



Autobiography: Maya Angelou

Curriculum Unit 85.03.03
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Adolescence is a period in a person's life when interest, thoughts, and preoccupation with the self is high. What better moment is there to cash in on students' thoughts about themselves and their lives than when they are in high school? At this time they begin to see themselves as somewhat separate from their families, and they can reflect back on their "youth" as well as give serious thought to their future.

In the past I have had fascinating experiences with students' thinking and writing when I asked them to write an odyssey of their life as a final project for a course on the *Odyssey* by Homer. Many students, who felt that other kinds of writing were boring, cumbersome, and difficult, could write pages of interesting composition about their own lives. Autobiography, in all its variations, is a natural extension of this process.

I am basing this unit of autobiography on the novels of Maya Angelou. Students who study this unit will be asked to read *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and one or more of her other novels as well as some of her poetry. The unit is designed for high school students who are reading on an intermediate-advanced level.

The first objective of the unit is to expose students to the concepts of autobiography, biography, and fiction as literary genres. The second objective is to enable students to read, study, and analyze Maya Angelou's autobiographical writings in terms of what she intended to accomplish by her writings. The third objective is to encourage students to develop and enhance their literary competence by lessons which focus on figurative and symbolic language and on voice or points of view. Students will also learn to understand the use of flashbacks and other distorted time sequences.

STRATEGIES:

How does autobiography differ from biography and from fiction? When or why does a person choose to write autobiography as opposed to biography or fiction? Can autobiography be fictional, or can fiction be autobiographical? Can the reader expect biography and autobiography to be an accurate portrayal of a person's life? Is there any such thing as the "truth" about a person's life? What do authors select in or out of their writings when they describe events in a person's life or his actions or his thoughts?

In the introduction to his book, *Autobiography Essays Theoretical and Critical*, James Olney discusses some of

these questions and raises many others. A teacher teaching this unit should begin with a discussion on the three literary genres, fictions, biography, and autobiography, using the definitions and distinctions that are described in Olney's book. Most high school students can tell you that fiction is made-up, imagery, or not true and can easily name novels, short stories, and movies that fit into that category. Olney, using his own notions and those of other critics, describes biography as "the entire life of the individual up to the time of writing."¹ At another time, using a different phrasing, Olney refers to the biographer as someone who "writes someone else's life."² Many students will have done a research project on the biographical history of a literary or historical figure and will have no difficulty understanding the concept of biography as defined above.

Introducing the concept of autobiography to students at this point in the discussion becomes much more complex because there is no set form or structure for autobiography and because there are no boundaries or limits to it as a literary genre. As James Olney says, "This is one of the paradoxes of the subject: everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement."³ The dictionary definition in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, "A biography written by the subject of it," or "Memoirs of one's life written by oneself," is only the beginning of the definition. Ask students to consider the following description.

1. "A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of personality." Lejeune⁴
2. "Memory that reaches tentacles out into each of these different 'times'—the time now, the time then, and the time of an individual's historical context." Erikson⁵
3. "In some tangled, obscure, shifting, and ungraspable way it is, or stands in for, or memorializes, or replaces, or makes something else out of someone's life." Olney⁶
4. "It is a fascination with self and its profound, its endless mysteries and, accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and the vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted." Olney⁷

Autobiography which is about the self or the "autos" or the "I"⁸ can be as varied as the self is. People have fantasy lives that are just as much a part of their real lives as is the Kentucky Fried Chicken that they ate yesterday or the high school diplomas that they earned last week. When autobiographers mix fantasy with actuality, how can the reader know what is fact and what is fiction?

Autobiographers can vary their use of time as well as their mix of fantasy and reality. Just as people have difficulty pinpointing when a human life begins, so does the autobiographer have difficulty pinpointing at what point the self begins,—at conception, at birth, at the first moment of conscious thought, or perhaps during a particularly relevant fantasy or dream. And when does an autobiography end? Is it at the moment that the writer stops writing? A biographer usually includes the beginning, middle, and the end of a person's life. The autobiographer may live on and on,—perhaps long enough for several more lives or changes of the self.

