



MAYA ANGELOU

Poet, Singer, Civil Rights activist.

Early life

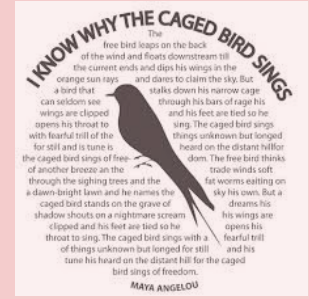


1. Born in St. Louis, Missouri (Deep South: Segregation and racism was prominent) on April 4th 1928.
2. Parents divorced at the age of 3.
3. She had a troubled childhood, with sexual assault and abuse from her mothers boyfriend at the age of 7; her uncles beat him to death. This trauma led to her remaining mute for 5 yrs.
4. Her family moved to San Francisco where she became involved with theatre and she became the first female cable car driver in San Francisco at the age of 15.
5. However, she had a child at the age of 16 which resulted in her working in nightclubs and stripclubs to make ends meat.
6. She was scouted by a theatre company from the strip club, with this company she toured europe in the opera 'Porgy and Bess'.
7. Angelou moved to New York where she began her writing career in the Harlem Writers Guild and continued her acting/singing career.
8. She married and moved to Egypt where she was a journalist and editor, then shortly after she moved to ghana to become a lecturer.
9. In 1964 she eventually returned to the US.



KEY WORKS

- **I know why the caged bird sings** (1969) - A criticism and comment on racism and segregation in America, written during the Civil Rights Movement. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" Here she compares growing up in America as feeling rootless and having a razor to the throat. This summarises why the book resonated with so many people, and shows her willingness to use her voice to show to african american experience. This book was written on these issues but the concept of people's freedom can be universal to much of the world, her work still sits and resonates with readers today.
- **And still I rise** (1978) - A poem about self confidence and defiance against oppression. **Nelson Mandela** read this at his presidential inauguration speech in 1994.
- In many of the texts she used dialect that was specific to african americans, her work was an embodiment of the african american experience that did not adhere to the white expectations or standards of writing that was expected for this time. She was proud of her race and its culture. Angelou believed in writing for 'We' and not 'Me', she was aware that the experience she was writing about was not just from her perspective but from the human perspective, and as an artist she had a responsibility to give a voice to all.



Key works 2

- **Mom & Me & Mom** (2013) - autobiographical on her relationship with her mother. Maya's mother had no time for her children, she left them with their grandmother. These two had different attitudes towards life - her mother was loud and aggressive, her grandmother was sweet and caring. However, this autobiography describes how both of them shaped Angelous character and values positively, she learnt to speak up and not compromise her values.

Civil Rights Movement- Maya's involvement



- Angelou was a prominent figure within the CRM and in embodying the human experience during this, her legacy within this movement is still prominent and celebrated. Her close relationships with political figures such as **Martin Luther King** and **Malcolm X** highlight this. First hearing MLK preaching in a Harlem church, he gained her undoubted support. She organised events with him and toured the country educating the masses on the cause, when her career moved her to Egypt in the early 60's she stated **"I join with millions of black people the world over in saying 'You are our leader.'"** Her travels around Africa led to her meeting Malcolm X in Accra (Ghana) , she returned to US with him to set up a new organisation "The organisation of Afro-American unity". He was assassinated shortly after.
- helped to draft up the "Freedom Budget For All Americans" that demanded: The abolition of poverty, full employment, fair prices for workers and farmers, housing for all, healthcare for all, a new fairer taxation system.

Harlem Writers Guild

The Harlems Writers Guild was established in New York in the 1950's. It was created to allow a creative space for young black writers to express their experiences and culture, as they were often excluded from mainstream literature. Most of the writers were well educated and wanted the same success as writers such as **Langston Hughes**, an author that paved the way for young black writers in the 1920's-30's. Social change was the primary drive behind the creation of the HWG, many of their conversations went further than just literature. Their meetings became safe spaces for them to exchange information on the freedom movements within the US. By the 1960's many members of the movement had found success within mainstream writing. **Maya Angelou** was one of the most famous members of this guild that was successful, her work was critically acclaimed by the 1970's. She was one of the founders of this organisation, moving from LA to NY to create it, she is often described as the 'mother' of The Harlem Writers Guild. This is a good example of the public vs the private, she was forced to be private because of oppression and racism, but the writers guild was forcing them to be public.

Legacy

1. **Presidential Medal of Freedom** - the highest civilian honour in the USA.
 2. **Pulitzer prize**
 3. **Tony award**
 4. **Grammy for 'Best Spoken Word Album'**
 5. She received **30** honorary degrees.
 6. **"Warrior for equality, tolerance and peace"** - statement from her family after her death.
- She left an imprint onto society, the awards are symbolic of her life and achievements that she made, for herself and for black acceptance into America. However, her lifetime was spent defending her culture, even into her later years, showing that even though she was accepted within society racism and prejudice towards black people still remains, emphasising it is deep rooted within society.



Bibliography

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maya-Angelou>

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/angelou-maya>

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