

LESSON 17

from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (autobiography)
by Maya Angelou

For nearly a year [after returning to Stamps, Arkansas], I sopped around the house, the Store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and **inedible**. Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first life line.

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

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

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

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

Momma had a strange relationship with her. Most often when she passed on the road in front of the Store, she spoke to Momma in that soft yet carrying voice, "Good day, Mrs. Henderson." Momma responded with "How you, Sister Flowers?"

Mrs. Flowers didn't belong to our church, nor was she Momma's familiar. Why on earth did she insist on calling her Sister Flowers? Shame made me want to hide my face. Mrs. Flowers deserved better than to be called Sister. Then, Momma left out the verb. Why not ask, "How are you, Mrs. Flowers?" With the **unbalanced** passion of the young, I hated her for showing her ignorance to Mrs. Flowers. It didn't occur to me for many years that they were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education.

Although I was upset, neither of the women was in the least shaken by what I thought an **unceremonious** greeting. Mrs. Flowers would continue her easy **gait** up the hill to her little bungalow, and Momma kept on shelling peas or doing whatever had brought her to the front porch.

Exercise 1: Context Clues

Read the passage above, paying special attention to the words in dark type. These are the Master Words you will study in this lesson. As you read, look for context clues in the sentences and paragraphs around each Master Word. Circle any words and phrases that give clues to the meaning of the Master Words.

Master Words

Place a check by words you feel you know; underline words you don't know.

aristocrat

familiarity

inclusive

taut

unceremonious

effortless

gait

inedible

unbalanced

wiry

Exercise 2: Using Context Clues

Fill in the form for each of the Master Words listed below with context clues (if any), your definition, and the dictionary definition. If you have difficulty writing a definition, try using the word in a sentence instead.

1. **aristocrat** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

2. **effortless** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

3. **familiarity** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

4. **gait** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

5. **inclusive** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

6. **inedible** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

7. **taut** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

8. **unbalanced** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

9. **unceremonious** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

10. **wiry** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____

Your Definition: _____

Dictionary Definition: _____

• • Exercise 3: Using Synonyms

Each italic word or phrase in the sentences below are synonyms of one of the Master Words in the list. On the line following the sentence, write the Master Word that best replaces the synonym.

aristocrat

effortless

taut

unceremonious

wiry

1. The dancer's leaps seemed *easy* but in fact were a lot of work. _____
2. Concentrating hard, the runner thinned her lips in a *tense* expression. _____
3. The mayor is so highly regarded that he is like a *nobleman* in our town. _____
4. "Whazzup, Kate?" he asked in an *informal* greeting. _____
5. The acrobat can twist his *slender* body into the most amazing positions. _____

• • Exercise 4: Sentence Completion

From the Master Words, choose the appropriate word for the blank in each of the following sentences. Write the word in the space provided at the right.

1. The gray, greasy clumps of potatoes looked completely ...?... _____
2. My dog greets me with a warm ...?... that makes me feel loved. _____
3. Bones is (a, an) ...?... pup, skinny, active, and always hungry. _____
4. Rich and famous, she is treated like (a, an) ...?... wherever she goes. _____
5. Your view is wildly ...?...; you need to put things in proportion. _____
6. He always walks with a brisk ...?... and a characteristic grin. _____
7. Pulling her hair into a tight bun gives her face (a, an) ...?... expression. _____
8. Matt's moves are extremely difficult, but he makes them seem ...?... _____
9. She opened her arms and ...?... invited everyone into her embrace. _____
10. In spite of the formal setting, his introduction was quite ...?..., almost rude. _____

Exercise 5: Related Words and Meanings

Words that are related in form are usually related in meaning, so knowing the meaning of one form can help you figure out the meaning of another. For example, the word *edible* has the same form as the Master Word **inedible** except that the prefix *in-*, meaning "not," has been dropped. So if you know that **inedible** means "not fit to be eaten," you can figure out that *edible* means "fit to be eaten."

The chart below lists forms of the Master Words that have added or dropped prefixes or suffixes. Use your knowledge of the Master Words to help you figure out their meanings. Write each meaning in the space provided. Then check your answers in a dictionary.

Related Word	Part of Speech	Meaning
1. balanced	adjective	
2. aristocratic	adjective	
3. wiriness	noun	
4. effort	noun	
5. ceremoniously	adverb	

Exercise 6: Figurative Language

In the passage from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou sometimes uses figurative language to describe her younger self and Mrs. Flowers. For example, when she says that Mrs. Flowers "had a private breeze which swirled around," Angelou does not literally mean that Mrs. Flowers possessed her own breeze. She means that Mrs. Flowers was cool and in control of things.

The chart below lists two examples of figurative language from the first paragraph of the passage. In the space provided, explain the figurative meaning. An example has been done for you.

Figurative Statement	Meaning
Mrs. Flowers "had a private breeze which swirled around. . ."	Mrs. Flowers was cool and in control of things.
like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible	
threw me my first life line	

Write About It: Figurative Language

Write a **brief character sketch** of a person you admire, perhaps someone who helped change your life. Use at least two examples of figurative language that each contain one of the Master Words.