In an exercise to conclude the discussion on the literary genres of autobiography, fiction, and biography, the

teacher can present the class with some basic “facts” about a particular person, fictional or real. Students should be asked to write three separate paragraphs about that person. The first paragraph will be the beginning of a biography. The second paragraph will be the beginning of a fictional story. The third paragraphs will be the beginning of an autobiography. Next, students should be asked to read the sample paragraphs aloud. Invite students to discuss on what basis they decided to begin their sample paragraphs. How did they choose a form or structure for each genre? Were the forms that some students chose very different from the forms that the other students chose? Why?

At this point students will be ready to start reading *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (in the future referred to as *Caged Bird* or *C.B.*). The teacher can give the students some basic details about the author and the book. Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928. She married, divorced and is the mother of one son. Along with writing she has been a visiting professor at several American universities and an assistant administrator at the University of Ghana in Africa. In Ghana she was also a newspaper reporter, an editor, and a writer for Radio Ghana. The *Caged Bird* was published in 1970. It was the first of four autobiographical novels. In addition to the novels she has written several volumes of poetry and some plays.

In the novel *Caged Bird* Maya Angelou uses herself as the central figure to recount her life between the ages of three and sixteen years old. During the first ten years young Maya or Marguerite lives in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas, with her maternal grandmother and her brother Bailey. During the last three years she lives in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In lecture or discussion the teacher should ask the students to consider the idea that “black writers entered the world of literature through the door of autobiography.”⁹ Maya Angelou, along with Frederick Douglas, Malcolm X, Olaudah Equiano, and Richard Wright, was one of those writers. *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou’s autobiography, was her first book, and it already has its own critical literature.¹⁰

In an interview published in *Black Women Writers at Work*, Maya Angelou explains that although she was writing autobiographically, “I wasn’t thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people . . . I used . . . myself—as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times.”¹¹ Maya Angelou says that she sees herself as a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America¹² and that when she talks with young black women who have read her autobiographical novels, she feels that her work is not in vain and that she can never die.¹³ Although many present day Black authors no longer make use of autobiography, Maya Angelou in her four novels makes extensive use of the form in order to reveal her own identity and that of Black women in general. She is now one of the most widely read Black female writers.

In discussion the teacher should next direct the attention of the students to the question of voice. Who is telling the story? How does the reader distinguish between the private self, Maya as a person, and the public self, Maya, the representation of all Afro-American women? As students read the first few chapters of *Caged Bird*, ask them to figure out if they can hear who is talking?

“I ran, peeing and crying, not toward the toiler out back but to our house, I’d get a whipping for it, to be sure, and the nasty children would have something new to tease me about. I laughed anyway, partially for the sweet release; still, the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge that I wouldn’t die from a busted head.”¹⁴ This is the private self of Maya Angelou. The “I” is not young Maya speaking in her own child’s voice although some of the words are the words of a child, “silly church,” and “busted head.” These are the words of the mature writer looking back on her life and describing

a relatively minor but still traumatic childhood experience from an adult point of view using at times adult words and phrases, “sweet release,” and “the greater joy.” But, as the adult Angelou describes an incident which she most likely actually experienced as a child, she is also recalling her personal feelings about it as she later reflects back upon it as an adult.

At this point the teacher should ask the students to notice how the voice changes in the following paragraph on the same page. “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. . .It is the unnecessary insult.”¹⁵ It is still the adult Angelou speaking but gone are the adult personal feelings. Here she is speaking for the representative young Black female experience which she summarizes in different words near the end of her novel: “the Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartate crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack power.”⁶

During Maya’s graduation from Central High in Stamps, Arkansas, the reader hears both voices of Angelou as Maya reflects on the words of the white racist speaker: “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead.”¹⁷ This is Maya, the young teenager thinking privately to herself words that she did not dare to speak aloud. At the same time it is Maya Angelou, the public self, speaking for all Blacks. “And here the sense of collective responsibility, a sensibility charged by the disparagement of the group, is reflected. In the impotence of childhood there is nothing she can do, but the charges which have been leveled against her people will not soon be forgotten.”¹⁸

As students continue to read *Caged Bird*, the teacher should invite them to examine Maya Angelou’s vivid use of figurative and symbolic language. Starting with the title of the novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which is taken from the poem, “Sympathy” by Laurence Dunbar, she makes extensive use of imagery, similes, and metaphors to express her feelings of entrapment, anger, and violation. Entrapment—Maya, the American Black, is like the Caged Bird who “beats his wing till its blood is red on the cruel bars.”¹⁹ The teacher should give the students a copy of the poem so that they can discuss ways in which the imagery and symbolism of the poem ties in with the imagery and symbolism of the novel. Anger—Maya, upon hearing the racist graduation speech imagined “a pyramid of flesh with the white folks on the bottom, as the broad base, then the Indians with their silly tomahawks and teepees and wigwams and treaties, the Negroes with their mops and recipes and cotton sacks and spirituals sticking out of their mouths.”²⁰ Violation—the rape of Maya” Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot.”

