essays, screenplays and children's stories. Experimentation with different genres is important to developing your voice as an author. Students will explore Angelou's character and background through her written prose. After they learn about her, we will examine poetry. We will explore how she used events in her life as the basis of her writing. Her feelings and beliefs are made evident through her writing.

Most of Maya Angelou's writing is a means of using her strengths: writing, showing her perseverance and eloquence, to document her weaknesses. All of her autobiographical novels explain the difficulties that she experienced growing up. In each of the novels, Angelou covers different years and events of growing up. She does not sugar coat or glamorize her choices. She does not ask the reader to approve of her emotions, and yet her emotions have such strength the reader can't help but empathize. Through the difficult times, Angelou always finds strength in the people in her life. She draws from their strength and grows into a self-assured strong woman.

## **Biographical Background Information**

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Maya Angelou has led a life of various experiences, jobs, and relationships. She has been many 'firsts', earned numerous rewards and prestigious honors, and shared her experiences with many people through her written and oral words. Even though she seemingly shares all of the information of her life as the topic of six autobiographical novels and many collections of poems, there are gray areas and gaps in her biography. On one hand, while researching her I found this to be troubling. Were the facts changed in her writing? Why did I find multiple years listed for her personal experiences? On the other hand it makes her seem more real. How often do we 'rewrite' incidents in our lives? Memory is human, not robotic. It changes to fit our needs, and influences how we perceive situations.

Maya's universal appeal is her unaffected manner. Her stories show her search for identity. Each take place in a different era with different characters, but all show her desire to learn and grow. Her development is shown to be an ongoing process. She then uses her experiences to write her poems. This curriculum will examine six of her poems. These are broken down into three categories; effect of family members, experiences she faced, and lastly her character and attitude toward life.

In the next several pages, I will explore six different poems. These poems were chosen for the relevance to my students' lives. My explanations are those I would use to jump start class discussions. The poems are not directly quotes due to copy right restrictions. The poems are all available in The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou. 'Phenomenal Woman', 'Willie', 'Still I Rise' are available in the collection of poems And Still I Rise. 'Avec Merci, Mother', 'Contemporary Announcement', 'My life has turned to Blue' are available in the collection Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?

## Breakdown of Poems

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### Poems about the Effect of Family Members

There were several characters that Maya describes as having had an influential effect on her. In the different periods of her life, different people played important roles on forming her character and personality. The ones I will examine are family members that were involved with Maya in the early part of her life. I will look at two, her mother, Vivian Baxter, and her uncle, Willie. While her mother sounds like an obvious choice, Maya did not live with her mother for most of her childhood. Despite that, Vivian was still vital to Maya's development. The second, a less obvious choice, is an uncle she lived with while she was away from her mother. In fact she lived with her grandmother and her uncle also lived there. From watching him and his acceptance of his difficult life Maya learned many valuable lessons.

#### Avec Merci, Mother

The first family member to be considered is Maya's mother, Vivian. The poem Maya wrote about her mother is entitled "Avec Merci, Mother". This poem intimates the ambivalent way children respond to their mother. This perspective is important because many of my students have ambiguous feelings toward their parents. While some blame their parents for the mistakes they made, other students idolize them and refuse to acknowledge the negatives. To admit that your parent made mistakes that affected your life in a negative manner, while still holding them dear as a parent is a difficult task. Angelou struggles with these emotions with her mother.

The poem 'Avec Merci, Mother' highlights many of the characteristics of Angelou's mother that one finds in her autobiographies. For instance the poem begins with an explanation of her mother's aura, which her children held in such high regard. The comment in the second stanza that refers to genuflection shows Maya's mother's gracious acceptance and expectation of the worshipful attitude. This is comparable to passages that occur in the autobiographies whenever Maya talks about the role her mother played in her childhood. When Vivian is mentioned it is with a sense of awe. Instead of being turned off by her mother's aloof, superior attitude, Maya and her brother, Bailey, quickly begin to believe that their mother deserves to be held in the high esteem she demands. For instance when Maya and Bailey first meet their mother, Maya says "It is remarkable how much truth there is in the two expressions: 'struck dumb' and 'love at first sight'. My mother's beauty literally assailed me." (Angelou, 1969 p. 49). The awe grew from there. From this awe came a sense of confusion that Maya would need to work out for the rest of her life. One the one hand this woman was above reproach and indeed did some of her motherly duties exceptionally well, however on the other hand there were many times that she was unapproachable and not around when Maya needed her.

