

The Heart of a Woman Study Guide

The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Heart of a Woman Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue, Chapters 1-5.....	5
Chapters 6-9.....	10
Chapters 10-15.....	12
Chapters 16-20.....	15
Characters.....	17
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	23
Style.....	25
Quotes.....	27
Topics for Discussion.....	29



Plot Summary

The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou is a memoir detailing the woman's powerful journey from young adulthood in San Francisco to her mid-thirties, mother to a university-aged son, living in Ghana.

The prologue begins with Maya Angelou and a group of others chanting an old spiritual. The author talks about blacks and whites being befuddled. The 1950s and 1960s were a tumultuous time and there were many cases in which people simply did not know which side was up. The time signified many accomplishments for blacks in all areas of society.

Angelou came up in a time that was marked by racial tension, oppression, and devastating circumstances for blacks throughout the country. As the daughter of a vivacious, courageous and outspoken mother, it is no wonder that Angelou would become the powerhouse known throughout the world today.

At the center of Angelou's life throughout the entire book is her son, Guy, civil rights, her devotion to the arts, and the raising up of blacks - black women, in particular.

From attending protests and lectures by up and coming activist leaders to throwing herself wholly into activism, Angelou never loses sight of what matters most. Those activities led to a stint as coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and working with Martin Luther King, Jr. to interactions with Malcolm X and other civil rights leaders.

The author's various activities in the arts community are numerous. Angelou admits that she was a mediocre singer and competent dancer and actress. Those roles propelled her forward and allowed Angelou to tour the world. The real breakthrough came when John Killens urged Angelou to return to New York to become a part of the Harlem Writers Guild. The Guild would help Angelou to harness her natural talent and to hone her craft to present the best possible work. Criticism was hard but valuable.

During this time, Guy grew up. The young man that had been taught to question everything and give respect to those who deserved it made Angelou proud. Guy was intelligent, well spoken, polite, ambitious, and devoted to the same cause his mother worked so hard for in order to eradicate racism worldwide.

The author also details her relationship with Vusumzi Make, a well known African leader. Vus pursued Angelou relentlessly from their first meeting and would not accept anything less than to have Angelou as his wife. The relationship became rocky due to Vus' irresponsibility and infidelity. Also, Angelou could not bring herself to be what Vus wanted in a typical African wife.

Throughout the book, Angelou tells tales of people she encountered along the way. They include Billie Holiday, the Rat Pack, Ossie Davis, Sidney Poitier, Abbey Lincoln,

Max Roach, Lou Gosset, Jr., and many others that were famous or blossoming during the era.

The book ends with Guy going off to the University of Ghana and leaving Angelou to her own devices for the first time.



Prologue, Chapters 1-5

Prologue, Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

The prologue begins with Maya Angelou and a group of others chanting an old spiritual. The author talks about blacks and whites being befuddled. The 1950s and 1960s were a tumultuous time and there were many cases in which people simply did not know which side was up. The time signified many accomplishments for blacks in all areas of society.

Angelou took her small son, Guy, and moved to a commune in Sausalito. The move seemed to be a good one for Angelou at the time. Angelou's mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, did not think so. However, Johnson said little and attempted to be supportive in any way she could, which included visiting her daughter and often leaving money underneath Angelou's pillow.

After a year, Angelou realized that she missed taking regular showers and getting manicures. Guy was treated like an adult by the other inhabitants at the commune and began to go a bit wild, ignoring the authority of his mother and others. It was time to move. Angelou and Guy moved to Laurel Canyon. It was considered to be the official residential part of Hollywood, only ten minutes from the famous Schwab's Drugstore and fifteen minutes from the equally famous Sunset Strip.

Angelou describes the neighborhood: "Its most notable feature was its sensuality. Red-roofed, Moorish style houses nestled seductively among madrone trees." Angelou also describes the flora and fauna, along with some of the area's residents. "Movie stars, movie starlets, producers and directors who lived in the neighborhood were as voluptuous as their natural and unnatural environment" (Prologue, p. 5).

There were few black people living in Laurel Canyon, and many of them were already rich and famous. They were also light-skinned enough to be able to pass for Portuguese. Angelou on the other hand, was a dark skinned, relatively unknown nightclub singer who wanted nothing more than to live in glamorous surroundings. When Angelou told a friend that she wanted to live in Laurel Canyon, the friend, who was white, voiced some reservations. Angelou called the landlord only to be told that the little, over-priced bungalow had been rented just that morning. Angelou suspected that the man was lying. The friend called the landlord and was able to rent the house. When Angelou showed up with the friend to move in, the landlord was outraged. There was nothing to be done without demonstrating out and out discrimination.

Angelou settled in to the new house, bought a used Chrysler convertible, and enrolled Guy in school.

Frederick "Wilkie" Wilkerson, Angelou's voice coach, dropped by one day to ask if Angelou would like to meet Billie Holiday. Angelou accepted and joked that the women



were sure to get along. Angelou claims she was not nervous until Wilkie went to pick up the infamous Lady Day at her hotel. While Wilkie was off fetching the legendary blues singer, Angelou cleaned her house and began to wonder how she would feel if Holiday began to exhibit some of her more outrageous behavior. It was well known that Holiday had engaged in several lesbian affairs. Angelou worried how to reject the great lady should the issue arise during their visit.

