Unit 2

Title: Mrs. Flowers by Maya Angelou[[1]](#footnote-1)

Suggested Time: 5 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4; W.8.1, W.8.2, W.8.4, W.8.9; SL.8.1; L.8.1, L.8.2

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

The beauty and power of spoken and written language has the ability to humanize us and transform lives.

Synopsis

In *Mrs. Flowers*, an excerpt from the autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author, Maya Angelou, describes a significant experience with a respected person in her community, Mrs. Flowers, which changes her life. Through their interactions, Maya Angelou learns the power of language (spoken and written) and relationships to transform lives.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Students read the entire selection independently.
2. Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along or students take turns reading aloud to each other. Depending on the text length and student need, the teacher may choose to read the full text or a passage aloud. For a particularly complex text, the teacher may choose to reverse the order of steps 1 and 2.
3. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| A dictionary definition of sop is:  **1.** To dip, soak, or drench in a liquid; saturate.  **2.** To take up by absorption: *sop up water with a paper towel*  Marguerite states, “I sopped around the house, the Store, the school, and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible.” How does the use of the word “sopped” impact the meaning of this sentence and what does it help the reader infer about Marguerite? | It impacts the meaning by describing Marguerite’s mental and physical state of being. She is weighted down by something and this impacts every aspect of her daily life. She is merely existing and not living.  She is saturated or filled to capacity to the point where she is listless and lifeless until Mrs. Flowers threw Marguerite her first lifeline. |
| How does the author describe Mrs. Flowers? What does her description tell you about Marguerite’s feelings towards her? | Mrs. Flowers is someone of high standing in the community and she has taken the time to pay attention to Marguerite. She makes Marguerite feel special and worthy. In the text, it stated, “When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her.” Marguerite is thankful and appreciative of the attention and the lessons learned. |
| What central idea is the author conveying in the portion of the text? What words serve as clues to the reader? | The author includes the following words related to communication: talk, language, communicating, read, words, paper, voice, and meaning.  The central idea of this portion of the text is that it takes the spoken word to truly convey what words mean. Spoken language is what makes us human and different from other animals. |
| Mrs. Flowers began Marguerite’s “Lessons in Living”. What lessons did these include and what is Angelou’s message here? | Intellect is not just about book learning. It can take many forms. Common sense has just as much value as book learning. Mrs. Flowers “said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy.” “I must always listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.” |
| Marguerite states of Mrs. Flowers, “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.” What does Mrs. Flowers reveal about what a human being can be? How does she convey this? | She reveals that a Black person can be a beacon to the Black community. Black people could be aristocratic despite oppressive conditions. She stated in the text, “She was our side’s answer to the richest white woman in town.”  She conveys this through her attire (white gloves and voile dress); her mannerisms (her smile, “grace of control”);her language (“I’d prefer Marguerite, though.” “My name was beautiful when she said it.”). |
| What effect does Mrs. Flowers’ reading aloud have on Marguerite? | For the first time Marguerite understands the beauty and power of the spoken word. (“Her voice slid and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing.”) She saw the difference that verbalizing the words in different ways can impact the meaning and how the words are received. |
| Mrs. Flowers is described as the “aristocrat of Black Stamps”. Throughout the rest of the text selection, how does the author convey the characteristics of an aristocrat in the description of Mrs. Flowers? | The author characterizes Mrs. Flowers as an aristocrat by the way she describes her. She is described as someone who is in control of situations and circumstances. The author states that Mrs. Flowers “had the grace of control” to appear unaffected by extreme weather to the point where the weather seems to respond and be controlled by her instead. “She appears warm in the coldest weather and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her.”  The author describes Mrs. Flower’s attire in contrast to that of farmers and notes that Mrs. Flowers is not pretentious, but comfortable in this attire. The author states “her printed voile dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer.”  The author also portrays Mrs. Flowers as someone who others respected and kept a distance from or maybe feared. She stated, “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.” |
| Throughout the text, Marguerite describes Mrs. Flowers and she states, “Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first lifeline.” Why is this phrase significant in the story? Why does she describe her in this way? Support your answer with evidence from the text. | This line is significant because it illustrates the degree of the impact Mrs. Flowers had on her life. It was not a brief encounter, but one that had an impression on her that lasted a lifetime. Additionally, the word lifeline has the connotation that she was a savior/role model for Marguerite. Mrs. Flowers takes the time to notice Marguerite’s existence and to form a relationship with her. Marguerite says, “I was liked, and what a difference it made.” “I was respected…for just being Marguerite Johnson.” Another quote that shows the significance of their relationship is “All I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me*.” She takes Marguerite to her home even though she is viewed as someone who maintains her distance from the rest of the community: “…no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers…She didn’t encourage familiarity.” Mrs. Flowers reveals to Marguerite the power of language in books and in the spoken word: “Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.” Mrs. Flowers opens Marguerite’s mind to life’s possibilities that Marguerite had not considered. |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** | sopped  taut  provisions  infuse  boggled  leered  bitter  collective  enchantment | grace(ful)  familiarity  common  gobble  intolerant  illiteracy  couched  cascading  absolute  logic  mother wit  ignorance  aura |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | aristocrat | benign  inclusively  valid  sufficient  essence |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt

