

Angelou's Autobiographical Anthology: An Artistic Manifestation of an Authentic Voice

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Autobiography immortalizes a person.
~ Ané Mouton

INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou is a universal author whose autobiographical series encompasses all the characteristics of what distinguishes a literary work. Angelou's work also demonstrates the effective use of the literary techniques that contribute to the beautifully poetic voice in her literature. I believe that an intense interaction with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her first of six autobiographical volumes, will give invaluable insight of how the masterful manipulation of literary techniques helps to create the distinctive voice that characterizes the genre. Since the perspective, form, structure, and voice are consistent throughout her autobiographical series, my students can have uninhibited access to Angelou's very soul.

I plan to use Angelou's first and most renowned *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to explore the elements that come together to color the literature of the autobiographical genre. I also plan to use this work as a model for creative writing. Research shows that when students are able to identify literary elements in literature, it encourages them to embellish their own writing by experimenting with the execution of these elements. Ideally, my holistic goal is to use Angelou's autobiographical series to empower my students to engross themselves into the mosaic of Angelou's life through literature and recognize a distinctive voice through the vehicle of the written word, and understand how Angelou's multi-thematic autobiographical series makes her universal experience that which pertains to being distinctly human, encompassing yet transcending the classification of the minority-majority Black, female: one of challenge and triumph!

I believe that the vehicle by which these goals will be actualized for my students will be through in-depth exploration of the elements that inundate and color this literature. We will also examine how Angelou transcends conventional autobiographical structure to give us more than a story, but to give us an experience.

What Will I Teach?

My initial goal was to use all the books from Angelou's autobiographical series to educate my students on how the effective manipulation of literary devices results in literary masterpieces. After much thought and consideration however, my experience as a novice Vanguard Reading teacher has informed my perspective by emphasizing the importance of focusing on the *depth and complexity* of fewer concepts for the purpose of mastery, versus trying the cover many concepts with time prohibiting in-depth exploration. Depth and Complexity is an educational framework specifically geared for the Gifted and Talented whose mechanics will be explored as a strategic framework by which I will equip my students to approach reading as an art.

Moreover, my newly informed paradigm shift has led to the decision to focus on Angelou's first and most popular autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Furthermore, this insight has influenced the decision to focus in-depth analysis on the effective application of a few literary devices instead of briefly visiting as many as possible. This unit can then serve as a foundational model by which other teachers can build a repertoire of literary devices, revealing its effective application across various literary genres.

I believe that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is best for sixth graders because it chronicles Angelou's life experiences from the ages six to fifteen, forming part one of the six-part series. Each subsequent book corresponds with age progression and more mature life experiences that may not be appropriate for them to have exposure to. Setting a clear and concise structure for the book will lay the foundation for teaching the rest of the works in Angelou's autobiographical series, which, I hope through proper vertical alignment and collaboration will follow my students to the conclusion of their tenure in secondary school.

Why Is It Important to Teach this Topic?

It is important to teach the effective application of literary devices in literature because it colors text, facilitates comprehension, and invites students to recognize reading as an art while helping them learn most effectively by example. If students have clear tangible models, they can use them as stepping-stones by which they can effectively analyze and synthesize literature, ultimately producing their own work. I want my students to develop an intimacy with the literature, recognizing the effective use of literary devices as the paint that must be blended into tints and hues to form the masterpiece. Furthermore, as we are to interpret art with various factors in mind, I want my students, seeing literature as art, to do the same, becoming so comfortable with it that they take audacious risks, imposing their perspective where they feel there is an absence of such by the speaker in (narrator) or of (author) the work. Pulitzer Prize winning author Toni Morrison models this in her envisionment of Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child*. From the following excerpt:

Your ears strain, stretching down the block, searching through schoolchild chatter for that one voice that will give you ease. Your eyes sting with the effort to see over bushes, look through buildings, cut through everything that separates you from your child's starting point---the junior high school.

Morrison envisions the following:

I see a woman-no, invent her: from fingers clinched on a broomstick to the sandals I am sure she is wearing. Flip-flops, maybe. She wears a skirt-not jeans. The porch is old cement with crevices and cracks where soil gathers and fall wind is always blowing leaves...she can't get them out; they're stuck like she is. The street is tree lined, houses hedged, brick ones, pale clapboard with wide yards. A hose is curdled on yellowing grass. A pair of skates that should have been put away? Or a bicycle? The silence is not total--there is traffic beyond, birds--but it is nevertheless disturbing because the single voice needed to calm me is not there. I know that fear. Even when I'm told there is no reason for it. Especially then ... (175)

Morrison takes artistic license to invent the woman with the use of her imagination. She goes on to deal with the irreparably cracked sidewalks as a metaphor for the protagonist's stagnation. She even creates the sounds that may be heard in the setting, grounded in the textual evidence of the time and place of the event in question. None of this envisionment is explicitly stated in the text; Morrison just brought her imagination to the literature and let it run wild.

