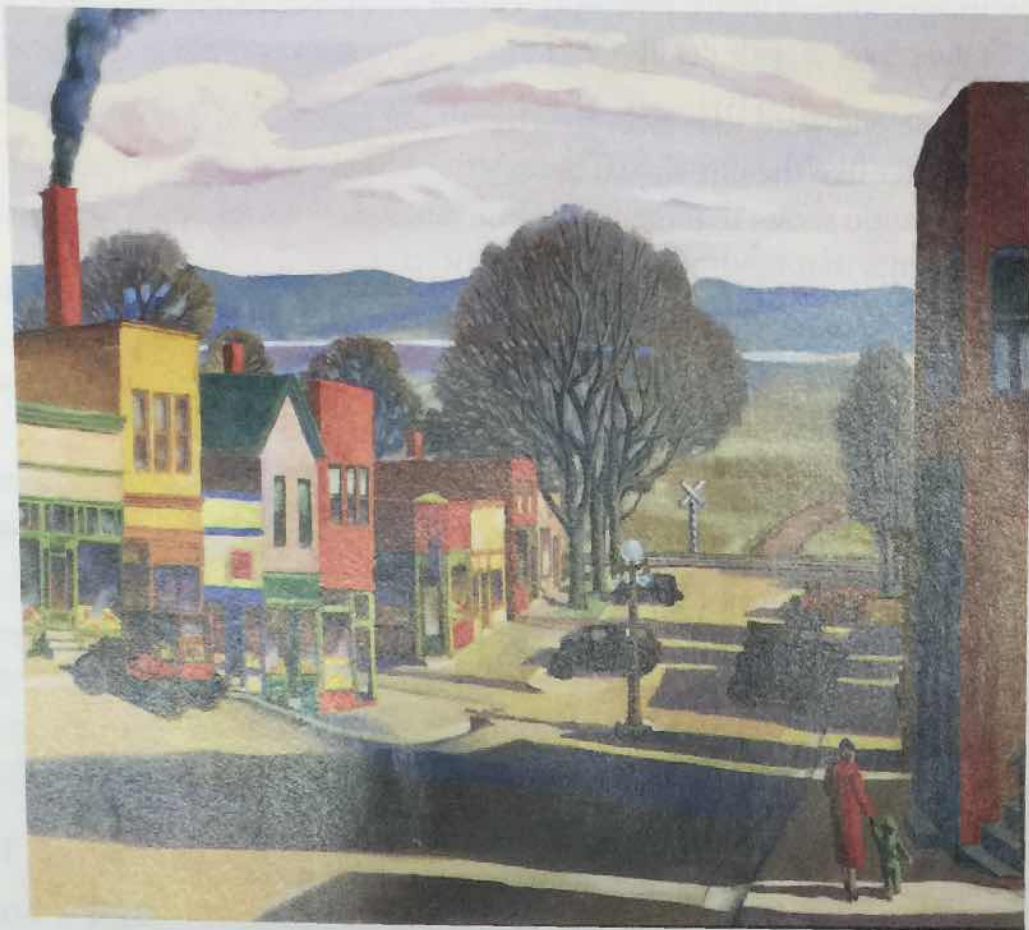


# Prepare to Read

from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



Parkville, Main Street (Missouri), 1933, Gale Stockwell, National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC



## Take It to the Net

Visit [www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com) for interactive activities and instruction related to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, including

- background
- graphic organizers
- literary elements
- reading strategies

## Preview

### Connecting to the Literature

In this true-life story from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a distinguished adult helps a young girl overcome shyness and begin to have pride in herself. Connect to her experience by remembering a time when someone helped you feel proud of yourself.

### Background

When Maya Angelou, the author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans and whites attended separate schools. African Americans were excluded from many public facilities. As an African American woman, Angelou experienced both racial and gender discrimination. With the help of a family friend, she learned to rise above it.