*After reading* Mrs. Flowers*, an excerpt from I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou, write a multi-paragraph essay stating the central ideas the author is seeking to convey in this selection. Use evidence from the text to support, including direct quotes and page numbers.*

* Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should remind students to use any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions.

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| ***Evidence***  ***Quote or paraphrase*** | ***Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument*** |
| “sopped around the house, the Store, the school, and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible” | This quote sets the stage for how worthless Marguerite felt. She was listless, lifeless, and just merely existing. |
| “Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.” That was a totally new idea to me and I would need time to think about it.    “Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.” | The author uses Mrs. Flowers’ words to teach us about the power of written and spoken language. The author is describing how critical spoken language is to making us human and that speaking words aloud has the power to convey and change meaning. |
| When she chose to smile on me I always wanted to thank her…The action was so graceful and inclusively benign pg. \_\_\_ and “Thank you Mrs. Henderson, I’d prefer Marguerite though. My name was beautiful when she said it.  I was liked and what a difference it made. I was respected, not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson. | The author is seeking to convey the significance of the encounter with Mrs. Flowers for Marguerite. Ms. Flowers is someone who Marguerite greatly respected, even revered. When Mrs. Flowers took time to pay attention to Marguerite, to single her out, this made Marguerite feel special, noticed, and important. |
| She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance, but understanding of illiteracy…She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people call mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations | Mrs. Flowers teaches Marguerite and the reader to value different types of knowledge, not just book knowledge or school knowledge. She is encouraged to see the importance of those who may not be school educated, but educated by life experience. |
| *It was the best of times it was the worst of times*… Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew form listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn’t really heard, heard to understand, a single word. | As Mrs. Flowers began to read aloud, Marguerite finally understood how the spoken word has beauty and power. Marguerite realizes that it takes more than just reading words to infuse meaning; it takes the human voice. Marguerite finally heard the emotions behind the words, the mood and intonation. |
| I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the enchantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes, but its aura remains. | Marguerite, in reflecting on her experience with Mrs. Flowers, finds the reason for the impact of the encounter somewhat inexplicable, but notes that the feelings or “aura” of the experience remains for her years after the encounter. This demonstrates how meaningful the experience of getting to know Mrs. Flowers and spending time with her was for Marguerite. |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

In the excerpt *Mrs. Flowers*, Marguerite Johnson finds her “lifeline” in Mrs. Flowers, the aristocrat of Stamps, Arkansas. Through a lifelong friendship, Mrs. Flowers turns a socially withdrawn Marguerite into a young lady who understands the power of language, the nuances of education, and the beauty of literature.

