

Before You Read

MRS. FLOWERS

Make the Connection

A Matter of Opinion

Rate each of the statements that follow with a number from 0 to 4.

disagree 0 1 2 3 4 agree

1. Young people need older role models.
2. Friends should be the same age.
3. Adults can't understand how young people feel.
4. Everyone deserves to feel special.

Record your ratings on a piece of paper. Then, with your class, tally all the responses to each statement on the board. Don't discuss your responses yet; wait until you've done the Quickwrite.

Quickwrite

Respond to one of the four statements.

You could explain your position or describe a related experience.



Elements of Literature

Imagery

In "Mrs. Flowers," Angelou describes a summer afternoon as "sweet-milk fresh in my memory" (page 20). She has created an **image**—a description that appeals to one or more of our senses: sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch.

As you read, notice how Angelou uses other images to bring an important experience to life.

Imagery is writing that uses descriptive language to appeal to the senses.

For more on Imagery, see the Handbook of Literary Terms.

Reading Skills and Strategies



Determining the Main Idea: What's It All About?

The **main idea** is the message, opinion, or insight that is the focus or key concept in a piece of writing. It's the most important idea that the writer wants you to remember. This important idea is developed by **supporting details**.

To find the main idea, you can do the following:

- Look for direct statements made by the writer.
- Look closely at the details that the writer gives. (*Who, what, when, where, and why* questions will help you identify the important details.)
- Think about what the details add up to.
- Try to put the main idea into your own words.

Background

Literature and Real Life

"Mrs. Flowers" is from Maya Angelou's autobiography. When Angelou (born Marguerite Johnson) was a little girl, her parents separated. She and her brother, Bailey, were sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother (called Momma), who owned a general store. A year before meeting Mrs. Flowers, Marguerite was the victim of a violent act. She reacted by retreating behind a wall of silence.



go.hrw.com

LEO 8-1



I was liked, and what a difference it made.

from **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

Maya Angelou

For nearly a year, 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 lifeline.

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 voile¹ 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

1. **voile** (voil): thin, sheer fabric.

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.

One summer afternoon, sweet-milk fresh in my memory, she stopped at the Store to buy provisions. Another Negro woman of her health and age would have been expected to carry the paper sacks home in one hand, but Momma said, "Sister Flowers, I'll send Bailey up to your house with these things."

She smiled that slow dragging smile, "Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I'd prefer Marguerite, though." My name was beautiful when she said it. "I've been meaning to talk to her, anyway." They gave each other age-group looks.

There was a little path beside the rocky road, and Mrs. Flowers walked in front swinging her arms and picking her way over the stones.

She said, without turning her head, to me, "I hear you're doing very good schoolwork, Marguerite, but that it's all written. The teachers report that they have trouble getting you to talk in class." We passed the triangular farm on our left and the path widened to allow us to walk together. I hung back in the separate unasked and unanswerable questions.

"Come and walk along with me, Marguerite." I couldn't have refused even if I wanted to. She pronounced my name so nicely. Or more correctly, she spoke each word with such clarity that I was certain a foreigner who didn't understand English could have understood her.

WORDS TO OWN

taut (tôt) *adj.*: tightly stretched.

benign (bi·nîn') *adj.*: kind.

"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.

"Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning."

I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic.

She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read them, I must read them aloud. She suggested that I try to make a sentence sound in as many different ways as possible.

"I'll accept no excuse if you return a book to me that has been badly handled." My imagination boggled at the punishment I would deserve if in fact I did abuse a book of Mrs. Flowers's. Death would be too kind and brief.

The odors in the house surprised me. Somehow I had never connected Mrs. Flowers with food or eating or any other common experience of common people. There must have been an outhouse, too, but my mind never recorded it.

The sweet scent of vanilla had met us as she opened the door.

"I made tea cookies this morning. You see, I had planned to invite you for cookies and lemonade so we could have this little chat. The lemonade is in the icebox."

It followed that Mrs. Flowers would have ice on an ordinary day, when most families in our town bought ice late on Saturdays only a few times during the summer to be used in the wooden ice cream freezers.

