

Read the passage. Then answer the questions that follow it.

A Poet of the People



Maya Angelou was honored by William Jefferson Clinton when he invited her to read a poem she had written to celebrate his **inauguration** as the forty-second president of the United States. This was a fitting tribute to the woman whose early life had seemed so empty of promise when she was born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, sixty-four years before. She sums up that life

concisely in these lines from one of her poems: "... birthing is hard / and dying is mean / and living's a trial in between."

When she was still a small child, her parents divorced; she and her older brother Bailey were raised by their grandmother, Annie Henderson, affectionately known as Momma. Mrs. Henderson was the **proprietor** of the only general store in Stamps, Arkansas, owned by an African-American. In her first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou **evokes** Momma's powerful presence as she lovingly describes the way her grandmother coped with the bigotry and racial hatred that was widespread in the country in the 1930s. It was this **resilience** that most impressed Angelou and which she herself tried to **emulate** throughout her life.

One example of such bigotry involved a visit to the dentist. Angelou was suffering from an **excruciating** toothache. Momma had no choice but to take her granddaughter to the town's only dentist, who was white. When she asked him to treat the little girl's toothache, he **rebuffed** her, using extremely **demeaning** language. He told her that he would rather put his hand in a dog's mouth than treat a black person. Momma reminded him that she had helped him in the past by making him interest-free loans; now she was asking a favor in return. But he **brusquely** asserted that his debts had been paid. He ordered her to leave. After taking her grandchild out of the office, Momma returned and stood her ground. She demanded that the dentist pay her a fair rate of interest on the loans she had made him. Finally, he handed over ten dollars, a large sum in those days. Only then did she depart, her dignity intact. She traveled over thirty miles with her granddaughter to Texarkana, where the nearest African-American dentist practiced.

avid
brusque
concise
demean
despicable
emulate
evoke
excruciating
inaugurate
pervade
proprietor
pseudonym
rebuff
resilient
turbulent

When Angelou was eight years old, she and her brother went to live with their mother in St. Louis. There her mother's boyfriend abused her. He threatened to harm Bailey if she told anyone. When Angelou became ill, her mother discovered the **despicable** abuse. The boyfriend was brought to trial and convicted. But the shock of the experience left Angelou unable to speak for a year.

In spite of her troubled and **turbulent** childhood, a spirit of optimism **pervades** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In it, Angelou pays tribute to those who helped and encouraged her. Among them was a neighbor named Bertha Flowers. She gave Angelou books and introduced her to the pleasures of reading poetry, drama, and great novels. As a result of Flowers's influence, Angelou became an **avid** reader. This led later to her dream of becoming a writer. Four more volumes of autobiography and many collections of poetry followed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. All appeared under her **pseudonym**, Maya Angelou, a name she began using in the 1950s.

It was a long and difficult road that she had traveled, but it led to the presidential platform where she read her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" to an audience of millions on that cold January day. Angelou had triumphed over many difficulties, strengthened by the deep faith expressed in these lines from the poem, "Lift up your hearts / Each new hour holds new chances / For a new beginning."

▶ Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson's word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. Why is it inaccurate to say that Momma was Mrs. Henderson's **pseudonym**?

2. Why would you not use the word **concise** to describe the title of Angelou's first book?

3. Why did Angelou compose "On the Pulse of Morning"?

4. Why did Mrs. Henderson have to be knowledgeable about business?

5. Why was Momma desperate to get her granddaughter to a dentist?

6. How did the dentist let Momma know that she was not welcome?

7. Why is Angelou's mother's boyfriend someone one would not **emulate**?

8. In what way did the dentist show **despicable** behavior?

9. What is the meaning of **evoke** as it is used in the passage?

10. What is one way that Angelou showed **resilience** in her life?

11. What is one example from the passage of Angelou's **turbulent** childhood?

12. What details in the passage suggest that Bertha Flowers's treatment of Angelou was not **brusque**?

- avid
- brusque
- concise
- demean
- despicable
- emulate
- evoke
- excruciating
- inaugurate
- pervade
- proprietor
- pseudonym
- rebuff
- resilient
- turbulent

13. In the 1930s, why is it likely that most African Americans experienced racial bigotry?

14. How do you know that Angelou did not **rebuff** President Clinton's request for a poem?

15. What is the meaning of **avid** as it is used in the passage?

FUN & FASCINATING FACTS

• The original meaning of the verb **demean**, "to conduct oneself," suggested neither good nor bad behavior. (Jane's young cousins *demeaned* themselves in a proper manner during their stay with her.) Even though this meaning continues, a second meaning, "to act in a way that lowers one's reputation or character," has largely replaced it. (You *demean* yourself by asking favors of someone who has treated you so badly.)

The original meaning of the verb survives in *demeanor*, the noun form, which means "the manner in which one behaves or conducts oneself." (No one could tell from Bill's *demeanor* that he was very angry.)

• People sentenced to death in Roman times were often crucified, a form of execution in which the hands and feet of the victim were nailed to a cross until death occurred, usually after a long time. Since the pain suffered by those executed in this way must have been extreme, it is easy to see how **excruciating** came to mean "very painful" or "agonizing." The word is formed from the Latin *crux*, which means "a cross."

• **Pseudonym**, a false name used by writers and others in place of their real name, is formed from the Greek roots *pseudo*, "false," and *onuma*, "name."