The wonderful thing about the interpretation of literature is the mandate that kids validate their interpretation through the text. This stipulation will help facilitate comprehension, the

sharing of various text perspectives that will inform and inspire minds in a corporate learning environment. Wouldn't it be amazing if our children had the paradigm that words on the page are only half of it, but an essential piece to a full and efficacious understanding of the literature is contingent on the literature based artistic license they bring to the table? Just imagine how much their comprehension would be enhanced! Just imagine the impassioned stake they would have in reading if there were a legitimate and sincere forum in which their thoughts were encouraged, lauded, and placed on an academically artistic pedestal? Once students recognize the importance of their role as artists in contributing to and getting the most out of the literature, they will then become empowered to use their writing as a vehicle to paint the ideas that will authenticate and immortalize their own voices.

As a reading teacher working in conjunction with a writing teacher, it is my responsibility to expose students to the way literary elements function to authenticate the narrative voice in the autobiographical genre. Ideally, this exposure should inspire the production of works that reflect the use of these elements as they partake in the process of establishing their own voices through written composition.

How Will I Teach It? Teaching through the Paradigm of Depth and Complexity

The strategies I will use to equip my students to perform in-depth analysis of Angelou's work are inspired by the Depth and Complexity conceptual framework. If my students are to become artists to see Angelou's work through an artistic lens, they must be given the tools to change their thinking. Depth and Complexity icon cards are learning tools that serve multiple purposes. Each icon card introduces a different concept, and any course of study can be viewed through the lens of any or all of the concepts. The icon cards provide task starters to prompt student thinking, they identify related thinking skills that cultivate higher-order conceptual development, inspired by the Bloom's Taxonomy framework. The cards also provide a sample list of where the given concept can be imbedded and introduced across all core content areas. I will briefly introduce each concept, and then share a few strategies to implement this unit of study grounded in each depth and complexity conceptual model.

The conceptual models that make up depth and complexity are Language of the Discipline, Details, Patterns, Rules, Trends, Unanswered Questions, Ethics, Big Ideas, Relate over Time, Multiple Perspectives, and Across Disciplines. It is ill-advised to explore all eleven concepts in one unit, but to use perhaps one or two per unit. I will, however, for the purpose of this curriculum unit blueprint, briefly visit them all to cultivate ideas about how they might be used by other educators.

Language of the Discipline

Language of the Discipline is represented by a lips icon, which communicates that we will be dealing with language. This concept refers to terminology, nomenclature, lexicon, tools of the discipline, combinations and patterns of terms, jargon, idiom, signs and symbols, figures of speech, eponyms and neologisms of the discipline (Gould).

One task starter I might implement in relation to our interactive analysis of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* will be the open-ended question, "What words and phrases are specific to the work in this unit?" My expectation is that they will share responses like, autobiography, alliteration, allusion, figurative language, simile, metaphor, and identity crisis. I will then get them to perform a related thinking skill, such as identifying the relationships among these terms. A response might be that they all have to do with literature, and that the autobiography houses the figurative language, which is created by the manipulation of the literary techniques alliteration, simile, and the like. I might group the students cooperatively and ask them to identify all words that are being used non-traditionally to modify nouns. I would then ask them to identify what

makes them non-traditional. One response I would expect is that they are not all adjectives, or that there are many word groupings, such as “old lady long” (Angelou 8), in young Angelou’s description of the Easter dress that was a “plain ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throwaway” (Angelou 8). We might then go on to examine these non-traditional noun modifiers to make discoveries about Angelou’s writing style, how it facilitates envisionment, and what we can take from it to inspire our own writing. We will also use this concept to facilitate comprehension by exploring plot and theme.

Details

A flower icon, communicating that ideas much like flowers, have intricate details that distinguish them, represents the Details concept. This concept refers to clues, facts, features, data, ideas, traits, items, parts, particulars, specifics, elements, factors, and attributes (Gould).

A task starter for my unit under this conceptual frame might be the question, what features characterize the autobiographical genre? Some responses I would look for are that they are typically chapter books whose content reveals the life events of a person. The author is the person who is writing the book about himself. I might ask kids to then cooperatively select details of life events that have various levels of bias, emphasizing that all autobiographical texts are written with some level of bias, and ask them what in the text suggests that there is overt (or covert) degrees of bias. I might also go deeper and ask them how Angelou’s stylistic command of the text eclipses the bias if we are not reading with an artistic eye. This concept also sets the stage for in-depth character analysis.

Patterns

The Patterns icon is represented by circles strategically placed in the pattern of a letter Z. Patterns are predictive, able to be replicated, cycles, motifs, repetitive, made up in details, person-made and natural designs, and recurring elements (Gould).

A conceptual task starter for this unit might be to describe the motifs (recurring themes) found in the book and compare and contrast them. One answer might be shame. Some motifs of shame are reflected in young Maya’s shame in standing up before the church to do her Easter speech. Another instance of shame is in her appearance. Not just shame in what she is wearing on Easter Sunday, but shame in the skin she is in. There is also the shame associated with her molestation by her mother’s boyfriend, resulting in her prolonged silence. I may cultivate the related thinking skill of cause and effect by asking the students to identify the events that lead up to the shameful experience, and identify the degrees of or similarities and differences between the events that lead to the shameful experiences. Some other patterns I will have them flesh out are that of plot, conflict, writing style, and characters.