# Literary Analysis

## Memoir

A **memoir** is autobiographical writing—true writing from a person’s own life—in which a writer shares a memory of a significant person or event. Angelou writes about her memories of working in the family store and learning “lessons in living” from a remarkable woman.

As you read the excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, use these focus questions to explore the significance of the events.

1. Why is the store Angelou’s favorite place?
2. What change occurs in Angelou after her visit with Mrs. Flowers?

## Connecting Literary Elements

In a memoir, writers use **descriptive details**—details that appeal to the senses—to bring their memories to life. In the following example, the italicized words provide details of the sights, feelings, and scents that Angelou associates with her memories of pineapples.

Although the *syrupey golden rings* sat in their exotic cans on our shelves year round, we only tasted them during Christmas. . . . Bailey and I received one slice each, and I carried mine around for hours, *shredding off the fruit* until nothing was left except the *perfume on my fingers*.

## Reading Strategy

### Analyze Figurative Language

In the excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou uses several types of **figurative language**—words, phrases, and expressions not meant to be interpreted literally. The chart shows different types of figurative language. When you encounter examples in the text, think about what the author really means, not just what the words say.

### Vocabulary Development

**fiscal** (fis' kəl) *adj.* having to do with finances (p. 33)

**taut** (tôt) *adj.* tightly stretched (p. 34)

**benign** (bi nīn') *adj.* kindly (p. 34)

**infuse** (in fyōōz') *v.* put into (p. 36)

**intolerant** (in täl' ər ənt) *adj.* unable or unwilling to accept (p. 37)

**couched** (koucht) *v.* put into words; expressed (p. 37)

#### Idiom

Expression that has a meaning particular to a language or region

#### Analogy

Comparison of the particular resemblances of things that are otherwise not like each other