She took the bags from me and disappeared through the kitchen door. I looked around the room that I had never in my wildest fantasies



Little Girl in Green (1944) by William H. Johnson. Oil on paperboard (31⁷/₈" × 22⁵/₈").

imagined I would see. Browened photographs leered or threatened from the walls and the white, freshly done curtains pushed against themselves and against the wind. I wanted to gobble up the room entire and take it to Bailey, who would help me analyze and enjoy it.

"Have a seat, Marguerite. Over there by the table." She carried a platter covered with a tea towel. Although she warned that she hadn't tried her hand at baking sweets for some time, I was certain that like everything else about her the cookies would be perfect.

They were flat round wafers, slightly browened on the edges and butter-yellow in the center. With the cold lemonade they were suffi-

WORDS TO OWN

infuse (in·fyōōz') v.: fill.

cient for childhood's lifelong diet. Remembering my manners, I took nice little ladylike bites off the edges. She said she had made them expressly for me and that she had a few in the kitchen that I could take home to my brother. So I jammed one whole cake in my mouth and the rough crumbs scratched the insides of my jaws, and if I hadn't had to swallow, it would have been a dream come true.

As I ate she began the first of what we later called "my lessons in living." She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.

When I finished the cookies she brushed off the table and brought a thick, small book from the bookcase. I had read *A Tale of Two Cities* and found it up to my standards as a romantic novel. She opened the first page and I heard poetry for the first time in my life.

"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 that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew from 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.

"How do you like that?"

It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor was still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak.

I said, "Yes, ma'am." It was the least I could do, but it was the most also.

"There's one more thing. Take this book of

poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite."

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 aura² remains. To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood³ for a cup of mead with Beowulf⁴ or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist. When I said aloud, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done . . ." ⁵ tears of love filled my eyes at my selflessness.

On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the Store.

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.

Childhood's logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I didn't question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention, nor did it occur to me that Momma might have asked her to give me a little talking-to. All I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me* from her favorite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me.

2. **aura**: feeling or mood that seems to surround something like a glow.

3. **wormwood**: bitter-tasting plant. Angelou is referring to the harshness of life for African Americans in the South at that time.

4. **Beowulf** (bā'ə·woolf'): hero of an Old English epic. During the period portrayed in the epic, people drank **mead**, a drink made with honey.

5. **"It is . . . ever done"**: another quotation from Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. One of the characters says these words as he goes to die in place of another man.

WORDS TO OWN

intolerant (in·tāl'ər·ənt) *adj.*: unwilling to put up with something.

illiteracy (il·lit'ər·ə·sē) *n.*: inability to read or write.

MAKING MEANINGS

First Thoughts



1. Go back to your Quickwrite. Did reading “Mrs. Flowers” change your opinion or strengthen it? Or: Did the story remind you of the experience you described?

Shaping Interpretations

2. Think about the stone wall in “A Time to Talk” (page 17). How did Marguerite build a wall around herself? How did Mrs. Flowers help her knock it down?
3. Go back to the text and find the only two words spoken by Marguerite. What do you think Angelou means when she writes “It was the least I could do, but it was the most also” (page 23)?
4. At the beginning of “Mrs. Flowers,” Maya Angelou says that she “sopped around” until Mrs. Flowers threw her a “lifeline.” What **main idea** does Angelou suggest here? What **supporting details** throughout the memoir develop this main idea?
5. In your opinion, would Maya Angelou have become a famous writer if Mrs. Flowers hadn’t singled her out for attention when she was young? Support your answer with evidence from the text.



Connecting with the Text

6. Who is “the measure of what a human being can be” for you? Why? (It doesn’t have to be someone you know personally.)
7. What do you think Mrs. Flowers means when she tells Marguerite that she “must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy” (page 23)? Is that good advice for today? Draw on your own experience to support your answer.

Extending the Text

8. Like Marguerite and the young man in California (see Meet the Writer), many young people today are at risk. How could a friendship with an older person like Mrs. Flowers help someone who is in trouble?

Reading Check

Draw a line down the middle of a blank page in your notebook. On the left, copy one or two of your favorite descriptive sentences from “Mrs. Flowers,” and underline the key words that create **images** in your mind. On the right, identify the sense or senses the words appeal to: sight, smell, taste, hearing, or touch.

Double-Entry Journal

“The sweet scent
of vanilla had met
us as she opened
the door.” (page
22)

smell