Rules

A chart, reflecting order, represents the Rules conceptual framework. Rules are characterized by standards, related to structure, authoritative directions for conduct or procedure, usual courses of action or behavior, statements of truth (all or most of the time) methods, and organizational elements (Gould).

A conceptual task starter for this unit may be determining the standards that uncompromisingly determine whether a work of literature is autobiographical, which will lead us to the rules that govern the distinctiveness of literary genres. A related thinking skill might be to differentiate facts from opinions in Angelou’s work with textual evidence. Another might be to classify Angelou’s relationships with all the people with whom she has any form of interaction. This particular analysis will lead them to discover that relationships are not all positive or personal, and often dichotomous, one gaining its significance from the subjugation of another: for

instance, Angelou's relationship with her molester was that of victim/culprit. There cannot be a victim without a culprit; the implications of "whiteness" have no meaning without the "otherness" associated with blackness. That's the rule! Other skills I would teach might deal with rules governing grammar and punctuation and how Angelou uses her artistic license to break grammatical rules in order to reinforce the authenticity of her literary voice.

Trends

A chart reflecting progress over time represents the Trends conceptual framework. Trends come in the form of general directions, tendencies, current styles, drifts, influences, and changes over time (Gould).

A task starter for my unit of study may require students to describe the trends in Angelou's prose chapter books. This question would require me to introduce and establish a familiarity among my students with the subsequent volumes that make up Angelou's autobiographical work. After this introduction, I would expect the students to identify trends such as that each autobiographical work is about a different season of Angelou's life, focusing on her progression in age and subsequent life experiences. Another might be the trend in her career choices, all of which were non-traditional. Her many professions included: prostitute, madam, Broadway performer, and, of course, poet and author. Another trend was that she accomplished a lot of "firsts." *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou's second autobiographical volume, reveals her accomplishment as the first African-American female conductor of the San Francisco Trolley (Angelou 356). And Angelou's third autobiographical volume, entitled *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas*, reveals that she was one of the original cast members of George Gershwin's *Porgy 'n Bess*, the first opera performed by an all African American cast (Angelou 631).

Some related thinking skills I might teach might be to identify the relationships among the trends in Angelou's very diverse professions. Some questions that might incite revelation may center around what is the same and different about her professions, how she acquired them, the influences they had in her life, and the direction in which they took her life. Further exploration of this might be in the context of the way this concept operates in historical fiction, nonfiction, character types, spelling, punctuation, word usage, and favorite authors and genres.

Unanswered Questions

The Unanswered Questions concept is represented by three question marks, communicating that the work should be so dynamic that it inspires a substantial vestment that necessitates further inquiry for increased efficacy. Envisionment in Angelou's work will incite inquiry that the text has not addressed, leaving it up to the reader to research answers based on what the text has given, coupled with perspectives from life experiences. An unanswered question may come in the form of a puzzle, a conundrum, and unsolved problem or mystery, something unexplained, a dilemma, or a situation that leaves one doubtful or uncertain (Gould).

A task starter for my unit may be for my students to describe the unknown details or stimuli for how Angelou acquired the hand-me-down purple dress her grandmother modified and made her wear for Easter. Another question might center around the circumstances that prohibited Angelou from wearing a new dress and whether the other kids at church had on new or modified Easter clothing. Another avenue of exploration is the point at which young Angelou discovered the dress was in fact a hand-me-down, as it seemed like she was unaware until the cruel in-the-moment reality of her making the Easter speech. Was her vivid imagination of a Cinderella dress a reflection of her denial of the reality of the worn, used dress just as it was of the reality of her inescapable blackness?

To relate this idea to Bloom's Taxonomy thinking skills, I have my students prove the conclusions they have drawn from their questions the text fails to explicitly answer from the textual evidence that helps them infer and envision, filling in the blanks. Other places in which this conceptual framework may be beneficial is in examining anonymous authors, pen names, author's message, author's motivation, personal likes and dislikes as the artist, and character types.

Ethics

The Ethics conceptual framework features a diamond, half of which is painted black, the other half, white. I believe this icon represents the differentiation between right and wrong. Ethics are, or can be found in controversies, dilemmas, biases, prejudices, decision-making, principles of "right" behavior, a set or theory of moral values, philosophies and metaphysics, professional rules or standards, and value-laden ideas (Gould).

A task starter for my unit might be for students to describe ethical issues that arise in the direct and indirect conflicts Angelou experiences with various characters in the book. I might expect a response to be the ethical issues of socialized perceptions of human worth, with America being founded and built by basing the value of people by the color of their skin to perpetuate their subjugation. This ethical issue comes from an incident in the text where "powhitetrash" (Angelou 112) kids would come over by Angelou's grandmother's house and taunt them, disrespecting her grandmother by urinating on their property, defacing it, and calling them names. Young Angelou could not understand why her grandmother would allow this to happen, the children calling her by her first name, the grandmother calling them "Ms/Mr." and then their first name, and how she would simply allow the children to have their way with the property in her presence, wait for them to leave, and simply clean it up, humming the entire time. Angelou had to learn hard lessons of survival during a time that this kind of unethical behavior was licensed.