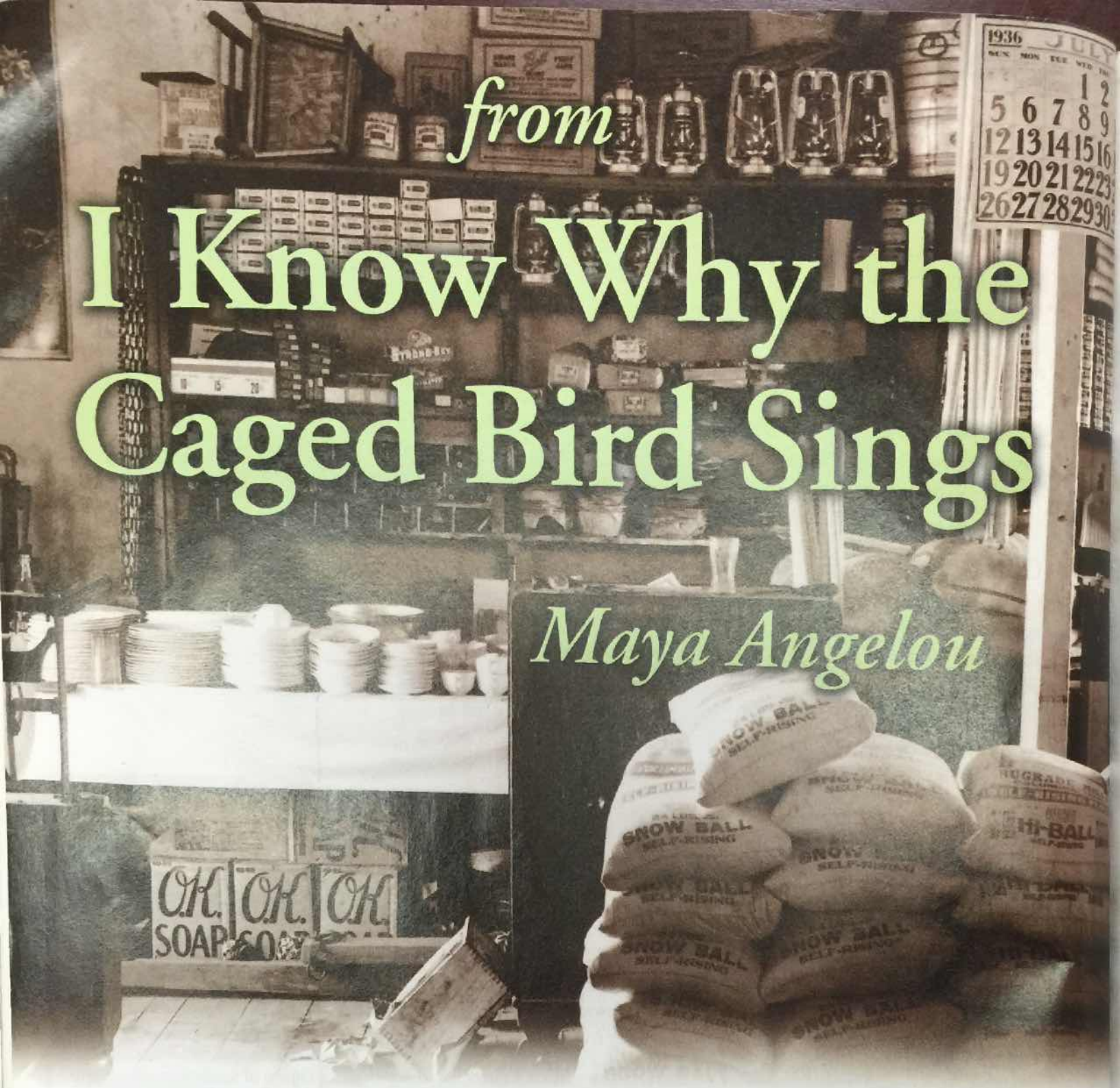
#### Metaphor

Figure of speech in which one thing is referred to as if it were another

#### Simile

Figure of speech in which two unlike things are compared using the word *like* or *as*





from

# I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

*Maya Angelou*

**W**e lived with our grandmother and uncle in the rear of the Store (it was always spoken of with a capital s), which she had owned some twenty-five years.

Early in the century, Momma (we soon stopped calling her Grandmother) sold lunches to the sawmen in the lumberyard (east Stamps) and the seedmen at the cotton gin (west Stamps). Her crisp meat pies and cool lemonade, when joined to her miraculous ability to be in two places at the same time, assured her business success. From being a mobile lunch counter, she set up a stand

**▲ Critical Viewing**

Why might the narrator enjoy spending time in a place like this? [Connect]



between the two points of fiscal interest and supplied the workers' needs for a few years. Then she had the Store built in the heart of the Negro area. Over the years it became the lay center of activities in town. On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch of the Store, and troubadours<sup>1</sup> on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The Brazos<sup>2</sup> while they played juice harps<sup>3</sup> and cigar-box guitars.

The formal name of the Store was the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store. Customers could find food staples, a good variety of colored thread, mash for hogs, corn for chickens, coal oil for lamps, light bulbs for the wealthy, shoestrings, hair dressing, balloons, and flower seeds. Anything not visible had only to be ordered.

Until we became familiar enough to belong to the Store and it to us, we were locked up in a Fun House of Things where the attendant had gone home for life. . . .

Weighing the half-pounds of flour, excluding the scoop, and depositing them dust-free into the thin paper sacks held a simple kind of adventure for me. I developed an eye for measuring how full a silver-looking ladle of flour, mash, meal, sugar or corn had to be to push the scale indicator over to eight ounces or one pound. When I was absolutely accurate our appreciative customers used to admire: "Sister Henderson sure got some smart grandchildrens." If I was off in the Store's favor, the eagle-eyed women would say, "Put some more in that sack, child. Don't you try to make your profit offa me."

Then I would quietly but persistently punish myself. For every bad judgment, the fine was no silver-wrapped kisses, the sweet chocolate drops that I loved more than anything in the world, except Bailey. And maybe canned pineapples. My obsession with pineapples nearly drove me mad. I dreamt of the days when I would be grown and able to buy a whole carton for myself alone.