The fourth stanza of the poem alludes to a male who cries over Vivian, and the inability to capture her essence. The mother responds with a patronizing glance, and notes the father and son resemblance. This individual is most likely Maya's brother Bailey. His adoration of his mother was greater than Maya's. Bailey didn't call his mother any of the terms that are normally used, such as mom, mommy or ma. Instead he referred to her as "Mother Dear" until the circumstance of proximity softened the phrase's formality to "Muh Dear," and finally to "M'Deah." (Angelou, 1969 p. 57). In fact Vivien was the first person to wedge between the strong bond that held Maya and Bailey together. This also added to Maya's conflicted emotions about her mother.

Vivian's flip reaction to males crying over her shows her attitude toward men and their influence over her. The attitude is of course men would cry over her. She exudes emotional as well as physical strength. In Angelou's autobiography there are many examples given to highlight her mother's strength. One example of Vivian's physical strength was when she took a billy club and "crashed the man's head... enough to leave him just this side of death" (Angelou, 1969 p. 55) because this man had dared to curse at her. She got her revenge even though he was physically large and had a bad reputation.

Knowing some of the history of Maya and Vivian's relationship I will be able to present the poem to my students showing conflicting views. These views will be readily understandable as we frequently feel mixed feelings about people. Reading the poem as viewing Vivian in a positive manner, the title "Avec Merci, Mother" seems to be Maya's method of thanking her mother for the strong role model she provided. Maya grew into a woman who was not scared to face challenges. Although she did act stupidly under the influence of love, Maya typically had the upper hand in her relationships with men and did not allow them the power to ruin her life. She learned to assume an air of self-confidence and self-sufficiency even if she didn't feel it, as she had seen her mother do. Several times in the autobiographies Maya wrote of difficult situations in which she would think how her mother would have handled herself, then act accordingly.

Read with an air of irony, the title gives the poem a much different feeling. Her mother was always shrouded in a cloud of mystery and there were many times when Maya felt an unconscious resentment toward her. The first was her abandonment of Maya and Bailey. They were given to a grandmother to live with for ten formative years, from ages three to thirteen and four to fourteen respectively. Then there was the allegiance switch of Bailey from Maya to her mother. While he did not give up on Maya, he let it be known that Mother Dear was the most important. The worst let down was when Vivian's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, was allowed to sexually molest and ultimately rape Maya in her mother's bed. Throughout Maya's life the slights continued.

This poem will allow students entry on several levels. All have had experiences, good and bad, with mother figures. This will lead to discussion regarding the strengths and weaknesses of people and how character can influence others. Another level will be reached by discussing the change in perspective and tone of the poem. Sarcasm is a trait many high school students are familiar with. Any argument over semantics and tone is sure to ignite their interest. Lastly, the strength of the words coupled with their accessibility will make this poem a good one for analyzing.

## Willie

Another poem about a family member is entitled simply "Willie". Willie is Maya's uncle. She lived with him in Stamps, Arkansas when she and Bailey left their parents to go live with their grandmother, Annie Henderson. Maya lived there for ten years, from age three to thirteen. Uncle Willie lived with his mother because he was limited in his wage earning powers due to his physical impairments.

As I would point out to my students, the first stanza provides a description of the physical characteristics of Willie. At the age of three, Willie was dropped by a babysitter and suffered physical deformities as a result. The poem describes him as crippled but doesn't give the full picture. When teaching this poem, I will have students refer to the autobiography in which Maya explains Willie's handicap in further details. She tells of his "high-topped shoes and the cane, his uncontrollable muscles and thick tongue" (Angelou, 1969 p. 11). The description in the first stanza is juxtaposed with his attitude. Even though troubled with a body that doesn't work, his attitude is that he just keeps going. This was very influential on Maya; she mentions it extensively in her autobiography as well as writing a poem in his honor.