A related thinking skill might be for the students to distinguish fact from opinion when it comes to the aforementioned conflict that produced the conversation about the ethics of human worth. It is important for the kids to understand that societal opinions of human worth, often cloaked in the factual guise of government mandates, have ethical implications that have cursed American society since its inception. I would throw this question out to them: Is it a fact or opinion that one human being is more valuable than another? What are the circumstances under which one might feel compelled to determine this? Other places ethics might be found in the English Language Arts/Reading content areas are plot dilemmas, conflicts, controversies, patterns of good vs. "bad" characters, plagiarism, and media such as editorials, political cartoons, and propagandistic articles.

Big Idea

The Big Idea conceptual framework, represented by a triangle supported by pillars, reflects that big ideas are umbrellas that cover and incorporate smaller, more marginal ideas. Big ideas can be found in generalizations, are related to many instances, developed from many facts, overarching, related to global or universal themes, and principles laws, and theories.

I would have students apply related thinking skills in this unit by inferring a big idea from supporting evidence or information. For instance, one big idea that can be supported by evidence is that of *instability*. Angelou had a lot of instability in her life, from being sent to live with her grandmother, going back to live with her mother after the passing of her grandmother, her mother and father's wavering presence in her life, homelessness after having borne her first and only child as a teenager and much more. Other places big ideas can be inherent are literary themes, implicit and explicit content, poetry, conflict, and critical analysis, or, the term I have adopted from Toni Morrison, reading as art!

Relate Over Time

The Relate Over Time conceptual frame is represented by an icon illustrating a continuous cycle of the past, present, and future. I believe this icon reflects how the same issues change or remain the same over time. Relating over time can mean looking at the past, present, and future, applying something historic to present knowledge, predicting something based on present knowledge, applying from the past to the present, and noting change (Gould).

A task starter I might use would be for students to identify multiple instances in Angelou's work that illustrate a significant difference in race relations from those of our current time. I might then get them to identify how her stories of race relations change over the course of her six-part series, which is about forty years. I may even have them explain it in the specific context of the professional opportunities she has had throughout the series. Other ways to facilitate student recognition of how change occurs over time might be through an examination of setting, historical relevance, historical authenticity, science fiction, biographies, historical fiction, and the time setting of nonfiction writing.

Multiple Perspectives

The Multiple Perspectives conceptual framework is represented by eyeglasses, symbolizing that there is always another side to every story. Multiple perspectives are communicated as different points of view, ways of seeing and reporting things, are often dependent on time and place, different slants on the same thing, and are affected by roles and responsibilities.

A task starter to this unit might be to group students by their various perspectives on an ethical issue that comes up in Angelou's work, and have them share what their perspective is and why. Going back to the event of the white children loitering on Angelou's grandmother's land, it might be a good idea to group students by the point of view of who's response they felt was the best overall response, her grandmother's conservative safe one, or Angelou's upset radical one, and why. Some students may even come up with a different point of view, and our grand, whole-class conversational forum would accommodate this. Ultimately, this exercise will create a forum in which student ideas are informed and perhaps transformed by the insights of their peers. I might have students judge the validity or credibility of their peers' various perspectives based on the extent to which they probed, interacted with, and applied empathy in the text to support their perspective. Other places multiple perspectives can be shared are in characterization, views of "good" and "bad" characters, nonfiction points of view, persuasive writing, and editorials.

Across Disciplines

The Across Disciplines conceptual framework is represented by various shapes overlapping, illustrating the idea that interdisciplinary collaboration between various content areas provide that much more student insight and real world meaning. Across disciplines could mean multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, establishes connections among disciplines, and touches on many subjects at once.

A task starter that I might implement in relation to this unit would be to ask the students how "across disciplines" is related to "multiple perspectives." I might then have my students do a role-play focusing on our ethical issue of socialized perspectives of human worth. I might have each of them be a minister, politician, mother, teacher, philanthropist, scientist, doctor and the like, and get each of their perspectives on this ethical issue. Because these professions also reflect various content areas we can explore how one issue might be viewed or examined from a completely different perspective based on various ways of thinking that come with each content area. To relate them to higher order thinking skills, I would have the role players describe the topic in the context of their distinct discipline, and then have the students compare and contrast this information. Other places within the English Language Arts/Reading discipline that this

conceptual framework could be applied are biographies, journals, diaries, letters, writing related to the discipline, and reading within the discipline.

Examining Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* through the **Depth and Complexity** conceptual framework paradigm will open up the world of the autobiographical genre in ways unimaginable. This kind of examination will facilitate a sophisticated, in-depth comprehension of the work, licensing the students to interact with the work as artists, creating an intimacy between them and the words that will have substantial implications for the real-world meaning that make the art of reading a lifestyle--free of obligation, coercive mandates, and boredom.

