



The Poetry of Maya Angelou

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The Work

Maya Angelou's poetry complements the search for self-identity as an African American woman described in her series of autobiographical narratives beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The caged bird image, which she borrows from a poem by African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, recurs in her work and expresses the collective yearning of African Americans for freedom as well as Angelou's search for individuality and independence.

In her poetry Angelou often focuses on the oppression of African Americans, including some that the media love to demonize: welfare mothers, prostitutes, and drug pushers. She describes the female African American experience with particular power in "Our Grandmothers," which begins with a slave mother dreading the approaching sale of her children. Angelou also proudly celebrates the accomplishments of African Americans such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.

Angelou's childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, merges with the Southern slave experience of her African American ancestors in poems about Arkansas, Georgia, Virginia, and the Southern slave plantation. Frequently, Angelou uses the vocabulary and slang of African American English. She also broadens her focus and speaks of urban African Americans and comfortable working white liberals.

Some of these themes are found in "On the Pulse of Morning," written for the inauguration of Bill Clinton as president of the United States in 1993. Using geographic references to Arkansas, to the Mississippi and Potomac rivers, and to the many peoples of the United States, Angelou affirms the diversity and brotherhood of humanity and a dawn of equality in American history.

Another important theme for Angelou is Africa. Angelou lived in Ghana for the four years described in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. For Angelou, Africa's pyramids and history are a source of pride; its black inhabitants are a criterion of beauty.

Finally, in her poems Angelou reflects on love and her own erotic feelings. Her search for physical and emotional satisfaction in her relationships is sometimes satisfying and sometimes frustrating. Always, however, the poet Angelou defines herself as a woman and an African American.

Suggested Readings

Kallen, Stuart A. *Maya Angelou: Woman of Words, Deeds, and Dreams*. Edina, Minn.: Abdo and Daughters, 1993.

King, Sarah E. *Maya Angelou: Greeting the Morning*. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook, 1994.

Lisandrelli, Elaine Slivinski. *Maya Angelou: More Than a Poet*. Springfield, N.J.: Enslow, 1996.

Pettit, Jayne. *Maya Angelou: Journey of the Heart*. New York: Lodestar Books, 1996.

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Shapiro, Miles. *Maya Angelou*. New York: Chelsea House, 1994.

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