Over the years, Holiday had continued to sing in her thin, unusual voice, thrilling millions; yet she'd become just as famous for her paranoia, drug and alcohol use and violent temper. Holiday was often known to refer to herself as a bitch on wheels.

Holiday and Wilkie arrived at Angelou's modest bungalow. Holiday was just what Angelou had expected, save for the obvious ravages of drugs and alcohol that showed on the woman's once pretty face. Holiday was combative until Wilkie tried to put the woman in her place. The luncheon went fairly well, all things considered. When Wilkie was ready to leave, Holiday said she would like to stay. Angelou did not know what to do but eventually agreed to take Holiday back to her hotel later that evening.

Holiday was less than pleased to learn that Angelou had a son. Holiday vehemently stated that she hated children. Angelou was offended and defended Guy, who was a polite, well mannered and intelligent boy of twelve. In the end, Guy won over Holiday who spent the next few nights singing lullabies to Guy before he went to bed.

Holiday spent the next four days with Angelou and Guy, along with her little Chihuahua. Everything went relatively smoothly until Holiday acted out in two instances. The first one was when she went to see Angelou sing and interrupted the song, hurling insults. Angelou was determined to give Holiday a piece of her mind, legend or no legend. The second incident was much worse as it involved Guy. On the night before Holiday was scheduled to return to New York, she promised to sing "Strange Fruit" for Guy. Several times during the song Guy interrupted to ask what various verse meant. Holiday became belligerent and swore at Guy. Guy left the room and did not see Holiday again. A few months later, the great Billie Holiday was dead.

The incident with Holiday strained the relationship between Angelou and Guy for quite some time. Guy eventually told his mother that he would never let anyone swear at his child that way. Angelou had not defended Guy in the moment. As a result, Guy was deeply wounded.

Angelou and discussed cussing and how it was inappropriate. Guy admitted to cussing while hanging out with his friends, but never in front of a woman. It became clear that Guy was already indulging in the double standard. Later, Guy got into trouble for using profanity on the school bus. Angelou went to school and became outraged when she learned that no one had given Guy the opportunity to voice his side of the story. After a stand off with the teacher and principal, Angelou pulled Guy out of that school. The mother and son moved to another part of the city and Guy was enrolled in another school.



Chapter one showed how for the next one and a half years, Angelou and Guy lived in the new neighborhood. Guy was able to make friends. Angelou began to write.

Angelou met John Killens, a well known black author. Killens critiqued Angelou's work and was complimentary, suggesting that Angelou should go to New York and join the Harlem Writers Guild. Angelou had lived in New York before and her close friend, Abbey Lincoln, lived there. Angelou decided to move to New York. Guy did not seem to be deeply affected by the decision to move. Angelou also thought it was a good idea because Guy was becoming a typical teenager, nearly estranged from his mother and their former family-oriented activities.

Angelou called her mother to ask if they could meet for a couple of days. Angelou wanted to talk to her mother about moving back to New York. The mother and daughter decided to meet in Fresno at a hotel that was known for accepting blacks. The idea made Angelou nervous.

Vivian Baxter Johnson arrived at the Desert Hotel an hour before Angelou, which was her custom. As usual, Johnson was decked out in furs and diamonds, which only served to raise even more eyebrows. When Angelou arrived, Johnson was in the bar, chatting with the bartender. Angelou did not want her mother to know how intimidated she was by the sheer number of whites in the lobby, saying, "Nothing frightened my mother except thunder and lightning. I couldn't tell her that at 31 years old the whites in the lobby had scared me silly" (Chap. 1 p. 25).

The visit was pleasant. Johnson had a grand time showing off her baby girl. Angelou was shocked to learn that her mother also had important news. Johnson was going to join the merchant marines. Johnson's reason for signing up was because she was told that a Negro woman could never get into the union. It was the wrong thing to say to Vivian Baxter Johnson.

The plan was for Angelou to go to New York and still with the Killens for two weeks. During that time Angelou would get settled and send for Guy. Angelou's lover, Ray, was somewhat surprised to learn that he was staying behind but graciously offered to watch over Guy until he was ready to join his mother in New York.

Chapter two begins with Angelou arriving at the home of John and Grace Killens in Brooklyn. Angelou refers to the home as being comfortable with a casual atmosphere.

Angelou got to know John and Grace much better during those first days. The author refers to John as being handsome and passionate. Grace was quiet, the wife of a successful man. It never interfered with independent thought. Angelou was particularly taken by John's mother. Angelou refers to her as being a robust woman in her sixties, saying, "She was one of the group of black women who had raised their children, worked hard, fought for her principles and still retained some humor. She often entranced the family with graphic stories set in a sullen, racist South. The tales changed, the plot varied; her villains were always white, and her heroes upstanding, courageous, clever blacks" (Chap. 2 p. 31).



Angelou had lived everywhere, from cities to rural country houses, north, west, east and south. Still, the author laments that she never heard so much conversation and energy devoted to the disparagement of whites. John Killen was especially vocal about the whites and their oppressive roles in society. There was talk about the ill treatment of Martin Luther King, Jr., the murder of Emmett Till, and the general feeling of people on the streets. The excessive talk bothered Angelou because she felt it was unnecessary to devote all that time and energy to hatred.