LESSON PLANS: A UNIT PLAN OVERVIEW

I will facilitate the mastery of literary elements using Angelou's first autobiographical work through an eight-step process, all of which will last approximately three months.

For the purpose of this unit, we will explore the depth and complexity of the literary devices alliteration, repetition, simile, anecdote and allusion, paying particular attention to how Angelou manipulates them to authenticate her voice.

1. We will read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* for pure enjoyment.
2. I will then provide lecture and guided instruction of in-depth comprehensive definitions of various literary techniques that color the autobiographical among other genres. Students will take detailed notes of each of these literary terms and techniques.

One example of these definitions is that of alliteration:

The repetition of a sound in successive or closely associated words or syllables. Usually the sound is a consonant or consonant cluster and is found at the beginning of words. Some common examples of this is *initial alliteration* are "sticks and stones" and "mind over matter." When alliteration occurs within words, it is called *hidden alliteration* or *internal alliteration*.

The repetition of final consonant sounds, as in *back/thick*, is generally called *consonance*, although some writers prefer to refer to any repetition of consonant sounds as *alliteration*. The term *consonance* is also used for a form of imperfect rhyme where the consonants are the same but the vowels are different: *look/lack*.

Alliteration is often found in poetry. Then repetition of a sound adds emphasis to words and helps make images more memorable. It also serves to unify a passage or poem (*Guide to Literary Terms*, 942).

The above definition goes more in-depth about alliteration, with the accompanying jargon to be used to describe its various aspects of alliteration.

3. We will then read the book again, chapter by chapter, looking to identify the application of these literary terms and techniques by referring to the in-depth dimensions of the definitions. The following passage from Angelou's work effectively illustrates the use of alliteration: "...the preacher really hadn't *moved* into the *meat* of the sermon" (34).

Our knowledge of the *Details* of depth and complexity would lead my students to recognize the above example as initial alliteration—as the repetition of the "m" consonant sound at the beginning of each word. The following alliterative phrase that helps paint a vivid picture of Sister Monroe, a colorful character in their church congregation, illustrates alliteration as a literary technique in more depth and complexity:

She lived in the country and couldn't get to church every Sunday, so *she* made up for her absences by *shouting* so hard when *she* did make it that *she shook* the whole church. (Angelou 34).

The above passage illustrates two literary techniques in operation. The first is alliteration, the second, repetition. The kids would be equipped to identify the alliteration in the words *she*, *shouting*, and *shook*. I will facilitate their synthesis of these words as initial alliteration of a consonant cluster. The initial alliteration determines that the repetition of sound takes place at the beginning of each word. The consonant cluster is reflected in the *sh* sound in each word. Consonant clusters are letters that come together to form one sound. Among the many examples of consonant clusters are: *ch*, *th*, *sp*, *sc*. Ultimately, students will be able to articulate this example as initial alliteration with the *sh* consonant cluster.

The second literary device that operates in this sentence is repetition. An in depth definition of repetition is:

A rhetorical device in which a word, phrase, or larger unit is repeated in a literary work. Repetition is used to emphasize an idea and to create intensity. There are many kinds of repetition. **Parallelism** is used in both poetry and prose, while **refrain**, **rhyme**, **assonance**, and **alliteration** are used in poetry. The exposition of these devices as forms of repetition opens the opportunity to explore these elements, identifying them in writing, and recreating them through their own writing. (*Guide to Literary Terms*, 954)

This in-depth explanation of repetition enhances our understanding of repetition as an umbrella under which many forms preside, all of which operate as literary devices.

Repetition occurs with the word *she*. This would be a great opportunity to acknowledge that repetition is a common device employed in poetry. This would also be the perfect opportunity to analyze how Maya Angelou's works are a reflection to her naturally poetic voice.

The third and final example of alliteration is yet another reflection of the depth and complexity of alliteration: "...she got the spirit and started *shouting*, *throwing* her arms around and *jerking* her body" (Angelou 34). This phrase illustrates the final alliteration or consonance of a consonant cluster. Final alliteration or consonance means that the repetition of sound occurs at the end of the word. The *ing* forms the consonant cluster. Another thing to emphasize in this example is the interchangeability of words to identify the same thing as an aspect of depth and complexity. The other thing that should be pointed out is how *diction*, or word choice, is reflected in the alliteration operating to distinguish voice in writing. This may inspire and encourage students to apply the creative dynamics of alliteration, with a working knowledge of its depth and complexity, to their own writing as a form of personal expression.