In addition to pointing out the intense and vigorous use of language in *Caged Bird*, the teacher should refer the students to another literary technique used by Angelou to enhance her autobiography, that is, time and time distortion. In order to enable students to understand how an author like Angelou makes use of time to tell her autobiography, the teacher should assign students to keep notes on the time references as they read the story. The teacher can point out to the students that Angelou starts the story when Maya is in church and cannot hold her bladder any longer. Maya’s age is not noted in this particular incident, which serves as the introduction to the story, but the reader can guess that she is somewhere between five and seven years old. Then the author switches the story back in time to when Maya is three years old and her brother is four. Their parents are divorcing, and the children are shipped alone with their name tags on their wrists from California to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson. At the end of Chapter 2

there is a sudden flashforward to Maya's school years where she talks about falling in love with William Shakespeare and enjoying passionately Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and many other writers. In Chapter 3 there is a foreshadowing of a major change in Maya's life when she departs from Stamps for good at the age of thirteen. In Chapter 5 there is a flashforward to a traumatic scene where Maya, at the age of ten, was forced to watch her grandmother being taunted cruelly by the racist powhitetrash children of Stamps.

In between the flashforwards the story follows Maya's early years in chronological order with frequent references to her age—five, six, and seven years old. In Chapter 10 there is a flashback to the marriage of Grandfather Baxter, a West Indian Black, to Grandmother Baxter, an octoroon or quadroon, who was raised by a German family in Cairo, Illinois. This flashback into Maya's family heritage on her mother's side gives the reader an understanding of Maya's mother and of how she came to lead an unusual and exotic gambling life in St. Louis.

At the age of seven Maya and her eight year old brother Bailey move away from the relative quiet and safety of Stamps and their grandmother. Life in St. Louis with their beautiful and fun-loving mother is exciting and fulfilling for Bailey, but the city remains a foreign country to Maya who in Chapter 11 foreshadows her silent, post-rape departure with the saying, "I didn't come to stay."²¹ Chapters 12 and 13 describe the painful rape of eight-year-old Maya by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman, and its after-effects of anxiety, fear, and guilt. Those chapters where Bailey cries at the hospital bedside of his sister give the reader an insight into the unusually close and supportive relationship between Bailey and his sister. In Chapter 13 the break in that relationship is foreshadowed by the passing remark of the author that it would be fifteen years before she, Maya, would see her brother cry again.

In Chapter 22 Angelou uses a flashback of eleven-year-old Maya's feelings about having attended the funeral of Mrs. Taylor to illustrate her fanciful, sensitive, and superstitious mind. The memory of the funeral was triggered when Mr. Taylor, a possible suitor of Mrs. Henderson, Maya's grandmother, came to call and described a dream that he had had of his wife who came to him saying that she wanted some children. When Maya, who believed in ghosts and haunts was asked by her grandmother to leave the light of the family circle around the warm pot-bellied stove to fetch a long-handled fork in the dark kitchen, the two minute trip of fear and panic in the dark took Maya through cemeteries, gravestones, and black cats. This flashback gives the reader an insight into the inner life of the child Maya, the future novelist and poet.

The rest of the novel follows Maya in fairly straight chronological order through to age sixteen when, in doubt about her own sexuality, she gives her virginity to a young man whom she scarcely knows in order to find out if she is a lesbian. Although the sexual experience, which was awkward and unromantic, does not give her an answer to her question, it does give her an unwanted pregnancy which she manages to hide from her parents until the final month. The novel ends with her giving birth to a son three weeks after having graduated from high school.