The second stanza explains further the difficulties Uncle Willie faced. Frequent loneliness was a curse he was forced to accept being unable to marry or socialize in a normal fashion. Despite that, he doesn't give up and turn inward. The reference to the leaders may refer to the civil rights fight that Maya was actively involved in. Although Willie "was the whipping boy and butt of jokes of the underemployed and underpaid" (Angelou, 1969 p. 9) he was still willing to support the leaders as he saw them struggle to emerge from the undesirable social conditions they endured. I will ask students to think about times they felt overwhelmed and unable to succeed. Then we will look at Willie's strengths.

The next stanza gives a sense of hope. Acknowledging the given physical and emotional injuries associated with life, Angelou then illustrates the undefeated attitude in referring to spring and children. Both spring and children bring to mind freshness, newness and endless possibilities. By pairing pain with hope, Angelou shows that the spirit is more powerful than the physical constraints of the body. It is through this spirit that Uncle Willie is able to have a strong effect on Maya as well as the world.

The fourth stanza also shows the slights he faced juxtaposed with the hope of the future. As a crippled black man, Willie was frequently dehumanized. By viewing him as an 'other', whether it be black or crippled, individuals were able to categorize him and avoid dealing with their own insecurities. After showing this phenomenon, Angelou then writes of children's games. Children will always play, and their games get passed along and shared with ease. This offers hope for the integration of the races. Adults are more resistant to change than children, and hope for the future is frequently placed upon the shoulders of those too young to realize the struggles to come. Angelou was very involved in the civil rights movement, but was wise enough to know people were too resistant for there to be an overnight solution.

The next stanza has moved from spring to summer. This shows the passage of time and the poem then moves to autumn in the next stanza. This shows the interminability of the racial issues they face, as well as the optimistic attitude Willie maintains. This stanza also mentions an unnamed force that threatens his comfort. While there were numerous like situations, this aligns with one situation Maya recounts in her autobiography that I would share with my students. One day the old sheriff rode up to warn her grandmother of an incident that occurred between a white woman and a black man. The warning was meant to protect Willie by getting him into hiding. As a black man, he was as apt as any other to be pulled in and punished for the alleged act that was committed. He was forced to fold his physically deformed body into the potato storage bin and hide all night. Angelou says that Uncle Willie "moaned the whole night through as if he had, in fact, been guilty of some heinous crime" (Angelou, 1969 p. 15). Living with the constant threat of unfair persecution is a weight that could easily pull a person down. Instead, Uncle Willie's spirit continued to rise above the worldly issues he confronted daily. His spirit is shown in the poem as the unrelenting spirit necessary through generations to keep fighting toward equality.

Maya learned from Willie's attitude. There were many times she felt utterly defeated, but giving up and quitting was never an option. This is a powerful message for students to hear. To see an example of a successful woman who faced parental abandonment, poverty, teenage pregnancy and struggles for money that led to prostitution, able to strive and continue to demand the best of herself and others is compelling. Maya didn't write herself off on any of these roadblocks, but found an alternative way around them. By using Willie as a comparable individual that strove for personal excellence in the face of hardship, it will help to make the curriculum less tailored to females.

#### Poems about Events in Angelou's Life

In order to understand Maya Angelou at all, it is important to know some of the situations she experienced and

how she dealt with them. Her autobiographies are filled with difficult situations and her strategies for coping with them. Her autobiographies are not written to make the reader believe she is a strong woman, instead they show her struggle in trying to carve out a life for herself and her son. It is through these struggles that her strength of character emerges. By allowing the reader to experience the nitty gritty with her, they take away the sense of her strength without her directly telling them. These two poems are typical events that occur in lives and show Angelou's attitude towards them.

### Contemporary Announcement

This poem is shorter than most of Angelou's. Only two stanzas, it shows the conflicting attitudes toward the monthly payment of rent. The first stanza shows her working, living well, and paying rent without difficulty. In the second stanza, the narrator is out of work and unable to pay the rent.