The same kind of identification and analysis can be executed with *simile*, which is defined as the comparison of two things using like or as, but in more depth is defined as:

A figure of speech in which the similarity between two things is directly expressed by the use of words of comparison such as like, as, than, such as, or resembles. Similes are frequently used in poetry and prose. They are also used in daily life. When you say, "Her fingers felt like ice," or "He was shaking like a leaf," you are using a simile. (*Guide to Literary Terms*, 967)

As Angelou shares how she and her brother Bailey hated the reverend of their church "unreservedly" (diction), she uses simile multiple times to illustrate the depth of their repulsion for the Reverend:

"He was ugly, fat, and he laughed like a hog with the colic." (30)

“The Reverend kept throwing out phrases like home-run balls and Sister Monroe made a quick break and grasped for them.” (35)

“She stood in front of the alter, shaking like a freshly caught trout.” (34)

We would first examine the simile, acknowledging which two things are being compared, and go deeper into an analysis of how the diction or word choices used to create the simile operates to colorfully authenticate the narrative voice. We would then deal with imagery and how the figurative language used in the simile helps create vivid images in the reader’s mind that make for a cathartic interaction with the text.

Another literary technique that colors Angelou’s autobiographical work is the *anecdote*. *The African American Literature* textbook defines the anecdote as:

A short narrative, often humorous, detailing a single episode or incident. An Anecdote illustrates an idea or reveals something about a person, place, or thing. Writers of biography and autobiography often include anecdotes to bring their subjects to life. In *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington tells of turning back the hands of the clock so that he could get to school on time. From this anecdote, the reader learns of his zeal for learning. (942)

A few of my favorite anecdotes come out of chapter six of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. One anecdote is about Angelou’s dislike of Reverend Thomas, who comes over for Sunday dinner and eats all their food. The other two are about Angelou’s youthful experiences of the pandemonium of the African American church services, ignited by Sister Monroe. The reflective perspective of Angelou’s youthful eye communicates Sister Monroe as a caricature or type, whose behavior in church is slapstick funny. Her literary account of Sister Monroe’s near physical assault of the preacher as a form of encouragement, coupled with the theatrical culture of many African American churches, and finally coupled with her grandmother’s insistence on the maintenance of composure as a measure of etiquette and protocol in the midst of what she perceives as a three-ring circus will be one of the many anecdotes with which my students will be able to connect.

A fifth and final literary device will be examined for the purpose of this draft that Angelou communicates as a pastoral sermon text within her own text is that of the *allusion*, defined in the *African American Literature* textbook as:

An indirect reference to a work of literature or art or to a well-known person, place, or event. Allusions are used to expand and enrich the meaning of a work. They do so by tapping into the reader’s previous knowledge. The effectiveness of allusion rests on there being a common body of knowledge between writer and reader (954).

In African American literature, there are many allusions to the Bible and to historical events such as the Emancipation Proclamation. James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation” alludes to the Biblical story of Creation, building on the reader’s knowledge of that text. Johnson’s “O Black and Unknown Bards” contains allusions to spirituals that are themselves rich in Biblical allusions (*Guide to Literary Terms*, 942).

Angelou recounts how after Sister Monroe’s assault on Reverend Thomas, he uses allusion to critique Sister Monroe’s unnecessary dramatic and physically transgressive antics that he feels are pretentious over-the-top overtures at establishing a reputation of spiritual piety at his expense:

...he took his text from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke, and talked quietly but seriously about the Pharisees, who prayed in the streets so that the

public would be impressed by their religious devotion. I doubt that anyone got the message – certainly not those to whom it was directed. (Angelou 36)

Hurricane Sister Monroe touched down ripping and ruining Reverend Thomas’s suit for which the deacon board appropriated funds to replace, “The other was a total loss” (Angelou 36). The effective execution of allusion as a text within the text will enable my students to see how allusion operates to enhance the meaning and add depth and dimension to the autobiographical genre.

4. We will then write about how each of the excerpts that reflect a particular literary technique operates to color the writing. This will be communicated in a way that shows an understanding of the technique while transcendentally expressing a personal viewpoint of how a particular excerpt operates. The students can jigsaw this activity, working on it in cooperative groups, each reader focusing on a particular literary device, coming together, and reflecting on the creative application of the device in coloring the writing.

Examples of student cooperative identification and analysis of Angelou’s application of literary elements in the first ten pages of Angelou’s work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is as follows. Note how empathic inferential perceptions of the text might make for more fruitful conversations that inevitably facilitate comprehension:

Simile, Imagery

“The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping (diction) wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms” (Angelou 7).

Angelou’s use of simile in this excerpt makes me feel for her as a little girl because when I imagine a wet handkerchief in my hand that I cannot let go, it makes me feel uncomfortable, and I can imagine that this is the way she feels as a little girl having to stand in front of the whole church and give an Easter speech with everyone looking at her.

Alliteration (Internal, Final/Consonance, Figurative Language)

“The children’s section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was wiggling and giggling over my well-known forgetfulness” (7).

The alliteration helps me to clearly see how young Angelou’s peers must have been responding to her “well-known forgetfulness.” The phrase well-known is being used to modify forgetfulness, which tells me that Marguerite was known for either being forgetful in general or drawing a blank when it comes to speaking before a crowd. I can understand this because initially, when I used to perform my monologues before my peers in reading, I would draw a blank, knowing full well I had it down pat! The kids laughing at what they know to be a weakness for Angelou is cruel, and I don’t blame her for not wanting to get up in front of the church and do her Easter speech.