Although the syrupy golden rings sat in their exotic cans on our shelves year round, we only tasted them during Christmas. Momma used the juice to make almost-black fruit cakes. Then she lined heavy soot-encrusted iron skillets with the pineapple rings for rich upside-down cakes. Bailey and I received one slice each, and I carried mine around for hours, shredding off the fruit until nothing was left except the perfume on my fingers. I'd like to think that my desire for pineapples was so sacred that I wouldn't allow myself to steal a can (which was possible) and eat it alone out in the garden, but I'm certain that I must have weighed the possibility of the scent exposing me and didn't have the nerve to attempt it.

**fiscal** (fis' kəl) *adj.* having to do with finances

### Literary Analysis

**Memoir** What does this paragraph tell about Marguerite?

### Reading Check

What does the narrator do in the store?

1. **troubadours** (trōō' bə dōrz') *n.* traveling singers.

2. **The Brazos** (brāz' əs) area in central Texas near the Brazos River.

3. **juice harps** (jōōs) small musical instruments held between the teeth and played by plucking.



Until I was thirteen and left Arkansas for good, the Store was my favorite place to be. Alone and empty in the mornings, it looked like an unopened present from a stranger. Opening the front doors was pulling the ribbon off the unexpected gift. The light would come in softly (we faced north), easing itself over the shelves of mackerel, salmon, tobacco, thread. It fell flat on the big vat of lard and by noontime during the summer the grease had softened to a thick soup. Whenever I walked into the Store in the afternoon, I sensed that it was tired. I alone could hear the slow pulse of its job half done. But just before bedtime, after numerous people had walked in and out, had argued over their bills, or joked about their neighbors, or just dropped in "to give Sister Henderson a 'Hi y'all,'" the promise of magic mornings returned to the Store and spread itself over the family in washed life waves. . . .

*When Maya was about ten years old, she returned to Stamps from a visit to St. Louis with her mother. She had become depressed and withdrawn.*

For nearly a year, I sopped around the house, the Store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible. Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first lifeline.

Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat<sup>4</sup> of Black Stamps. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. She was thin without the taut look of wiry people, and her printed voile<sup>5</sup> dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer. She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town.

Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged, but then no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers to ruffle her dress, let alone snag her skin. She didn't encourage familiarity. She wore gloves too.

I don't think I ever saw Mrs. Flowers laugh, but she smiled often. A slow widening of her thin black lips to show even, small white teeth, then the slow effortless closing. When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her. The action was so graceful and inclusively benign.

She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be. . . .

One summer afternoon, sweet-milk fresh in my memory, she stopped at the Store to buy provisions. Another Negro woman of

### Reading Strategy

**Analyze Figurative Language** Marguerite says that Mrs. Bertha Flowers threw her a "lifeline." What does she mean to communicate with this expression?

