The Life and Works of Maya Angelou

"All of my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated.' In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure." --Maya Angelou

Overview:

This unit is designed for students to explore the life and works of Maya Angelou, an accomplished dancer, singer, writer of prose and poetry, and the recipient of many honors. She has even been referred to as a "National Institution" (Bloom, 2002). In the exploration of the life and works of Angelou, students will have the opportunity to investigate many of the events and attitudes she has experienced during her lifetime. Her writing, through the eyes and experiences of a black woman, can lend a structure to the study of racial relations and culture in 20th century America.

African American autobiography is a distinct genre of literature. Angelou's series of autobiographical works is distinctly seen from the female African American experience. She "...writes for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it" (Angelou in Evans, p.3).
Cudjoe (1984) offers a helpful outline of the importance of African American autobiographical works: "The practice of the autobiographical statement, up until the contemporary era, remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism," (p. 6). However, despite the long history of autobiography written in the African American voice, the voice was almost exclusively a male voice until the second half of the last century. Cudjoe notes that "...the Afro-American woman remained in all-pervading absence until she was rescued by the literary activity of her Black sisters..." (p.7).

African American autobiography is a personal presentation of experience. While autobiography can sometimes be a bit blurred, it is portrayed from the memory of the writer and generally represents authentic experiences of that person in a society. Angelou's work is then, a presentation of the life of a black woman who has lived in the south and in the urban north, who has lived in Africa, and has traveled Europe. She has experienced poverty and despair and she has been granted high honors. Her work is the expression of those experiences and sensations through the eyes of a black woman.

**Biographical Information:**

Maya Angelou was born on April 4, 1928 as Marguerite Ann Johnson. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri to Bailey Johnson, Sr., a doorman and Vivian Baxter Johnson, a card dealer in a local gambling parlor. Marguerite's brother Bailey was a year older. He gave Marguerite her nickname when he couldn't say her name and called her 'my sister' or 'my-a-sister'. The nickname was shortened to Maya. Although Bailey called Marguerite 'Maya', she went by the
name Marguerite Johnson or Rita until adulthood. In 1949 she changed her name to Maya Angelou for professional and stage recognition.

When Marguerite was three years old, and her brother Bailey four, their parents divorced. The children were sent alone on a train to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their paternal grandmother. The grandmother, Annie Henderson, owned a general store and did well financially during the depression. Ms. Henderson had the nurture and means to care for the children but the small Arkansas town also exposed them to the segregated south and related injustices. Marguerite lived with her brother, grandmother, and a disabled uncle in the back of the general store and often helped Ms. Henderson in the store. The children lived in Arkansas for four years before their father returned them to the care of their mother in St. Louis. They returned to the care of their grandmother later in their childhood, only to return to their mother once again when Marguerite had finished grammar school. By then, Ms. Johnson lived in San Francisco. Marguerite and Bailey enjoyed the presence of a generous stepfather when they moved to San Francisco. Bailey was a consistent presence in her childhood and Marguerite has remained close to her brother throughout her life.

During the time that Marguerite and Bailey lived with their mother in St. Louis, Marguerite was raped by her mother's boyfriend. She told Bailey, who then told their maternal grandmother about the incident. The man acknowledged his guilt but he was murdered by maternal uncles after he spent only one day in jail. At the time of the murder, Marguerite became mute and she did not speak for about five years. Soon after the murder is when she and Bailey returned to the care of their grandmother for a period of additional time.

Marguerite was impacted by Mrs. Flowers, a woman of means and influence in the black community of Stamps. Mrs. Flowers knew that Marguerite was bright and a voracious reader.
She encouraged Marguerite to read every book in the library and convinced her that words were not nearly as meaningful if they were not spoken. Mrs. Flowers helped Marguerite overcome her muteness and once again be able to use her voice.

Marguerite attended a predominantly white high school in San Francisco. She was a troubled teen and experienced several crises related to her own identity. She convinced a local boy to have sex with her and she became pregnant. Her son, Clyde, was born just days after she graduated from high school. Marguerite worked as the first African American streetcar conductor in San Francisco during her high school years.

As a young mother she experienced life in poverty and a world of illicit activity. She experienced multiple traumas during her early years as a poor, single mother, including the kidnapping of her son by a babysitter.

As a young adult, Angelou worked as a dancer, singer and actress, and she began to write songs and poetry. She traveled a European tour with the opera *Porgy and Bess*. Angelou learned new languages as she traveled and she became fluent in English, Italian, Spanish, French, Arabic, and West African Fanti. In the 1950's Angelou joined the Harlem Writer's Guild and began to work on her writing with earnest. She wrote prose, poetry, screenplays, songs, short stories and more. She also became involved in the civil rights movement during that time and wrote and produced a show to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She later became the Northern Coordinator of that organization for several years. Angelou and her son spent a number of years living in Cairo, Egypt and Ghana. During that time she worked as a newspaper editor and teacher of dance and drama. During her time overseas Angelou became familiar with the home and culture of her African heritage. She met Malcolm X and became even more closely aligned to the civil rights activities. She returned to the United States and had
hoped to work closely with Malcolm X but he was assassinated as she was to begin her work with him. She was also involved with the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. It was not until after his death, and at the urging of friends, that she wrote her first autobiography at the age of 42.

Angelou has written six autobiographical volumes. They have alternated with books of poetry and essays. She has also written several children's books. All of the autobiographical works have been produced as adult looking through the eyes of the child and young woman who was evolving. The work is a glimpse into the experiences of a black, female individual who has had to find an identity through the experiences lived.