Simile, Imagery

“The dress I wore was lavender taffeta, and each time I breathed it rustled (diction), and now that I was sucking in air to breathe out shame it sounded like crepe paper on the back of harnesses” (7).

I guess one of the symptoms of nervousness is a heightened sensitivity. I would imagine that the sound of crepe paper on the back of harnesses is draggy and sad. The fact that she likens the rustle of her taffeta dress to the sound of crepe paper on the back of a harness versus limousine from a wedding, a happier occasion, says something. Does this mean that she feels like she is dying a slow suffering death in front of all these people? Is she in the

metaphorical harness she is imagining? She must really have had negative experiences speaking in front of a crowd, because she associates it with morbidity. With every breath she takes, which she needs to speak, she breathes out shame, which tells me she is ashamed to be up there speaking.

Simile

“As I’d watched Momma put ruffles on the hem and cute little tucks around the waist, I knew that once I put it on I’d look like a movie star” (7).

The use of simile to compare a movie star to what young Angelou hoped to look like after having put the dress on reinforces for me how clothing sometimes determines how people feel about themselves. Easter is a big deal. I understand the importance of wanting to be a standout for Easter Sunday, especially since she has to stand in front of the entire church and give a speech. It also shows how the media and celebrity have a significant influence on everyday people.

Simile

“I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (7-8).

Why does young Angelou wish to be white? If she believes that “sweet little white girls are everybody’s dream of what is right with the world,” then does she believe herself/her blackness to be everybody’s nightmare of what is wrong with the world? Where does she get these ideas? The kids at church? But aren’t they black too? Maybe her grandmother doesn’t tell her she is pretty the way she is. She is close to her brother, so I don’t believe he tells her she is ugly. Maybe she is going through what every girl goes through based on societal pressure to be beautiful. But I thought the extent of it may have been losing weight or getting a nose job. But wow! Wanting to be a completely different race! That’s something completely different!

Alliteration, Simile

“Hanging softly over the Black Singer sewing machine, it (the dress) looked like magic” (8).

The use of alliteration to emphasize the qualities of the sewing machine helps to paint a clear picture of how it looks. To compare the dress, a tangible noun, to magic, an intangible noun, reminds me of the limitless imagination that comes with youthfulness. We don’t know exactly how magic looks, but we know that it is something that is designed to wow its viewer, and according to young Angelou, viewing the dress has done the same for her.

Alliteration/Imagery/Diction

“But Easter’s early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long, too, but it didn’t hide my skinny legs which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with Arkansas red clay” (8).

The use of creative noun modifiers or figurative language like “plain ugly,” “once was purple throwaway,” and “old-lady-long” give this excerpt so much meaning, and create a clear image in my mind. It is so cool the way she incorporates not only how the dress looks in these descriptors, but the way she feels about the dress. When I think of a once was purple throwaway, I think of the dress being in the purple family, but no longer having the richness of the color purple. Also, the choice of words throwaway, versus cliché words like hand-me down or second-hand, communicate young Angelou’s repulsion of the dress. Her noting that

the dress once belonged to a white woman may imply a larger issue, perhaps her self-imposed disgust at never being able to attain that which she so desperately wishes to be: white. Perhaps her inheriting the white woman's dress, only after it is worn and ugly serves as a metaphor for the idea that she will never be good enough to be or attain what she perceives to be the best. Young Angelou seems to feel that not only is she worth only the white woman's throwaways, but she herself/her blackness is a throw-away in comparison to the white woman. I can also empathize with a dress being old-lady long! Boy, I have had a few disagreements with my mom about a dress being too long. I think it is common for mothers and daughters to disagree over appropriate dress lengths. But the longer a dress is, the older it makes you look, especially if it is a dress for church.

Imagery/Initial Alliteration/Simile

“The age-faded color made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs” (8).

Angelou uses “age-faded” as a modifier for the color of the dress, which does so much more than tell me as the reader that the dress is faded, but it tells me *why* it is faded. It is faded because it is old, not because it was messed up in the wash or anything like that. Also, it communicates that when one is not comfortable or confident with what they have on, it causes them to be self-conscious. It is almost as if she expects the dress to eclipse her felt sense of ugliness, but all it did was illuminate it: A not good enough dress for a not good enough person.

Imagery, Initial Alliteration

“Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass momma wouldn't let me straighten” (8)?

Young Angelou must really perceive herself as ugly if she wishes that the reality of who she is were a dream!

Repetition/Initial Alliteration

“My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about ‘my daddy must have been a Chinaman’ (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty” (8).

Here again is another imagination of the complete antithesis of what young Angelou is and can never attain to validate her sense of self-worth. I feel for her, and I am angry with her peers who instigate her feelings of insecurity about her appearance. The fact that the kids talk about what her father must have been tells us that her father was absent from her life:

Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big (diction) Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil. (8)

Imagery/Figurative Language/Initial Alliteration

Angelou uses her imagination as a white girl who was turned black by an evil stepmother to make sense of why she has always been different from her peers, from the way she speaks, to her taste in food. This foreshadows that Angelou will take a completely different path in life. I bet she's laughing all the way to the bank now! I still think it is sad that she is ashamed of every physical trait associated with her blackness.