One night Angelou asked Killen why he was so angry. Killen replied that no matter where a black person lives in the country, it is on a plantation. No matter the circumstances, no matter how nice the master, blacks were still slaves, pure and simple. Angelou disagreed. The author also reminded Killen that she had lived in New York before. Killen replied, saying, "You were a dancer. Dancers don't see anything except other dancers. They don't see; they exist to be seen. This time you should look at New York with a writer's eyes, ears and nose. Then you'll really see New York" (Chap. 2 p. 33).

Angelou found an apartment in the Killens' neighborhood, and after one month of being in New York, was able to send for Guy. Even four short weeks had changed Guy, who seemed much taller, older, and more aloof than ever. Angelou discovered that Ray had left Guy alone after the first week. Guy had lived at the small house in Los Angeles by himself for three weeks. Angelou was horrified that she did not know. Guy, a fourteen-year-old, declared that he was not afraid. After a chat, Guy and Angelou decided to play a game of Scrabble and suddenly, it was like old times again.

Angelou writes about her first traumatic experience with the Harlem Writers Guild. Angelou read from a play and was cut down hard for her unpolished work. Angelou stuck it out, however, and learned that she needed to grow and work hard if she was going to make it as a writer.

In chapter three, Angelou tells about her attempt to break into the club scene as a singer. It was difficult for a black woman to find a niche in New York. After two months singing at a small club, Angelou was invited to sing at the Apollo. When Angelou was in rehearsal, the man in charge told her that the audience would not participate in the encore. Angelou was determined to sing "Uhuru" and ignored the man's advice. Although Angelou was forced to suffer through a night with a particularly mean heckler, the act - and the encore - was a solid hit.

In chapter four, Angelou details her introduction to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Angelou and her friend Godfrey attended services at a Harlem church where representatives of the SCLC were scheduled to speak. Martin Luther King, Jr. was among the speakers. To Angelou and Godfrey, the meeting brought about an epiphany. The friends decided that they wanted to put on a play or a revue of sorts to raise money for the SCLC. Angelou was elected to approach the organization to ask for permission. Angelou details her nervousness in meeting with the representatives of the SCLC and relates her joy when the group accepted her offer. Plans to create and organize the play were put into motion. There were many obstacles to overcome but



things began to come together. In a few weeks "Cabaret for Freedom" was ready to hit the stage.

In chapter five, Angelou and the cast of the revue were playing at the Village Gate. The revue had been such a success that the owner of the club offered it without charge for five weeks. One thing led to another, and before long Angelou and two others had volunteered to do direct mail to advertise the show.

After the show closed, Angelou was offered a chance to perform in Chicago. Although traveling to Chicago meant that Angelou would have to leave Guy for two weeks, it also meant that the rent would be paid for two months with money left over for Guy's school clothes.

Just before Angelou was ready to return to New York, she received a call from John Killens. Killens asked Angelou to go to his house when she returned to the city. Although Killens assured Angelou that everything was fine, the mother still worried about her son.

While Angelou was in Chicago, Guy had a run-in with a gang known as the Savages. A spurned girl lied to her gang member boyfriend about being hit by Guy, which resulted in threats. The gang was notorious in the area and even the police were afraid of them. As one would expect, Guy tried to assert himself as being a man who could handle himself.

Angelou did not tell Guy how she stepped in to the situation. Angelou visited the girl's family. The girl's grandmother worked for Angelou sometimes. Angelou met with the girl and the gang member who had threatened Guy. Angelou made it very clear that should Guy ever return home with a black eye or torn shirt, Angelou would return to the house and kill the girl's grandmother, mother, and the newest baby in the family. Then Angelou promised to go to the gang member's house and kill anything that moved. The gang member got the point. Later, Guy told his mother how he handled the situation with the gang members. It turns out that the son bluffed as well as his mother.



Chapters 6-9

Chapters 6-9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter six begins with Angelou walking through Harlem on her way to meet with Rustin and the others at the SCLC office. Angelou was worried about the fact that the receipts from the revue were not accurate. What Angelou got upon her arrival was nothing the author ever would have expected.

Angelou learned that Rustin was leaving the SCLC. Angelou was asked to take his place as coordinator. Angelou was shocked and baffled as to why the men would ask her to take Rustin's place. Apparently, Angelou's skills seen at the revue in regards to organizing and motivating were enough to impress Rustin. Trepidatious about accepting such a lofty position, Angelou conferred with John Killens. Angelou accepted the job.

For the next two months, Angelou sent out thousands of letters, organized volunteers and did basically anything that needed to be done. The biggest surprise of all came when Angelou walked into her office one day to find Martin Luther King sitting in the chair across from her desk. Angelou fought hard to overcome shock and nervousness at meeting the great man. Soon, the two were chatting like old friends.

Things began to heat up in New York. One incident mentioned involved a summit between Cuba and the Soviet Union in Harlem which spurred a protest. Guy was in attendance without permission and once again challenged his mother.

In chapter seven, over the next months, Angelou became completely immersed in the business at the SCLC. The author began to see changes in the attitudes of both blacks and whites and learned that changing the world was expensive. Every penny counted.

Angelou began to go to a neighborhood bar called Tony's. After a month, the bartender and Angelou had become friends. Angelou recalled what her mother had said about always being safe if the bartender had been treated well.