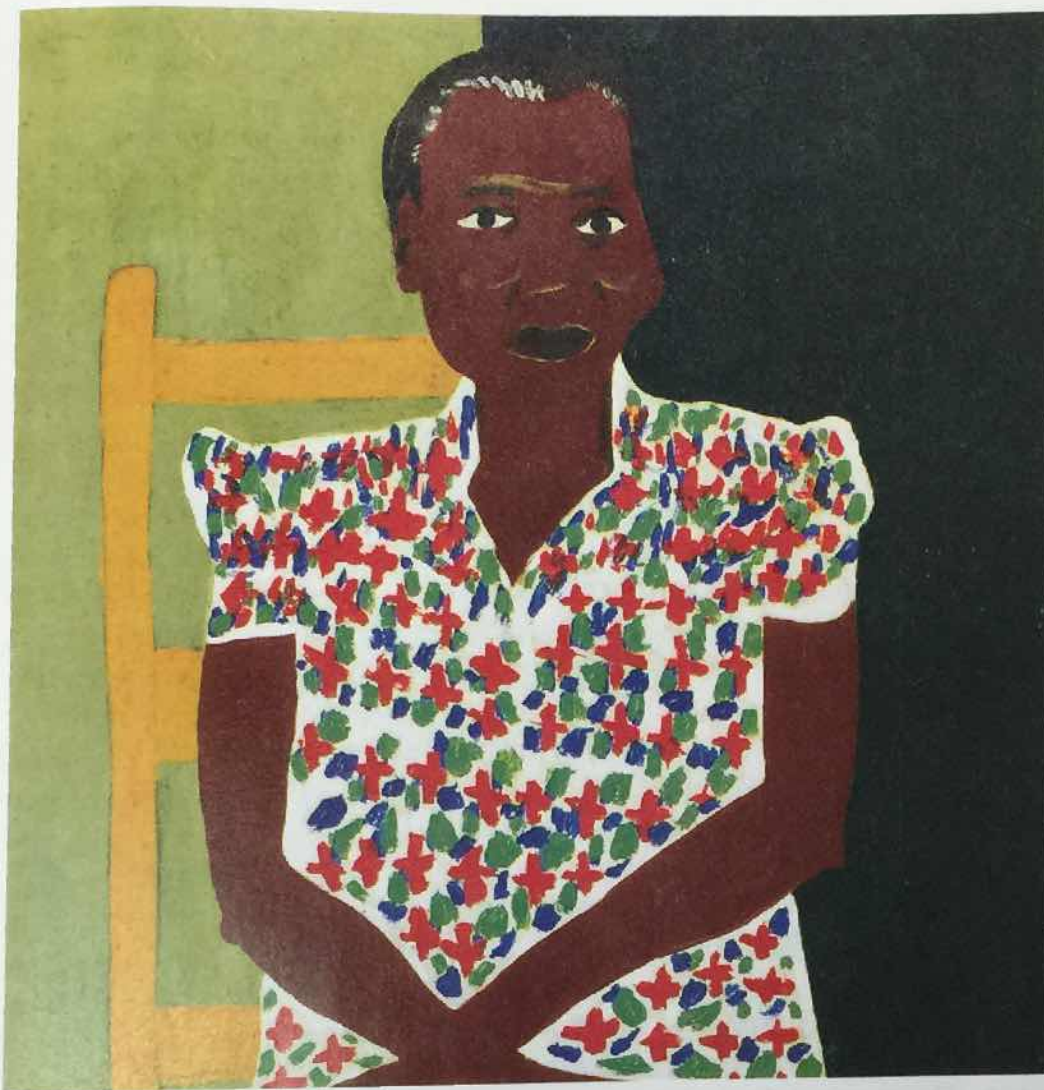
**taut** (tôt) *adj.* tightly stretched

**benign** (bi nin') *adj.* kindly

4. **aristocrat** (ə ris' te krat) *n.* person belonging to the upper class.

5. **voile** (voil) *n.* light cotton fabric.





Woman in Calico, 1944. William Johnson. National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC

▲ **Critical Viewing** Read the description of Mrs. Flowers on page 34. Does this portrait resemble her? Explain. **[Assess]**

her health and age would have been expected to carry the paper sacks home in one hand, but Momma said, "Sister Flowers, I'll send Bailey up to your house with these things."

She smiled that slow dragging smile, "Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I'd prefer Marguerite, though." My name was beautiful when she said it. "I've been meaning to talk to her, anyway." They gave each other age-group looks.

Momma said, "Well, that's all right then. Sister, go and change your dress. You going to Sister Flowers's. . . ."

There was a little path beside the rocky road, and Mrs. Flowers walked in front swinging her arms and picking her way over the stones.

She said, without turning her head, to me, "I hear you're doing very good school work, Marguerite, but that it's all written. The teachers report that they have trouble getting you to talk in class." We passed the triangular farm on our left and the path widened to

**✓ Reading Check**

What details about Mrs. Flowers are still vivid in Angelou's memory?



allow us to walk together. I hung back in the separate unasked and unanswerable questions.