Diction/Imagery

“What you looking...” The minister’s wife leaned toward me, her long yellow face full of sorry (8).”

When I think of someone having a “long” face, I think of his or her face being sad. I wonder if her face is naturally long, or if it is long because she is sad for Angelou. Also, I wonder if the minister’s wife’s face is naturally yellow, or if it is yellow because she is sickened by the pathetic nature of Angelou’s speech. Isn’t sickness sometimes associated with the color yellow? Could the yellow also mean that she is Asian? Or that she simply has lighter skin? Does Angelou point out her yellow skin because it is different from her brown skin? Does she covet the pastor’s wife’s skin because it is closer to white? I just read that she perceives all the physical traits that define her blackness as a nightmare. Maybe that’s it. Also, the word choice of “sorry” being used as a noun instead of its typical use as an adjective is also very creative. It’s cool how she uses her artistic license to use non-traditional parts of speech to give in-depth meaning to a word.

Diction

She whispered, “I just come to tell you it’s Easter Day.” I repeated, jamming the words together, ‘Ijustcometotelyouit’sEasterDay,’ as low as possible” (8).

The analysis I created from a child’s perspective focuses on cultivating an artistic approach to reading, in order to maximize what one gets out of the literature. According to Toni Morrison, reading is fifty percent what is on the page, and the other fifty percent is what the reader brings to it. By immersing oneself in the text, and establishing relationships with the characters the way we establish relationships with people, we become one with the text, and our stake in the reading becomes much more substantial. Toni Morrison shares that there are two approaches to reading: reading as a skill and reading as art. She acknowledges that while the former is enough, approaching reading as an art cultivates a pleasure, a passion that causes one to engage in reading as a lifestyle. After reading and immersing herself into an excerpt of Toni Cade Bambara’s novel through envisionment and empathic reading of *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, Morrison comments:

I read literature slowly, digging for the hidden...eager to envision what is there, noticing what is not... I can do this again; read it and be there once more, anytime I like. Sifting, adding, recapturing. Making the work while it makes me do the same. Just like leaning into the radio; or sitting cross-legged at the feet of grandparents.
(175)

This is approach to literature I wish to cultivate in my students. This is the approach that will make a reading akin to living, breathing.

5. We will watch the movie to see how the execution of these elements are effected in a film adaptation, leading to questions about spect-actorship when it comes to the book and the imagery it creates through these techniques, and how this relationship, this active stake in an efficacious experience with the book, is often what establishes the feeling that “the book was better than the movie.”
6. After full exploration of the book in comparison to the movie, the students will do a written comparative analysis of the book and movie.
7. As an extension activity that leads to writing, I intend to teach this unit by exposing my students to the various features of an autobiographical work. We will then read Maya Angelou’s autobiographical series for content, identifying the experiences that illustrate the sub-themes that fall under the umbrella of “coming of age.” We will then write our own

stories that will fall under these sub-themes writing an autobiographical anthology inspired by the works of Maya Angelou. I will emphasize the importance of cultural relativity for each story, reinforcing the importance of subjective norms that define their lives. We will look at Angelou's work from a universal standpoint, asking the students to identify an aspect of Angelou's life experience with which they can identify.

8. We will cap the unit off with an oral-interpretation of an excerpt of Maya Angelou's work juxtaposed with their life experience. This unit finale will emphasize the importance of "eating the text." Furthermore, my students will be able to experience "visual literacy" while oral interpreters embody the literature through the process of analysis, interpretation, and ultimately, performative adaptation.

Interacting with Angelou's autobiographical work in this way will incite a perspective of reading as art, the investment of the entire body in the learning process, an intimacy with the core features that distinguish various genres of literature, and specifically an autobiographical work, and inspire my students to use their own literary voices to tell their stories. They will ultimately gain an appreciation for the efficacious benefits of reading an entertaining life-story, and become empowered to write a portion of their own. My students will discover that writing has no boundaries, and through writing, one can leave a literary legacy for the world to remember them by. I believe that an in-depth analysis and mastery of literary terms and techniques will be a most exciting vehicle by which they can begin this in-depth exploration of literature.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This anthology houses all six books that make up Angelou's autobiographical series. The series chronicles the main events of her life from the age of six to mature adulthood. The books that make up Angelou's autobiographical series are: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas*, *The Heart of a Woman*, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*.

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Morrison differentiates between two different approaches to reading, reading as a skill and as an art. While reading as skill is sufficient, she emphasizes that reading as an art, which requires reader interaction with the text is much more efficacious, encouraging the act of reading as a lifestyle. She emphasizes reading as a reciprocal relationship of give and take between reader and text.

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This text categorizes the function of various characters in Angelou's work through the dichotomous framework of hero and villain.