Before Marguerite “got to know” Mrs. Flowers, Marguerite had shut down and had alienated herself from the world. She would not speak to anyone. Instead, she “sopped around the house, the Store, the school, and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible” implying she was emotionally saturated. She was merely existing, listless and lifeless until Mrs. Flowers threw Marguerite her first lifeline.

Mrs. Flowers inspired Marguerite and made her feel worthy again. “I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.” Having the respect and attention of Mrs. Flowers was incredible for Marguerite. She took the time to notice Marguerite’s existence and chose to pursue a relationship with her, the beginning of Marguerite’s “lessons in living”. Mrs. Flowers invited Marguerite to her home and revealed the power and beauty of language in books.

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Marguerite had read that passage from a *Tale of Two Cities* before, but the words never had an impact on her. But she soon realized that “words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.” As Mrs. Flowers “opened the first page…I heard poetry for the first time in my life.” Marguerite finally heard the emotions behind the words, the mood and intonation. Marguerite now understood the power of spoken language. Therefore, Mrs. Flowers was Marguerite’s savior in a sense.

Mrs. Flowers’ “lessons on living” did not stop at the study of literature. Marguerite learned that one’s education comes in different forms: educated in school and educated by life. Book learning is important but there are people who have never gone to school and are just as intelligent as college professors. Mrs. Flowers encouraged Marguerite “to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was crouched the collective wisdom of generations.” Common sense is as important as a formal education.

Through the relationship between Mrs. Flowers and Marguerite, Marguerite’s life was transformed. “When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her.” Marguerite was now able to understand the emotional significance that the spoken word gave to language and to see the beauty in her world. Mrs. Flowers “has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be.” Without Mrs. Flowers, the world would have never been introduced to Maya Angelou. All it takes is that one person to show life through a new lens.

Additional Tasks

* *Do you think Mrs. Flowers is an appropriate title for this excerpt? Write a one-paragraph essay explaining why or why not citing specific evidence from the text to support your ideas.*
  + Sample Answer: Mrs. Flowers is the subject of the text selection and the entire excerpt revolves around her. She is featured as a major person and is described in detail. The author provides a great deal of information about Mrs. Flowers’ impact on her thinking about books, language, and people, etc. She was important to the author.

Note to Teacher

Additional words that may need clarification:

outhouse, tea towel, ice box

wormwood, mead

Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**“Mrs. Flowers”**

1. A dictionary definition of sop is: To dip, soak, or drench in a liquid; saturate; To take up by absorption: *sop up water with a paper towel;* Marguerite states, “I sopped around the house, the Store, the school, and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible.” How does the use of the word “sopped” impact the meaning of this sentence and what does it help the reader infer about Marguerite?
2. How does the author describe Mrs. Flowers? What does her description tell you about Marguerite’s feelings towards her?
3. What central idea is the author conveying in the portion of the text? What words serve as clues to the reader?
4. Mrs. Flowers began Marguerite’s “Lessons in Living”. What lessons did these include and what is Angelou’s message here?
5. Marguerite states of Mrs. Flowers, “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.” What does Mrs. Flowers reveal about what a human being can be? How does she convey this?
6. What effect does Mrs. Flowers’ reading aloud have on Marguerite?
7. Mrs. Flowers is described as the “aristocrat of Black Stamps”. Throughout the rest of the text selection, how does the author convey the characteristics of an aristocrat in the description of Mrs. Flowers?
8. Throughout the text, Marguerite describes Mrs. Flowers and she states, “Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first lifeline.” Why is this phrase significant in the story? Why does she describe her in this way? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

1. *This story is a “duplicate.” (It is found in other anthologies, as well.) This particular revision was completed by a teacher who uses a different anthology than you, so the page numbers have been removed. This may require you to make some adjustments/add page numbers to some of the questions.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)