Maya Angelou has been married several times but none of the relationships survived. As she grew older she continued to write autobiographical material, poems, songs, screen plays, television series, and directed a motion picture. In 1981 Angelou was offered a lifetime chair as the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. She has had an active lecture schedule as well.

Maya Angelou was asked by then President-elect Bill Clinton to write a poem for his inauguration. She read a poem she wrote for the occasion, "On the Pulse of Morning", at the 1993 inauguration ceremony. She was the first African American and first woman to be given such an honor.

Ms. Angelou has received many other academic and national honors. She was granted her first honorary doctorate degree in 1975. She was granted the Presidential Medal of the Arts in 2000. The received the Lincoln Medal from the Ford's Theatre in 2008. In February, 2011 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, by President Barak Obama.
Autobiographical Works and Poetry:

Maya Angelou provides a narrative of her life from early childhood until the age of 16 in her first autobiographical publication, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The first volume ends with the birth of her out-of-wedlock son. Her second work, *Gather Together in My Name*, describes the troubled years between the ages of 17 and 19 when she was struggling as a single mother living in poverty and surrounded by illicit activities. *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* is the third autobiographical volume. It portrays the adventures of her young adult life in San Francisco through her European tour with the Broadway musical *Porgy and Bess*. The fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, outlines her personal and artistic growth along with her perceptions of racial relations during the 1950's and 1960's. *All God's Children Need Travelin' Shoes*, the fifth autobiographical work, describes her years of living in Ghana and her reconnection with her African roots. This volume also portrays some of her interactions with Malcolm X. The final autobiographical work is *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. In this last work she shares her experiences in the four years between her return from West Africa and the time she began work on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The final volume of relays the pain experienced by the African American community as it watched the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. and lived within the racial tensions in the United States during the closing years of the decade of the 1960's.

Maya Angelou has been a prolific writer of poetry and multiple volumes of her work have been published. Many of her poems speak to the experience of the African American community, most especially the African American woman. Common themes of the poetry include topics such as love, the beauty of the black woman, the strength of woman, political statements, social justice, and the resilience of the human spirit.
Activities:

These activities can be adjusted to meet the objectives of the particular class. They could be appropriate for literature courses, multi-cultural courses, or social studies courses. It will be important for the classroom teacher to insure permission for use of the work as some school districts have censored parts of Maya Angelou's work, especially the first autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. For younger students, there are a few children's books available and secondary sources may be more appropriate for them to read as they learn about the life and times of Ms. Angelou.

1. Group projects.
   - Divide class into small groups of 3-6 students.
   - Each small group will read one piece of autobiography and then share that part of Maya Angelou's life with the other groups through group report.
   - The report will contain details of that portion of her life but also some cultural and historical information to understand the setting.
   - Each student should keep a reading journal.
   - The group will create a timeline of the important life events of MA described in the autobiographical section.
   - Each group will create a presentation for the rest of the class about their section of the timeline.

2. Exploration/recitation of poetry
   - Each student will choose a poem (or be randomly assigned) to rehearse and recite in a class presentation.
   - The student will write a brief interpretation of the poem.
   - The student will create a piece of artwork to present with the recitation.

3. Individual Report about an element of life that Maya Angelou shares in her biographies
   - Life in the segregated south
   - Childhood sexual abuse
   - Civil Rights movement
   - Awards and Recognition..."Renaissance Woman"
   - African American contributions to the arts
   - The Harlem Renaissance
   - African History
• Choice of individual student with teacher approval

4. Poem or short story about a significant event in student's life

• Each student will write a piece of poetry or an essay to describe an important event in their life, either personally or in their community experience.

**Bibliography:**


**Web Resources:**

Not all websites report the same facts/dates about the life of Maya Angelou. Students will need to understand the value of double checking information and finding the most reliable. Information is best checked against the official website and the actual writing.

Maya Angelou Official Website
http://mayaangelou.com/bio/

Academy of Achievement
http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/ang0bio-1

Black History
http://www.biography.com/blackhistory/featured-biography/maya-angelou.jsp

Poetry Foundation
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/maya-angelou

Smithsonian Website
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/angelou.html

**Audio-Visual Resources:**

YouTube video of 'On the Pulse of Morning' at 1993 inauguration reading
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDtw62Ah2zY

YouTube video of poem 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'
YouTube video Maya Angelou reciting 'And Still I Rise'
http://www.bing.com/videos/watch/video/maya-angelou-still-i-rise/a631058ff2f1aa6ad990a631058ff2f1aa6ad990-913970693674?cpkey=977b5d49923770765bf1977b5d49923770765bf1-897351025336%7CMaya%20Angelou%7C%7C&q=Maya%20Angelou

YouTube video Maya Angelou reciting 'Phenomenal Woman'
http://www.bing.com/videos/watch/video/maya-angelou/6690074dfe0db00e38076690074dfe0db00e3807-969023226974?cpkey=977b5d49923770765bf1977b5d49923770765bf1-897351025336%7CMaya%20Angelou%7C%7C&q=Maya%20Angelou

Online resource for multiple Maya Angelou videos
http://www.videos.afqam.com/watch.aspx?Vd=ykKoPCOMSto&Title=Maya%20Angelou

National Visionary Leadership Project (multiple video clips of Maya Angelou sharing about her life)
http://www.visionaryproject.org/angelomaya/

Writings of Maya Angelou:

Autobiographical Works:


Poetry:


**Other Works:**


**Children's Books:**