It was at Tony's that Angelou met Thomas Allen. He was a handsome man, a bail bondsman by profession, and divorced. The two began to date frequently. Before anyone knew it, Angelou and Thomas decided to get married. Everyone warned Angelou about rushing into such a commitment. Angelou seemed to want to get married more out of defiance than love. As the wedding drew nearer, Angelou began to realize that while the sex and food were good, there was little to no conversation. Thomas also seemed to be the type that would take over all decision making with little regard to Angelou's agreement. For the first time, Angelou began to act with a demureness that contradicted her true personality.

In chapter eight, Hazel told Angelou how she had seen an African freedom fighter speak over the weekend. The man was powerful and reminded Hazel a lot of King. The man, Vusumzi Make, was speaking out against apartheid. Hazel could not say enough about



the man and his message. The following week, Hazel went to see Make speak again. Angelou did not go. Killens called to ask why Angelou had not been at the function to hear Make speak. Angelou explained that it was getting close to a benefit at which the Rat Pack was giving a performance. There was much to be done.

At this point, it becomes obvious that while Angelou was still devoted to the cause, she was not as active in public in regards to her personal life. Thomas continued to have a profound effect on the author. The nail in the coffin came when Thomas stated that he did not want to discuss politics and felt nothing for Africa.

Angelou eventually met Make at a party given by the Killenses. The man was immediately smitten with Angelou and immediately began to pursue her, even though he knew the author was engaged. Make was not to be deterred.

Angelou began to fall into a confused state. Make was beginning to demand her attention while Thomas was becoming more distant, as was Angelou. Angelou no longer wanted to go to Thomas' apartment. Angelou began to become torn between the two men.

In chapter nine, Angelou agreed to have lunch with Make. The more the man spoke, the more Angelou became entranced. Before the end of the lunch, Make had completely swept Angelou off her feet and she agreed to marry him.

Abbey was shocked at the news and asked about the minor detail of Thomas. Angelou would have to break it off so that she could be with Make. It would not be a pretty scene. Abbey did as Angelou asked and picked up Make to take him to a party at her home. Like Angelou, Abbey was taken by Make but worried about her friend making such a rash decision.

Make had also asked the writer to go to London with him and then on to Africa. Angelou was worried about Guy's reaction and was pleased when Make said he wanted to speak to Guy about the proposal. Guy would appreciate being treated like the man he had become.

Thomas did not take the news well. His ego had been damaged but the author noted that the news did not break his heart.

Angelou struggled somewhat with the duality of being both woman and mother. She need not have worried. Guy was supportive of the union. Guy said that his mother would be happy with Make in a way she would not have been with Thomas. When Angelou asked why Guy thought that, Guy said that Thomas did not love her. It was obvious that Make respected her, which for an African was even better than love.

Chapters 10-15

Chapters 10-15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter ten details Angelou's arrival in London. There Angelou met women from Africa, ones that had seen the fight for freedom with their own eyes. Angelou was enthralled by their demeanor and their stories; how women were women in Africa, not just wombs. Angelou felt at home with these women and was equally pleased to know that she had something to contribute.

Make had to go to Cairo and sent Angelou back to New York to find an apartment. Large amounts of money began to show up regularly and Angelou had no idea where it was coming from. Make avoided the subject which made Angelou suspicious.

It had been a year since Angelou left SCLC and set to creating a home for the new family unit. The activist activities continued even stronger than before. Make was a central figure in the movement and as an African leader's wife, Angelou was right by his side.

It wasn't long before Angelou began to be aware of Make's demands for perfection which worried her as well as Abbey and Rosa. Everything had to be perfect. It was not the life Angelou had signed up for and something had to be done.

In chapter eleven, the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH) was founded in Abbey Lincoln's apartment. The group's mission was to support all civil rights causes, promote and publicize important events, and to use their talents in any way they could to help create a just society.

The women were devastated when they heard about the death of Patrice Lumumba, one of the Holy African Triumvirate. There was early word on the street about the African leader's assassination, but it would not be announced for few days. Angelou and Rosa walked along in devastated silence. The friends came upon a crowd surrounding speakers from the nation of Islam. One of the main speakers was Malcolm X. the women were enthralled by the message even though it was incredibly harsh. Still, it was exactly what they needed to hear after receiving the news about Lumumba.

It became clear that the CAWAH would have to do more to further the cause. The group decided to attend the General Session at the United Nations to make a show of mourning regarding Lumumba's death. It wasn't much, they knew, but it was a start. Angelou recalled something Make had said, about not separating oneself from the people. Predators wanted them to be separated. The women agreed. Rosa and Angelou went to a well known book shop in Harlem to spread the word. Before long, the women were speaking in front of a large crowd about the importance of the cause, how it affected every black American, and the things that could and should be done. Many agreed to attend the General Session.



The CAWAH only expected about fifty people to show up at the UN and were shocked when thousands arrived. The gathering turned into an ugly riot but at least the group had made a point. The next day Rosa and Angelou met Malcolm X at a local restaurant. Angelou talks about Malcolm's presence and what a powerful man he was when he spoke about the oppression of blacks. The women were disappointed, however when Malcolm admonished CAWAH and other blacks regarding the protest. The Muslim community does not protest and nothing would be gained by creating riots in the street. As much as the women hated to hear that, they would soon learn that Malcolm was right.

In chapter twelve, Vus returned to New York. Angelou had been asked to read Genet's play "The Blacks." It was written by a white Frenchman, which surprised many. Angelou read the play and laughed at it, not understanding the underlying context. When Angelou was asked to be in the play, she turned it down. Abbey and Max would write the music for the production, which was an incentive, but Angelou did not understand the appeal. Later, the true meaning of the play had become clear to Angelou. Vus changed his mind from not allowing Angelou to perform to insisting she must because the play was great and spoke volumes about the struggle.