'Contemporary Announcement' is powerful for several reasons. First is the way it corresponds with Angelou's life. Later in her life, while she was supporting her son, there were times between jobs when she struggled to pay her bills. Her solutions were varied and usually worked out. Sometimes she would end up going home, she found herself starting off her performing career in a strip club, to performing in cabarets. While Angelou worked as a cabaret singer, she and Guy moved frequently to follow the jobs. She writes, "When the money was plentiful, we lived in swank hotels and called room service. At other times we stayed in boarding houses. I strung sheets as room dividers, and cooked our favorite food illegally on a two-burner hot place." (Angelou, 1981 p. 32). They say necessity is the mother of invention. Without the need to support her son, Angelou may not have found herself pushed in the many directions she was ultimately able to find success.

This poem is powerful also because it gives a glimpse into a way of living that is transient. Not knowing if you are going to be able to pay your monthly bills, it is hard to have a sense of permanence. Without the sense of fitting into your environment it is difficult to have the strength to fight for your beliefs. While focusing on paying rent, an experience common across race and gender lines, it taps into the deeper sense of belonging. Written during a time of great racial conflict, the poem shows the importance of having that sense of what it means to belong. My students are living in a different time, with different issues. However the common bond between is not hard to find. This concept is one that is crucial to discuss. It can be dealt with on several levels. The most topical being not having a place to live. Educators are taught that without the basic life necessities taken care of, food and water, shelter, and safety, learning cannot take place. I have watched students drop out of school because they were kicked out of their homes and did not have a secure place to reside. My students may have experienced this first hand, but if not all have known someone it has happened to. Students will want to discuss a variety of issues that relate to this idea. On a deeper level, if these needs are not being met and energy is being spent on surviving, then character development and growth cannot occur. How can an individual be expected to stand up for their or anyone else's rights when they are struggling to find money for food or rent? This question will fit nicely into our school's philosophy.

While written in a direct manner of speech, the poem is still able to show the emotional toll that comes along with this unsure existence. In the first stanza the narrator has a sense of pride and wants to share their success with the world. When an individual feels that way it is easy to conquer fears. The second stanza, however, shows an individual who is stuck cowering in the dark, hoping no one notices them. Living life in this fashion makes it near impossible to think about issues outside of the immediate ones you face, such as finding money to pay the bills so you don't face eviction. It also takes a toll on a person's character. When the solution for finding money for food and bills is against your moral codes, be it welfare, begging or prostitution, the real depth of character emerges. Maya refused to rely on welfare. Her family taught her too much pride.

Begging was not an option and she wasn't any good at prostitution. Instead of caving on her beliefs she upheld her character and found ways to survive.

This poem aligns with Angelou's experiences, but is used as a tool to explore deeper issues. Many of my students may find themselves struggling with the month to month concern of paying rent and buying food. Because the experience written about in this poem is widely known, it provides an interesting gateway to exploring the connection between poetry and writing as a means of survival. After analyzing this poem, students will be able to walk away with a deeper understanding of the emotional issues connected with the financial concerns they experience.

### *My Life Has Turned to Blue*

The surface message of this poem deals with heartache, a theme which most adolescent students have strong feelings about. I figure this topic will be a theme that generates a lot of discussion, and will allow for a good entry into the analyzing of this poem. Angelou has been married an undisclosed number of times and has been involved in many relationships. I believe this poem doesn't refer to one failed relationship, but rather the universal emotions that accompany failed relationships.

One interesting aspect of 'My Life Has Turned to Blue' that I will have my students explore is the use of color. The first stanza refers four times to color, while the second uses three, and the last has only two references to color. This reduction of color is a subtle way of showing the gradual paling of the narrator's life. Colors are used to show vividness and liveliness. The removal of color gives the opposite feeling to the poem.

In juxtaposition to the blanching of color, the references to regenerative objects give it the feeling life and hope. For instance, green grass gives the impression of continuance and new growth. Winter is past and spring has arrived. That shows the passing of time, which heals the heartache. The reference to spring also shows that life continues and that cycle is never ending.