The teacher should encourage students in their notes to keep track of references to historical time periods at the same time they are keeping track of other time references. For example, in Chapter 8 when Maya is six years old, the Depression slowly makes a deep impact on the Negro community in Stamps. Black families, poor to begin with, become much poorer bartering their welfare provisions for other necessities at Mrs. Henderson's store. Chapter 10, when Maya is seven years old, starts out with a reference to St. Louis in the mid-thirties with its prohibition, gambling, and other related activities. Chapters 26 and 27 speak of America's declaration of war on Japan, of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and of the Japanese population of San Francisco that disappeared and were replaced by newly arriving southern Blacks. When Maya, eight months pregnant,

graduated from Mission High School in San Francisco at the end of the book, it is two days after V-Day.

The next three novels chronicle Angelou's later teenage years in which she gets involved in prostitution, loses her son temporarily to a kidnapper, has a short marriage, travels in Europe, and works in Africa. She becomes a singer, dancer, educator, editor, and a prolific writer of prose and poetry.

During the reading and discussion of *Caged Bird* and Angelou's other novels and poetry which students can read in class or independently, the teacher should lay the groundwork for students to write their own autobiography. Lessons can be assigned a few days apart or on a weekly basis depending on the pace of the class. Below is an explanation of the origins of this assignment.

When I taught Homer's *Odyssey* and asked students to write odysseys of their own lives, I approached the task from an autobiographical viewpoint. During the reading of the epic poem I gave assignments in which I asked students to write about their lives in short segments. I invited students to think about their lives in different time periods. They were to write about their birth, their memories, about significant events in their lives, and about their projections into the future. I collected each piece of writing and after the last assignment, I put each student's writings together into a packet and returned the packets with comments and corrections. Next I told students that they were to take the packets and use the papers in them to write their own odysseys in any way that they wanted except that they could not recopy all their work word for word. They had to organize, edit, and rewrite. Their compositions were exciting and full of originality and insights. I am adapting the lessons into a project for this unit that culminates in a well-developed, well-thought-out piece of autobiography.

It is surprising how much writing students will do when they are given short, specific assignments about themselves. Usually I read the compositions aloud to the class even though they are personal unless I am denied permission to do so. I warn students ahead of time that I will read them aloud unless I am asked not to. Some students love to hear their work read aloud. Others will seldom permit it. Some students request that certain passages be deleted. I find that students become increasingly open in their writing if they know they can trust me to be appreciative, respectful, and uncritical of their feelings.

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

These writing assignments and activities are intended to supplement the discussions which I outlined earlier.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING PROJECT

Lesson One:

Objective Students will talk to relatives and friends in order to find out about and write about the earliest part of their life.

Instructions Write a description of your birth.

Include: Who was present at your birth.

What you looked like.

Where the birth took place.

What the delivery was like. How your family felt—parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.

Any other details that you can come up with:

Optional (How you felt about being born!!)

For this assignment in particular consider writing or phoning your relatives whom you do not see on a regular basis. They will be able to give you interesting information and different points of view.

Lesson Two:

Objective Students will examine and write about one of their earliest memories.

Instructions Describe your earliest memory. Concentrate on feelings and mental pictures as well as on the event itself. Let the memories flow. Only you will be able to decide which is your earliest memory. You may wish to choose a different early memory.

Lesson Three:

Objective Students will consider and write about the impact a trip can have on their life.

Instructions Describe a trip that you took that affected your life in a significant way. It can be a trip across town or a trip to a faraway place. Describe the trip and the way in which it affected you significantly.

Lesson Four:

Objective Students will reflect back on what they were like in the years before puberty. They will also work on incorporating figurative language into their writing.

Instructions Describe an event in your childhood that caused you much happiness or much pain. Think of the years before puberty, five to ten years old. Describe what led up to the event, the event itself, and the after-effects. Describe your feelings at the time. Make use of similes, metaphors, and personification when appropriate. Note Maya Angelou's use of figurative language:

Similes: My mother was "like a pretty kite that floated just above my head. If I liked I could pull it in to me by saying I had to go to the toilet or by starting a fight with Bailey."

C.B . p. 54.

"For nearly a year, I sopped around the house, the store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible."

C.B . p. 77

Metaphors : "Mother was a blithe chick nuzzling around the large, solid dark hen. The sounds they made had a rich inner harmony. Momma's deep, slow voice lay under my mother's rapid peeps and chirps."