In chapter thirteen, Angelou found make up on Vus' shirt along with the scent of another woman's perfume. The couple had never discussed infidelity. When Angelou questioned Vus about another woman, he denied it and said that as the wife of an African, she should never question him again.

Work on "The Blacks" continued. Since Abbey and Max were no longer doing the music for the show, Angelou and another cast member pitched in to write the tunes. Angelou conferred with Max first. Max was angry that Bernstein had reneged on the deal to pay for the music created by him and Abbey but would not hold it against Angelou if she chose to take over. When Angelou and her partner asked to be paid, Bernstein once again degraded the value of the music and refused to pay. Angelou left the show.

Angelou began to receive phone calls from people telling her that Vus was dead; he had been murdered. Angelou was terrified. It turned out to be a ploy by the South African police, trying to scare the freedom fighter's wife.

Chapter fourteen details an event at the Waldorf Astoria, during which Angelou made a huge scene. Angelou and Make were attending a gathering with the ambassador. Although Angelou was intelligent and spoke several languages, no one would talk to her. Eventually, Angelou ended up in the kitchen with the cook, talking and drinking. A fight ensued between Angelou and Make. Angelou completely embarrassed her proud African husband and ran away to spend the night with Rosa.

The biggest shock came when Angelou, Make and Guy were evicted from their apartment on the West Side. The notice said it was for non-payment of rent. That was Vus' responsibility. Angelou realized how powerless she was in the situation, with no job and no money. She was acting like the traditional African wife.



Guy was a support to Angelou and together they knew everything would be okay. For three weeks the family lived in a musty hotel. Vus went to Cairo and Angelou and Guy went to San Francisco to visit Angelou's mother.

While in San Francisco, Vivian and Angelou began to switch roles. Vivian needed support and Angelou was strong enough to give it. Some of Angelou's self reliance and confidence had begun to return.

In chapter fifteen, Angelou and Guy arrived in Cairo to find Vus waiting for them. Vus was ebullient at the sight of his wife and stepson. The first visit to their new home was a shock to Angelou, who could not understand why the landlord would have left so many expensive things like paintings and oriental rugs. Angelou could not believe it when she learned that the items had been purchased by Vus. Angelou's reaction was less than complimentary. For so long, the author had equated herself with the poor blacks and had a hard time accepting this new opulent lifestyle.

After a couple of months of entertaining and living the high life, repossessioners began to show up at the front door.

Angelou met David DuBois, a journalist with whom she connected and often spent time with in the corner at parties, talking about family and singing old spirituals.



Chapters 16-20

Chapters 16-20 Summary and Analysis

In chapter sixteen, the furniture was in danger of being repossessed, the rent was overdue, and Guy's school fees were in arrears. Angelou saw no choice but to get a job. Angelou did not want to relive the fiasco in New York.

Angelou called DuBois, who managed to arrange a meeting with the publisher of a new magazine. Angelou was hired immediately. The only obstacle was Vus, who would certainly be angry. Angelou was prepared. Vus was angry and also laughed at her for being so foolish as to think she could get a job. The relationship was strained.

The job proved to be challenging at first, particularly because Angelou was a woman. Soon, things began to smooth over.

In chapter seventeen, Angelou began to spend long hours at the Arab Observer, learning the nuances of the business as well as the ins and outs of publishing. At home, things were strained and unhappy. Angelou's money seemed to be going out faster than it was coming in, which made no sense since Vus' work had doubled. The married couple was no longer romantic. Angelou states that while she loved and respected Vus, she was no longer in love with him. Guy became even more withdrawn, choosing to spend time with Arab friends.

Chapter eighteen shows how Vus's infidelity had finally come to a point of no return for Angelou. It was clear that there were many other women, including Mendinah, a woman considered to be a home wrecker and a whore. Angelou confronted Vus, who tried to explain away his actions to no avail. Angelou decided to leave Vus.

Angelou was invited to a party. When she arrived, she saw Vus. It turned out that the party was a palaver, an intervention of sorts. The aim was to reconcile the couple and to get Angelou to agree to stay in Egypt. At the end of the night, Angelou agreed to give Vus six months to change.

In chapter nineteen, the six months dragged on endlessly for the couple. Eventually, Angelou decided to go to Ghana. Angelou could get a job and Guy could go to university.

Things were shaping up well when Guy was involved in a serious accident. The cause of the accident was unclear, but Angelou had been assured that Guy was not at fault; he had been hit by a truck. Guy's neck was broken.

Chapter twenty shows how Guy had to wear a full cast for four months. After the first month, he was allowed to go home, although there was no home to go to for him or Angelou. Angelou had planned to leave Ghana for Liberia, but Guy's accident had changed those plans. Vivian sent money, which was welcomed, and offered to fly to



Ghana to be with her daughter. Angelou managed to get a job. Although she was not in possession of a degree, she was able to work as an administrative assistant at the University of Ghana.

Angelou still needed a place to live. Once again, the author was able to reach out for help and by doing so, secured a house for six months.

The time finally came for Guy to go off to university, to be on his own for the first time. It was clear that Guy was ready to go. Angelou states that she waited for desolation to set in but it never came. The only thought that did come was that she would finally be able to eat an entire chicken breast by herself.