The color descriptions Angelou uses are not particularly original. Red robins, golden days and rosy dawns are fairly trite expressions. I will have students explain if they feel the expressions work or if they feel more original descriptions would have been better. If I get blank stared and the customary nod of approval without thought, I will encourage them to remember the days of Mad Libs. The descriptions one would get by filling in blanks in unknown sentences were very original, albeit typically nonsense. Students will have to try to understand why she used these expressions and then decide whether she was successful at that. I believe she used common expressions the reader would be familiar with because the feeling of heartache is a common experience and by using common wordings she taps into that commonality. I will hope to get students to explain their decision and to be able to use that knowledge in a poem using color descriptions they will write.

The first two stanzas have similar rhyming patterns. The second, fourth and sixth lines rhyme. By changing this slightly in the last stanza, Angelou shows the change in attitude in the last stanza. This is where the subtle sense of optimism comes through. Breaking out of the pattern, even if it is only slightly, allows the reader to break away from the melancholy sense of the heartache.

### Poems about Character and Attitude

The correlation between Maya Angelou's life and my school's guiding words and principles makes Angelou's poetry a logical tool for reinforcing and discussing them. The next two poems will look at her character. Even though she has done things in her life she is not proud of, these acts together comprise who she is, and she



continues to live with her head held high. Her character traits are worthy of discussion due to the events she had faced. If her life had been simpler, the opportunities for her character growth might not have occurred.

### *Still I Rise*

As the title indicates, this poem is a tribute to Angelou's ability to rise above anything that happens or has happened to her. The poem creates a voice for all people, not just her individual story.

'Still I Rise' begins with a mention of writing down history. There has been a movement to analyze the text books presented to students to see if they hold the true history, or just one rose colored version. It is interesting that 'Still I Rise' begins by making the reader immediately think of the skewed versions of history they have been taught over the years. There is a sense of lies and silent discrimination that surrounds the history of African Americans. She also mentions dust in the first stanza. This goes along with the theme, bringing to mind many blacks who were killed. However, she says that the dust will rise, indicating that although the history has been difficult, the spirit will prevail.

The second, fourth, fifth, and seventh stanzas begin with different questions. This question is spoken to those that are perceived as taking offense at the rise of her spirit. The tactic of asking the questions pulls the reader into the poem. Instead of being able to skim over the content, the reader is forced to examine his or her own beliefs. The first, third, and sixth stanzas, those that do not question the reader, end with the phrase "I'll rise." The mixture of questions and assertion that "I'll rise" lets the reader know that the answers to the questions are mute. They are to be filled in by the reader.

This poem has a consistent rhyming pattern until it reaches the last two stanzas. With these two stanzas the format changes. Instead of talking to the reader, Angelou begins to assert the rising the title speaks of. She makes reference to 'roots' and the slavery era. Instead of these experiences being a weight around her neck, she draws on the strength of her ancestors to increase her own. She says that she is able, in fact obliged, to persevere to fulfill the dreams of her ancestors for the opportunity to be a success in a free world.

While teaching this poem to students, I will make them examine their own character traits. They will have the opportunity to examine their personal strengths and how they have helped them develop. Many of my students feel modern day effects of racism and power struggles, including 'driving while black', frequent questioning by the police, and close scrutiny in stores. This poem will tap into their prior experiences and provide an interesting forum for discussion.

### Phenomenal Woman

This poem is obviously written to reaffirm women's strength. This poem may seem to be a strange option. The reason I am including it has to do with an event that occurred this year. In my school every day is begun with a whole school meeting. The purpose is to have a forum for announcements, but more importantly to start the day with a positive reminder of the school's guiding words and principles. Put-ups are given to highlight individuals who have demonstrated the words and principles. The meeting ends with the positive message for the day. One day a girl stood up in front of the school to give the positive message. She had recently transferred in and was finding the adjustment to be hard. She rarely spoke up in a leadership role and was in frequent trouble. Her positive message was the reading of 'Phenomenal Woman'. I spoke to her after to ask why she had chosen it. She said she was at a turning point and needed to find her inner strength to put herself on the right path. This poem spoke to her. Judging the response of the female population of the school, it also

spoke to them. So while it will be challenging to engage the boys through this poem, I think the poem's power should be discussed nevertheless.