“Come and walk along with me, Marguerite.” I couldn’t have refused even if I wanted to. She pronounced my name so nicely. Or more correctly, she spoke each word with such clarity that I was certain a foreigner who didn’t understand English could have understood her.

“Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.” That was a totally new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it.

“Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That’s good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.”

I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic.

She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read them, I must read them aloud. She suggested that I try to make a sentence sound in as many different ways as possible.

“I’ll accept no excuse if you return a book to me that has been badly handled.” My imagination boggled at the punishment I would deserve if in fact I did abuse a book of Mrs. Flowers’. Death would be too kind and brief.

The odors in the house surprised me. Somehow I had never connected Mrs. Flowers with food or eating or any other common experience of common people. There must have been an outhouse, too, but my mind never recorded it.

The sweet scent of vanilla had met us as she opened the door.

“I made tea cookies this morning. You see, I had planned to invite you for cookies and lemonade so we could have this little chat. The lemonade is in the icebox.”

It followed that Mrs. Flowers would have ice on an ordinary day, when most families in our town bought ice late on Saturdays only a few times during the summer to be used in the wooden ice cream freezers.

She took the bags from me and disappeared through the kitchen door. I looked around the room that I had never in my wildest fantasies imagined I would see. Browned photographs leered or threatened from the walls and the white, freshly done curtains pushed against themselves and against the wind. I wanted to gobble up the room entire and take it to Bailey, who would help me analyze and enjoy it.

“Have a seat, Marguerite. Over there by the table.” She carried a platter covered with a tea towel. Although she warned that she

### Literary Analysis

**Memoir** What does this paragraph reveal about Marguerite’s personality?

**infuse** (in fyōōz’) v. put into



hadn't tried her hand at baking sweets for some time, I was certain that like everything else about her the cookies would be perfect.

They were flat round wafers, slightly browned on the edges and butter-yellow in the center. With the cold lemonade they were sufficient for childhood's lifelong diet. Remembering my manners, I took nice little ladylike bites off the edges. She said she had made them expressly for me and that she had a few in the kitchen that I could take home to my brother. So I jammed one whole cake in my mouth and the rough crumbs scratched the insides of my jaws, and if I hadn't had to swallow, it would have been a dream come true.

As I ate she began the first of what we later called "my lessons in living." She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.

When I finished the cookies she brushed off the table and brought a thick, small book from the bookcase. I had read *A Tale of Two Cities* and found it up to my standards as a romantic novel. She opened the first page and I heard poetry for the first time in my life.

"It was the best of times and the worst of times . . ." Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew from listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn't really heard, heard to understand, a single word.

"How do you like that?"

It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor was still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak.

I said, "Yes, ma'am." It was the least I could do, but it was the most also.

"There's one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite."

I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the enchantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes but its aura<sup>6</sup> remains. To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood<sup>7</sup> for a cup of mead with Beowulf<sup>8</sup> or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist.

6. **aura** (ô' ə) *n.* atmosphere or quality.

7. **wormwood** (wûrm' wûd') *n.* plant that produces a bitter oil.

8. **Beowulf** (bâ' ə wûlf) hero of an old Anglo-Saxon epic. People in this poem drink mead, (mêd), a drink made with honey and water.

### Literary Analysis

**Memoir and Descriptive Details** Which descriptive details in this paragraph help bring to life Angelou's memory of her visit with Mrs. Flowers?

**intolerant** (in täl' er ənt)  
*adj.* not able or willing to accept

**couched** (koucht) *v.*  
expressed in softer or more flowery terms

### ✓ Reading Check

What does Marguerite learn from Mrs. Flowers?



When I said aloud, "It is a far far better thing that I do, than I have ever done . . ." tears of love filled my eyes at my selflessness.

On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the Store.

I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.

Childhood's logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I didn't question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention, nor did it occur to me that Momma might have asked her to give me a little talking to. All I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for me and read to me from her favorite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me.