Characters

Dr. Maya Angelou

Dr. Maya Angelou (1928 -) was born in St. Louis, Missouri on April 4, 1928. Angelou was raised in St. Louis as well as Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou rose in her various chosen careers despite racial oppression. To date, Dr. Angelou is considered to be a "global renaissance woman" and one of the most influential women in modern history. Angelou is known worldwide as a poet, educator, filmmaker, actress, singer, historian, civil rights activist, and novelist.

At age fourteen, Angelou dropped out of a scholarship program for drama and dance at the Labor School in San Francisco. Angelou went on to finish high school and shortly thereafter gave birth to her son and inspiration, Guy. Like many single mothers, Angelou did what she had to do to survive, but the spirit of the arts would eventually propel her forward into the various areas for which she is now well known.

In the mid 1950s, Angelou toured Europe while appearing in a production of "Porgy and Bess." Angelou studied and danced with many greats in the dance world, including Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey. In 1957, she recorded Calypso Lady, her first album. In 1958, Angelou became a member of the prestigious Harlem Writers Guild.

Throughout Angelou's career, she has published over thirty bestsellers, which include poetry, memoirs, non-fiction and fiction. Angelou is also well known for her work as the author of Bill Clinton's inaugural poem, "On the Pulse of the Morning."

Dr. Angelou has received numerous awards for her various bodies of work. She currently holds the position of Reynolds Professor of American Studies at North Carolina's Wake Forest University.

Guy Johnson

Guy Johnson is Maya Angelou's son and perhaps her greatest inspiration. As a single mother, Angelou raised Guy the best way she could, often saying that she sought to raise "a black boy to live in a white society." Guy was raised in various locations around the world, including California, New York, Africa, and Egypt.

Like his mother, Guy is devoted to civil rights and to chronicling the forgotten and distorted truth in black history.

Johnson claims that he was unaware he was meant to be a writer until later in life. Johnson had set his sights on becoming a painter or musician. Regardless of his career path, Johnson says he is grateful that he was able to grow up in the presence of some of the most influential people in history, from Billie Holiday to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.



As the son of a notable poet, it is not surprising that Guy would also become a writer filled with energy and emotion. The mother and son often proclaim how much inspiration comes from the other. Guy lives in the San Francisco area with his wife and children.

Billie Holiday

Billie Holiday was a world famous blues singer. Often referred to as Lady Day, Holiday became just as famous for her paranoia, drug and alcohol use and violent temper.

Vusumzi Make

Vusumzi Make was a South African lawyer and civil rights activist. Make was also once married to Angelou.

Malcolm X

Malcolm X was a central figure in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Malcolm was also a good friend to Angelou.

John and Grace Killens

John and Grace Killens were the husband and wife who offered Angelou a place to stay in Brooklyn when she decided to return to New York.

Roscoe Lee Browne

Roscoe Lee Browne is a famous actor who appeared in many films and stage production, including the groundbreaking "The Blacks" by Genet.

James Earl Jones

James Earl Jones is a famous actor who appeared in many films and stage production, including the groundbreaking "The Blacks" by Genet.

Lou Gossett

Lou Gossett is a famous actor who appeared in many films and stage production, including the groundbreaking "The Blacks" by Genet.



Cicely Tyson

Cicely Tyson is a famous actress who appeared in many films and stage production, including the groundbreaking "The Blacks" by Genet.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a central figure in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. King was also a close friend to Angelou.

Abbey Lincoln

Abbey Lincoln is a close friend of Angelou's.



Objects/Places

Harlem Writers Guild

Harlem Writers Guild is a group of black writers who sought to create and present the best work possible. The group was filled with a wide variety of intellectual and creative people who strove to hone their craft. The Harlem Writers Guild became the preeminent organization for writers, particularly those that had the desire to raise their voices against oppression and racism. John Killens, recognizing Angelou's blossoming talent as a writer, urged the author to move back to New York and become a part of the group.

Angelou's first experience with the Harlem Writers Guild was not pleasant. The group met at the Killens house in Brooklyn. Angelou was intimidated by the number and scope of people in attendance. Additionally, presenting a play to be critiqued by strangers was nerve wracking, particularly since it was Angelou's second effort in the medium. Angelou went ahead with the reading and was devastated when one of the members gave a harsh and negative critique. It was then that Angelou learned the value of critique, honing her craft, and refusing to be daunted by the opinions of others.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Southern Christian Leadership Conference is an organization that is devoted to non-violent activities related to the eradication of racism and the promotion of civil rights. The organization was formed in 1957 by core members Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, et al.

The SCLC became almost synonymous with the work of King. During King's nine years as the organization's leader, there were many efforts to stop racism and violence in regards to black America.

In chapter 4 Angelou details her introduction to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Angelou and her friend Godfrey attended services at a Harlem church where representatives of the SCLC were scheduled to speak. Martin Luther King, Jr. was among the speakers. To Angelou and Godfrey, the meeting brought about an epiphany. The friends decided that they wanted to put on a play or a revue of sorts to raise money for the SCLC. Angelou was elected to approach the organization to ask for permission. Angelou details her nervousness in meeting with the representatives of the SCLC and relates her joy when the group accepted her offer.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is still an active entity, currently presided over by Bernice King.