The biggest challenge will be to present this poem in a fashion that will not alienate high school males. In order for it to work the students will have to think of women who have impacted their lives. If they are able to view the poem as a tribute to influential women they have known, they will be more likely to appreciate it.

The layout of this poem is four stanzas, 13 lines in the first, 16 lines in the second and third, then 15 in the fourth stanza. All of the stanzas end with the same four lines, repeating the title.

The first stanza deals with her physical characteristics. While she is not conventionally beautiful, the way that she holds herself sets her apart from most women. Her confidence is more influential than her body type. The next stanza explains her attitude. She walks around like she owns the place, and people respond. The third stanza asks why men are so attracted to her. The last stanza tells the reader that they must understand then why she is a phenomenal.

This poem is great for adolescent girls to read and identify with. Angelou is a strong woman that uses her strengths, instead of bemoaning her weaknesses. The language of the poem is simple and easily understood. The message is very strong and resounds from every word. Even if this poem is not a focal point of a lesson, it provides a message that adolescents may need to hear, that despite what others see or expect of us to do, we can hold our heads up and prove them wrong.

## State Standards

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This unit will address the following Language Arts standards for grades 9-12 as approved by the New Haven Board of Education.

### Content Standard 1.0 Reading

- Students will give an initial personal reaction to text and describe its general content and purpose.
- Students will make comparisons between texts.
- Students will construct an interpretation and/or explanation of text.
- Students will describe the text-initial reaction, description of content and purpose.
- Students will interpret the text - construct interpretation and/or explanation of the text and connect text to outside knowledge.
- Students will move beyond the text - reflect, make judgments about its quality and meaning.
- Students will construct meaning through analyzing, elaborating, and responding critically.

## Content Standard 2.0 Writing

- Students will demonstrate successful writing behaviors.
- Students will write to define, clarify and develop ideas and express creatively.
- Students will demonstrate effective use of the writing process: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing.
- Students will reflect, use feedback and assessments and confer with others to plan for improvement.
- Students will establish a purpose for writing.
- Students will determine and plan for a specific audience.
- Students will establish tone, theme, point of view, and type of writing.
- Students will use graphic organizers, take notes, select and synthesize relevant information and plan text sequence.

## Content Standard 6.0 English/Integrated Language Arts

- Students will explain how literature represents, recreates and explores human experiences through language and imagination.
- Students will write observations and descriptions.
- Students will create, critique and discuss texts in verbal and written format.
- Students will view concepts and issues from diverse perspective.

## **Lesson Plans for Maya Angelou**

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These poems can be taught so as to emphasize different skills. My primary focus will be the analysis of character traits. As my school's philosophy encompasses this vein of thought, students already have a background in it. The second aspect will be to improve student's reading and written expression skills. These lesson plans can be modified to place more of an emphasis on which skills needs to be taught.

## Lesson One: 'Willie'

In order to have students understand this poem, we will read it aloud and discuss it. Copies of the autobiographical excerpts describing Willie will be provided to be used to compare with the poem. Both versions show Uncle Willie as a strong individual who does not give up against difficult odds. After having discussed Willie and his strategies for dealing with difficult situations, students will be able to describe his character strengths and how he was able to use them to benefit him. Students will also be able to explain his role in influencing Angelou's character development. As a secondary caregiver, he is not the obvious choice for having an impact on her character development. However because he was such a strong individual, she was able to learn a lot from him. Students will learn that our role models come in different packages and we should learn what we can from everyone we meet.

After exploring the poem in depth, students will select an individual who has influenced their own lives. They will brainstorm the character traits that led them to be so important. Then students will use the brainstormed information and, following Angelou's format, create a poem. This poem has several stanzas, three of which end in the same word endings. Angelou also uses a form of repetition. These are aspects students will identify and use in their own poems.

These activities will take three days of class time. At the end of the third day students will be able to hand in their finished poem as well as their brainstormed charts about Willie.

