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# Maya Angelou & Resilience

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928. Her professional name came from a childhood nickname. Her brother, Bailey, would call her “my-a sister,” and the name Maya stuck. Angelou had a difficult childhood. After her parents separated, she went back and forth between her mother’s home in St. Louis and her grandmother’s home in Stamps, Arkansas. She dealt with poverty and racism throughout her childhood and had to attend segregated schools. As a young girl, she was sexually abused, and the events that followed led her to stop speaking to anyone but her brother for five years. When she grew up, Angelou turned her pain into art. She wrote about her struggles in a series of autobiographies that show her resilience, or ability to bounce back from difficult situations.

Notes

2. Maya Angelou was known for including figurative language in her books and poems. Figurative language is language that means something other than its literal meaning. It adds color and vividness to writing. Similes are one type of figurative language. Similes compare two things using the words “like” or “as.” For example: “His shirt was pure white like freshly fallen snow.” Other types of figurative language include metaphors, in which two unlike things are compared without using “like” or “as,” and imagery, or very vivid, descriptive language.

Notes

3. In addition to being an author and a poet, Angelou held many jobs throughout her life. While she was living in San Francisco as a young woman, she became the city’s first black female cable car conductor. She was a successful singer, dancer and actress, releasing music albums and performing in Broadway and Off Broadway plays and musicals. Angelou worked as an activist with her friends Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X during the Civil Rights movement. She was also a successful screenplay writer and director and became the first black woman to have her screenplay produced.

Notes

4. Angelou's first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was published in 1969. It was an instant bestseller and won the National Book Award in 1970. It even became a part of the English and Language Arts curriculum at many high schools. However, not everyone thinks the book should be studied in school. Critics claim that it encourages profanity and is too sexually explicit. Other people think Angelou portrays the white characters in the book in an unfavorable way. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has become one of the most challenged and banned books in the country.

Notes

5. Angelou never received a college degree, but she was awarded more than 50 honorary degrees from schools including Smith College, Howard University, Columbia University and Boston College. She was appointed a professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. At the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993, Angelou read an original poem, becoming the second poet ever to do so. In 2010 she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States, from President Barack Obama. Angelou died on May 28, 2014 at her home in North Carolina. Her legacy includes seven autobiographical novels, several collections of poetry and three books of essays. She had been working on a new book when she passed away.

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