Broadway

Broadway is the section of Manhattan that is devoted to the performing arts. Angelou often played parts on Broadway throughout her career as a dancer, singer, and actress.

New York City

New York City is the largest live performing arts city in the US. Angelou returned to New York at the urging of her friend John Killens, who wanted Angelou to join the Harlem Writers Guild. Angelou also became involved with various people and activities in Harlem.

California

Angelou was born and raised in California, in addition to times spent in Arkansas. Over the years, Angelou would leave California but would eventually return. The author lived in Los Angeles, Sausalito, and San Francisco among other places.

Apollo Theater

Apollo Theater is one of the foremost theaters in the world, particularly regarding black performers. Angelou was asked to perform at the Apollo, a great honor, shortly after returning to New York.

Stamps, Arkansas

Stamps, Arkansas was the town in which Angelou's grandmother lived. Angelou and her brother often spent summers there.

Ghana

Ghana was the location in which Angelou met Malcolm X.

Paris

Paris was one of the locations Angelou visited on tour and eventually lived for a time.

San Francisco

San Francisco was the city in which Angelou spent a great deal of time in her youth.

Atlanta

Atlanta was the home to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement.



Themes

The Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement is one of the main themes of "The Heart of a Woman" by Maya Angelou. Angelou was involved in civil rights before the movement even had a name. The book mentions rights and racism from page one; how it affected the author, her family and friends, and the entire black community. The first major interaction between Angelou and the civil rights movement took place when Angelou went to a Harlem church to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. From that moment onward, Angelou devoted even more of herself to trying to right the wrongs thrust upon blacks at the hands of racists and those who supported ethnic oppression.

Angelou went to work for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The first activity for Angelou was to participate in a revue to raise money for the organization. The revue, titled "Cabaret for Freedom," was a smash hit and propelled the author and her counterparts forward in the movement.

Angelou would eventually come to befriend Malcolm X when she lived overseas. The two became friends. Later, when Malcolm needed help in fighting for civil rights, Angelou returned to the United States to be by his side.

There were also many examples of how Angelou fought for equal rights in her everyday life. They include the author's battles for equality in housing, in the job market, and in the education of her son, Guy.

Dignity

From the beginning of the book, Angelou displays a great deal of personal dignity. The influence of the author's mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, is obvious in Angelou's daily activities. Both women believe that one should never back down, particularly when someone expects or even demands it.

Angelou kept her dignity when confronted by people that did not agree with her goals or desires, whether or not that person was prejudice. Angelou refused to accept things as they were just because they were a part of typical everyday life. Change and dignity often go hand in hand.

One of the most interesting and amusing anecdotes in the book deals with Angelou and Johnson paying a visit to the Desert Hotel in Fresno, California. Johnson, showy in diamonds and fur, was determined to stay at the hotel where blacks were being accepted as guests. Johnson was never deterred by others and was determined to be treated like any white guest - with respect and dignity. The woman acted as if she had every right to be there and always managed to hold her head up high, even when the

action terrified her daughter. Johnson also demanded other types of respect and usually got it.

Mother/Child Relationships

A great deal of the book details the relationship between Angelou and her son, Guy. Angelou was a single mother from the age of seventeen. Unlike many young single mothers, Angelou did not allow her status or responsibilities to keep her from living life to the fullest. Angelou simply took Guy along for the ride.

Angelou and Guy lived all over the world while he was growing up. Places included Los Angeles, New York, Egypt, Ghana, France, and Africa. Wherever Angelou went, Guy went.

The author gives insight into struggles with raising a child alone. There were difficult times when Guy was coming up in two of the largest cities in the US when he was confronted by challenges that could have been potentially lethal. Still, Guy showed his strength and intelligence in many ways, leaving Angelou to be a proud mother.

Oftentimes, Angelou pretended to give Guy all the power to protect himself. The one exception lies in an episode in which Guy was confronted by a vicious gang member.

While Angelou was in Chicago, Guy had a run-in with a gang known as the Savages. A spurned girl lied to her gang member boyfriend about being hit by Guy, which resulted in threats. The gang was notorious in the area and even the police were afraid of them. As one would expect, Guy tried to assert himself as being a man who could handle himself.

Angelou did not tell Guy how she stepped in to the situation. Angelou visited the girl's family. The girl's grandmother worked for Angelou sometimes. Angelou met with the girl and the gang member who had threatened Guy. Angelou made it very clear that should Guy ever return home with a black eye or torn shirt, Angelou would return to the house and kill the girl's grandmother, mother, and the newest baby in the family. Then Angelou promised to go to the gang member's house and kill anything that moved. The gang member got the point. Later, Guy told his mother how he handled the situation with the gang members. It turns out that the son bluffed as well as his mother.

Style

Perspective

The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou is a work of non-fiction and therefore relies on the perspective of the author to relay pertinent information relative to the woman's journey. Although this book is a memoir, Angelou is able to present many facts objectively.

Dr. Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri on April 4, 1928. Angelou was raised in St. Louis as well as Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou rose in her various chosen careers despite racial oppression. To date, Dr. Angelou is considered to be a "global renaissance woman" and one of the most influential women in modern history. Angelou is known worldwide as a poet, educator, filmmaker, actress, singer, historian, civil rights activist, and novelist.

Angelou toured around the world, studied and danced with many greats of the world, including Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey. In 1957, she recorded Calypso Lady, her first album. In 1958, Angelou became a member of the prestigious Harlem Writers Guild.