Content Standard 1.0: Reading

Content Standard 2.0: Writing

Content Standard 6.0: English/Integrated Arts

## Lesson Two: Geography

To create a fuller picture of Angelou's life, a quick exploratory geography lesson could be used. Students will be given a variety of resources including her autobiographies and various web pages that are founts of information on Angelou's life. Students will be assigned to find five locations where she has lived or visited. After they work in pairs to conduct their research, students would come together as a whole class to mark the different locations on a group map. Several places will be found, including St. Louis, Missouri; Stamps, Arkansas; San Francisco, California; Brooklyn, New York; and Cairo, Egypt. Before she became famous, Angelou traveled extensively for different reasons. Since her fame has increased, she has traveled even more extensively around the world.

This lesson will allow students to practice research skills, cooperative learning, and geographic skills. A message they will walk away from the lesson with is that the only restrictions we face are those we place on ourselves, be they emotional or geographic.

This activity will be finished in a period. After completing the assignment, students will receive a copy of the completed map.

## Lesson Three: My Life has Turned to Blue

This lesson will involve the poem 'My Life has Turned to Blue'. Students will read and discuss the poem. Then they will go through the poem and locate the different uses and references to color.

Color is an important aspect of this poem. Angelou uses it to subtly show her changes in attitude. Angelou also uses rhyming patterns to show changes in emotion. Students will examine the difference in the rhyming pattern in the first and second stanza compared to the third stanza. The role and effect of rhyming will be discussed. Students will decide if Angelou was successful at using color and rhyming to show subtle changes in mood.

After exploring these ideas, students will have the opportunity to try out strategies involving color and rhyming patterns. They will write a poem focusing on these tools. After they have had opportunities to revise and edit, they will share their poem with the class.

These activities will take four days to complete. Students will finish with specific examples of color in 'My Life' and their rationale for the effectiveness of it. They will also have a poem they write individually trying out using colors to convey meaning.

Content Standard 1.0: Reading

Content Standard 2.0: Writing

Content Standard 6.0: English/Integrated Arts

## Works Cited

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Angelou, M. (1969). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Random House.

This is the first of Angelou's autobiographical novels. This novel covers her early years in Stamps, Arkansas living with her grandmother, years living with her mother in California and up to the birth of her son Guy.

Angelou, M. (1974). *Gather Together in My Name* . New York: Random House.

In this second book in a series of autobiographies, Angelou, still in her teens, gives birth to a son, tries to keep a job, falls in love, dances, falls out of love, chases after her kidnapped baby, and goes to work in a house of prostitution thinking she is helping the man she loves.

Angelou, M. (1976). *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*. New York: Random House.

Angelou's third autobiographical novel. This one has her entering her adult world. She tours with Porgy and Bess around Europe.

Angelou, M. (1980). *And Still I Rise* . New York: Random House.

Collection of poems including: 'Phenomenal Woman', 'Willie' and 'Still I Rise'.

Angelou, M. (1981). *The Heart of a Woman* . New York: Random House.

The fourth volume in Angelou's autobiography, this takes place during the sixties and focuses on Angelou's experiences as a single mother. Follows her through several relationships as she tries to find the best paths for her and her son Guy.

Angelou, M. (1983). *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* . New York: Random House.

Collection of poems including: 'Avec Merci, Mother', 'Contemporary Announcement', and 'My Life has Turned to Blue'.

Angelou, M. (1991). *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. New York: Random House.

Her fifth in the autobiographical series, this novel shows Angelou's experience with a colony in Ghana. Deals with her experiences as a mother and as a woman.

Angelou, M. (2003). *Song Flung Up From Heaven* . New York: Random House.

The sixth autobiographical novel of Maya Angelou. This book covers the years of 1964-1968.

## Useful Internet Sites

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<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/authors/angeloumaya.html>

<http://udel.edu/~arbrown/webpage.html>

[http://allsands.com/writing/mayaangeloubio\\_yhz\\_gn.htm](http://allsands.com/writing/mayaangeloubio_yhz_gn.htm)

Sites that are helpful in finding biographical information as well as information about her publications and experiences.

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