9. "It is . . . than I have ever done" speech from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

## Maya Angelou

(b. 1928)



Born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou received her unusual first name from her brother,

Bailey, who referred to her as "mya sister." Maya and Bailey were raised by their grandmother, who owned a country store in rural Arkansas.

Growing up in the segregated South did not prevent Angelou from breaking through the barriers of racism and poverty. She has been a streetcar conductor in San Francisco, a journalist, an actress, a civil rights worker, a teacher, and a poet. In January 1993, she read "On the Pulse of Morning" at President-elect Bill Clinton's inauguration, a poem that she had been asked to write for the occasion.

## Review and Assess

### Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Does Mrs. Flowers remind you of anyone you know? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** What does Marguerite do in the store?  
(b) **Infer:** What can you tell about Marguerite's character from her actions at the Store?
3. (a) **Recall:** According to Mrs. Flowers, for what two reasons is language important? (b) **Interpret:** Why does Mrs. Flowers tell Marguerite to read aloud and in as many different ways as possible?
4. (a) **Recall:** What does Mrs. Flowers tell Marguerite in the first of her "lessons in living"? (b) **Compare and Contrast:** Describe the change in Marguerite after her first meeting with Mrs. Flowers.  
(c) **Draw Conclusions:** In what ways do you think Marguerite will change as a result of her meetings with Mrs. Flowers?
5. (a) **Recall:** What does Mrs. Flowers do when Marguerite visits? (b) **Infer:** What do Mrs. Flowers' actions prove to Marguerite? (c) **Interpret:** Why has Mrs. Flowers remained for Angelou "the measure of what a human being can be"?
6. **Apply:** Mrs. Flowers helped build a sense of self-worth for young Maya Angelou. What social conditions of the time may have contributed to her low self-esteem before her meetings with Mrs. Flowers?



# Review and Assess

## Literary Analysis

### Memoir

1. In a chart like the one below, list two details that we learn about Marguerite from her **memoir**. In the second column, explain how we know about each detail.

What we know about Marguerite	How we know it

2. Why is the store Angelou's favorite place?
3. What change occurs in Angelou after her visit with Mrs. Flowers?

### Connecting Literary Elements

4. Complete a sensory details chart like the one shown here.

	Sights	Sounds	Touch	Tastes	Smells
The Store					
Mrs. Flowers's house					

5. Explain why sensory details are important in the memoir.

## Reading Strategy

### Analyze Figurative Language

6. Explain the difference between the literal and **figurative** meanings of the idiom "I developed an eye for measuring."
7. Explain what Angelou means by the following analogy: "Opening the front doors was pulling the ribbon off the unexpected gift."
8. What simile does Marguerite use to communicate her low self-esteem before she goes to Mrs. Flowers's house?

## Extend Understanding

9. **Social Studies Connection:** Angelou's memoir takes place during a time when segregation laws governed most of the South. How do Mrs. Flowers's life lessons prepare Marguerite to challenge unjust laws?

## Quick Review

A **memoir** is a form of autobiography that focuses on a writer's memory of a significant person or event. To review memoir, see page 31.

**Descriptive details** are words that appeal to the five senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing.

**Figurative language** is speech or writing that is not meant to be taken literally. To review figurative language, see page 31.



### Take It to the Net

[www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com)

Take the interactive self-test online to check your understanding of the selection.



# Integrate Language Skills

## Vocabulary Development Lesson

### Word Analysis: Forms of *tolerate*

The verb *tolerate* means “to accept.” Other forms of *tolerate* include the following:

tolerance    tolerable    intolerant    tolerant

Knowing the meaning of *tolerate*, you can determine the meanings of its related forms. On your paper, complete the following sentences with the correct related word from the list above.

1. Mrs. Flowers suggested that Marguerite show \_\_\_\_\_ toward people who are illiterate but to always be \_\_\_\_\_ of ignorance.
2. Marguerite’s working at Momma’s store was \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Mrs. Bertha Flowers was \_\_\_\_\_ of Marguerite’s shyness but wanted her to overcome it.