Throughout Angelou's career, she has published over thirty bestsellers, which include poetry, memoirs, non-fiction and fiction. Angelou is also well known for her work as the author of Bill Clinton's inaugural poem, "On the Pulse of the Morning."

Dr. Angelou has received numerous awards for her various bodies of work. She currently holds the position of Reynolds Professor of American Studies at North Carolina's Wake Forest University.

Tone

The Heart of a Woman by Maya Angelou has a unique tone for a memoir. Angelou is well known for being outspoken, straightforward and unapologetic. This book reflects that same tone without being overpowering or biased to the point of being viewed as the work of a zealot.

Since this is a work of non-fiction and therefore relies on the perspective of the author, Angelou is able to present many facts objectively. The overall tone is one of a woman who is passionate about her career, her devotion to her son, Guy, to her own spiritual growth and the eradication of oppression and racism as it affects the black community.

In the beginning of the book, Angelou often comes off as being somewhat lost. As the book progresses, the reader can see how Angelou progresses as well and begins to develop the voice which has served to inspire several generations.



Part of the tone and effectiveness of Angelou's work undoubtedly comes from years of education, independent study, hard work and critique. In the early years of Angelou's membership in the Harlem Writers Guild, the author learned to work and rework her writing until there could be no better tone, no better way to express specific feelings and thoughts.

Structure

"The Heart of a Woman" by Maya Angelou is a work of non-fiction. It is comprised of 272 pages broken down into twenty chapters. The shortest chapter is comprised of seven pages; the longest chapter is comprised of twenty-seven pages; the average number of pages per chapter is thirteen.

The prologue is rather lengthy at eighteen pages. The prologue serves to introduce the reader to the basic concept of the story through Angelou's early experiences in California. Angelou was a young single mother who worked hard to raise her son with dignity, pride and a strong moral base. The influence of Angelou and her own mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, is seen quite clearly throughout the book.

The balance of the chapters run in a basic chronological order with some use of flashback to previous years such as Guy's younger years as well as Angelou's own childhood. This serves to create a background and fill in details that might otherwise be missed or overlooked.

Angelou chronicles the various aspects of her life during this period. Angelou is woman, singer, dancer, actress, activist, mother, and friend. Angelou's style gives the reader an insight into her life and that of the 1950s and 1960s so that even those who did not live in that era can understand and appreciate its importance.



Quotes

"Strangely, the houseboat offered me respite from racial tensions, and gave my son an opportunity to be around whites, who did not think of him as too exotic to need correction, nor so common as to be ignored." Prologue, p. 4

"I didn't become nervous until he left. Then the reality of Lady Day coming to my house slammed into me and started my body to quaking. It was pretty well known that she used heavy drugs, and I hardly smoked grass anymore. How could I tell her she couldn't shoot up or sniff up in my house?" Prologue, p. 6

"Nothing frightened my mother except thunder and lightning. I couldn't tell her that at 31 years old the whites in the lobby had scared me silly." Chap. 1 p. 25

"She was one of the group of black women who had raised their children, worked hard, fought for her principles and still retained some humor. She often entranced the family with graphic stories set in a sullen, racist South. The tales changed, the plot varied; her villains were always white, and her heroes upstanding, courageous, clever blacks." Chap. 2 p. 31

"You were a dancer. Dancers don't see anything except other dancers. They don't see; they exist to be seen. This time you should look at New York with a writer's eyes, ears and nose. Then you'll really see New York." Chap. 2 p. 33

"We set each other afire with anger and complimented ourselves on our talent." Chap. 5, p. 74

"Redemptive suffering had always been the part of Martin's argument which I found difficult to accept. I had seen distress fester souls and bend people's bodies out of shape, but I had yet to see anyone redeemed from pain, by pain." Chap. 6, p. 93

"My first reaction was to wish I could be the white cloth in his dark hand touching his forehead, digging softly in the corners of his lips." Chap. 8, p. 108

"Vus saw me as the flesh of his youthful dream." Chap. 9, p. 123

"I said nothing. I knew no words which would match the emptiness of the moment."
(Chapter 11, page144)

"Blacks understood and enjoyed the play, but each night in the theater whites outnumbered my people four to one, and that fact was befuddling." Chap. 12, p. 183

"I was his wife, the wife of an African leader." Chap. 14, p. 203

"I nodded, wondering if our place of birth would have as negative an impact in Ghana as our color had in our homeland." Chap. 20, p. 264

Topics for Discussion

How would you have handled Guy's negative experience with Billie Holiday?

How do you think Maya felt when she was told she was not a good singer? Do you think she was dissuaded from her passion for music or more determined to prove the critics were wrong?

Describe the relationship between Angelou and the Killen family: John, Grace and mom Willie.

How might Angelou's life have changed if she had stayed in California rather than moving to New York?

Discuss how Angelou handled the incident with Jerry the gang banger. Was the author's method effective? Would you have done the same thing? If not, what action might you have taken?

Examine Angelou's relationship with her son, Guy. Do you think the author did a good job raising Guy on her own? Explain. Discuss the pros and cons of raising a child while pursuing a career in the artistic field.

Discuss Angelou's personal and working relationships with Martin Luther King, Jr. How did those relationships change Angelou's life? How did the author's involvement affect the civil rights movement?

Compare and contrast Angelou's work in the US compared to the work in Ghana.