C.B . p. 171

“I hefted the burden of pregnancy at sixteen onto my own shoulders where it belonged. Admittedly, I staggered under the weight.”

C.B . p. 242

Personification : “The Depression must have hit the white section of Stamps with cyclonic impact, but it seeped into the Black area slowly, like a thief with misgivings.”

C.B. p. 41

“After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds.”

C.B . p. 73

Lesson Five :

Objective Students will reflect on their teenage years. They will continue to incorporate figurative language into their writing.

Instructions Describe an event in your teenage years that affected you in a significant way. Think of the years after puberty, eleven until now. Describe what led up to the event, the event itself, and the after-effects. Describe your feelings at the time. Make use of similes, metaphors, and personification when appropriate.

Lesson Six :

Objective Students will consider their future. (Note to the teacher. This assignment takes a fanciful turn.) I enjoy including it because it often produces some surprising and creative results. I like to challenge students to look ahead into the future especially if it is in combination with the past and the present.)

Instructions Think about one or more important experiences that could happen to you in the future. The experience can be something that you wish would happen or that you fear would happen. Write about it, and consider how it could change the course of your life for better or for worse.

At this point the teacher will have six separate compositions to return to the students. The final writing project below can follow straight chronological time order, or it can focus on the use of time distortions. The teacher who chooses to work with students on time distortions can have students make several different starts to their

final autobiography. Foreshadowing can be accomplished by students starting the autobiography with a memory or an event that foretells in some way a later happening. Flashbacks can be accomplished by students starting the autobiography in the present or future and flashing back to earlier time periods. If the students have the six compositions all together in one packet, it makes it quite easy for them to visualize how to go about arranging and rearranging time periods until they achieve the desired effect. The packet of six compositions lead to the final project for this unit.

Lesson Seven :

YOUR OWN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Objective *The student will write an autobiography incorporating figurative language and the concept of time and time distortions.*

Instructions *Reflect on your own past, present, and future. Write your own autobiography.*

Reread your six compositions. Mix up the order and think about different points in your life when you could start telling your story. Do you want to start telling the story as a teenager looking back on your life or as a child who then grows up as the story is being told. Think about whose “voice” you are using to tell the story. Will you incorporate flashbacks, flashforwards and foreshadowing?

Talk to your parents, other relatives, friends, and teachers. Think about your past and present experiences which have affected your sense of identity and maturity. Consider also future experiences which could affect your sense of identity and maturity. Who are the people that you look up to and the laws or the rules that you go by? Who are your “gods”?

If you wish, include photographs, illustrations, or other relevant pictures or papers. For example, you can use a xeroxed copy of your birth certificate, awards, or your driver’s license. You might even have a passport.)

Use figurative and symbolic language when appropriate Write neatly using correct sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling.

Notes

1. James Olney ed., *Autobiography Essays Theoretical and Critical* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 19.
2. Olney, p. 20.
3. Olney, p. 7.
4. Olney, p. 8.
5. Olney, p. 19.
6. Olney, p. 24.
7. Olney, p. 23.
8. Olney, p. 21.
9. Olney, p. 15.
10. Olney, p. 15.

11. Claudia Tate, "Maya Angelou," in *Black Women Writers at Work* . (New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1984), p. 6.
12. Tate, p. 3.
13. Tate, p. 2.
14. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird sings* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 7.
15. Angelou, p. 3.
16. Angelou, p. 231.
17. Angelou, p. 153.
18. Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Maya and the Autobiographical Statement," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation* , ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), p. 14.
19. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* . (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1913), p. 102.
20. Angelou, p. 153.
21. Angelou, p. 58.
22. Angelou, p. 54.
23. Angelou, p. 171.
24. Angelou, p. 242.
25. Angelou, p. 41.
26. Angelou 73

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———. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Random House, 1970.

Covers the childhood of Maya and her brother Bailey as they grow up in Arkansas, Missouri, and California.

———. *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* . New York: Random House, 1971.

Poetry.

———. *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* . New York: Random House, 1975.

———. *Singin' & Swingin' & Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* . New York: Random House, 1976.

Describes Maya's stage career including an international tour.

——— *The Heart of a Woman* . New York: Random House, 1981.

Maya as a mature woman.

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