## Grammar Lesson

### Plural and Possessive Nouns

Plural and possessive nouns are sometimes confused. A **plural noun** indicates more than one person, place, thing, or idea. Most plural nouns end with the letter *-s*.

**Plural Nouns:** “On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch. . . .”

A **possessive noun** shows ownership, belonging, or some other close relationship. A possessive noun can be **singular**, ending in *-s*, or **plural**, usually ending in *-s’*.

**Singular Possessive:** “If I was off in the Store’s favor, the eagle-eyed women would . . .”

**Plural Possessive:** “[S]he . . . supplied the workers’ needs for a few years.”

### Fluency: Sentence Completions

On your paper, write the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence.

1. The rope was pulled \_\_\_\_\_ for security.
2. Although stern, Mrs. Flowers’s actions were \_\_\_\_\_.
3. She used lemons to \_\_\_\_\_ her tea.
4. Her advice was \_\_\_\_\_ in stories and sayings.
5. For \_\_\_\_\_ reasons, the Store was open late.
6. Marguerite learned not to be \_\_\_\_\_ of others.

### Spelling Strategy

In some words, like *benign*, the *in* sound is spelled *ign*—with a silent *g*. Complete the following with an *ign* word.

1. A pattern or arrangement of parts: \_\_\_\_\_
2. A publicly displayed billboard: \_\_\_\_\_
3. To leave a job: \_\_\_\_\_

► For more practice, see page R28, Exercise B.

**Practice** On your paper, copy the following sentences. Correct errors of plural and possessive nouns as needed.

1. Mrs. Flowers’s home smelled like vanilla.
2. There are many picture’s in the book. All the picture’s colors are fading.
3. The book’s Mrs. Flowers’ allowed Marguerite to borrow were her favorite’s.
4. Take this book of poems.
5. Read each poems words carefully.

**Writing Application** Write a paragraph that includes the following nouns: *store*, *owner*, and *customer*. Use two of the nouns as plurals and one as a possessive.



# Writing Lesson

## Memoir About a Turning Point


Marguerite's visit with Mrs. Flowers was a turning point that changed her outlook. Think of a time when you experienced a turning point. Write a memoir about the event.

**Prewriting** List specific details that describe your turning point. Include explanations of how events and people made you feel and why. Then, organize the details into a sequence.

**Drafting** Use your organized list as the basis for drafting your memoir. Add descriptive details that will make the event or experience vivid in your readers' minds.

	<b>Model: Add Descriptive Details</b>	<b>Descriptive details like <i>heavy</i> and <i>silver</i> appeal to sight, sound, taste, smell, or touch and help paint a more memorable picture of what happened.</b>
	I clutched the trophy proudly.	
	+ <b>silver</b>	
	+ <b>heavy</b>	
	<hr/>	
	I clutched the heavy, silver trophy proudly.	

**Revising** Reread your memoir and underline the descriptive details you have used. Add details to appeal to senses you have not included.

 Prentice Hall Writing and Grammar Connection: Chapter 6, Section 2


## Extension Activities

**Listening and Speaking** Angelou describes the effect of Mrs. Flowers's reading aloud as "a wonder in my ears." Prepare a **reading** of a portion of Angelou's memoir.

With a group, discuss **delivery techniques** that can enhance a listener's appreciation for what is being read. Techniques include

- volume (the loudness or softness of your voice).
- tone of voice (the feelings expressed through your voice).
- enunciation (the clear, precise pronunciation of words).

**Research and Technology** Photographers Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange recorded the lives of Americans during the Great Depression. Use museums, museum Web sites, or the Library of Congress Web page to locate historical photographs. Print copies of the photos. Identify the photographer and where and when the photo was taken. Display your **photo collection** in the classroom.

 **Take It to the Net** [www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com)

Go online for an additional research activity using the Internet.