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Lesson 9

The Fight

from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

- *Autobiography*

Heads Up You are about to read an excerpt from an autobiography titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. As you read this passage, begin thinking about the *symbolism* that is present. In literature, a *symbol* is a visible object or action that suggests some additional meaning beyond the object or action itself. It stands for something more than its physical being. There are times the author makes the symbolism very obvious, but at other times it is more subtle. In our country, we have symbols that we may not realize are symbols. The flag, for example, is a symbol of freedom. What other symbols can you think of? List or draw them on the next page.

continued



Heads Up *continued*

Symbols



Answering the Think-Along Questions will help you be an active reader and focus on the *symbolism* in the story. Also, as you read, circle or highlight any words you don't know.

The Fight

from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

by Maya Angelou

1 The last inch of space was filled, yet people continued to wedge themselves along the walls of the Store. Uncle Willie had turned the radio up to its last notch so that youngsters on the porch wouldn't miss a word. Women sat on kitchen chairs, dining-room chairs, stools and upturned wooden boxes. Small children and babies perched on every lap available and men leaned on the shelves or on each other.

Predict why the people are in the Store.

2 The **apprehensive** mood was shot through with shafts of gaiety, as a black sky is streaked with lightning.

3 "I ain't worried 'bout this fight. Joe's gonna whip that cracker like it's open season."

4 "He gone whip him till that white boy call him Momma."

5 At last the talking was finished and the string-along songs about razor blades were over and the fight began.

Why might the people have come to the Store to listen to the fight?

6 "A quick jab to the head." In the Store the crowd grunted. "A left to the head and a right and another left." One of the listeners cackled like a hen and was quieted.

7 "They're in a clench, Louis is trying to fight his way out."

8 Some bitter comedian on the porch said, "That white man don't mind hugging that niggah now, I betcha."

9 "The referee is moving in to break them up, but Louis finally pushed the contender away and it's an uppercut to the chin. The contender is hanging on, now he's backing away. Louis catches him with a short left to the jaw."

10 A tide of murmuring assent poured out the doors and into the yard.

continued

The Fight continued

11 “Another left and another left. Louis is saving that mighty right . . .” The mutter in the Store had grown into a baby roar and it was pierced by the clang of a bell and the announcer’s “That’s the bell for round three, ladies and gentlemen.”

12 As I pushed my way into the Store I wondered if the announcer gave any thought to the fact that he was addressing as “ladies and gentlemen” all the Negroes around the world who sat sweating and praying, glued to their “master’s voice.”

Why would the African Americans think it unusual for their race to be addressed as “ladies and gentlemen”?

13 There were only a few calls for R.C. Colas, Dr. Peppers, and Hire’s root beer. The real festivities would begin after the fight. Then even the old Christian ladies who taught their children and tried themselves to practice turning the other cheek would buy soft drinks, and if the Brown Bomber’s victory was a particularly bloody one they would order peanut patties and Baby Ruths also.

14 Bailey and I lay the coins on top of the cash register. Uncle Willie didn’t allow us to ring up sales during a fight. It was too noisy and might shake up the atmosphere. When the gong rang for the next round we pushed through the near-sacred quiet to the herd of children outside.

15 “He’s got Louis against the ropes and now it’s a left to the body and a right to the ribs. Another right to the body, it looks like it was low . . . Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the referee is signaling but the contender keeps raining the blows on Louis. It’s another to the body, and it looks like Louis is going down.”

16 My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.

What symbolism can you find in paragraph 16?



My Thoughts

The Fight continued

26 Then the voice, husky and familiar, came to wash over us—
“The winnah, and still heavyweight champeen of the world . . .
Joe Louis.”

How would you feel if you were listening to the fight in the Store and heard the announcer say those words?

27 Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black mother’s son. He was the strongest man in the world. People drank Coca-Colas like ambrosia and ate candy bars like Christmas. Some of the men went behind the Store and poured white lightning in their soft-drink bottles, and a few of the bigger boys followed them. Those who were not chased away came back blowing their breath in front of themselves like proud smokers.

28 It would take an hour or more before the people would leave the Store and head for home. Those who lived too far had made arrangements to stay in town. It wouldn’t do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world.

Has the fight really changed anything? Explain.



Make Sense of Words

As you come across a vocabulary word you don't know, sometimes you are satisfied you have enough "sense" of the word that knowing the exact meaning doesn't matter. If you feel you can infer, or make an educated guess about, the meaning by taking what you are reading and combining it with your personal understanding, then you can get the "gist" of the word and continue reading.

Read the following sentence from "The Fight."

*"The **apprehensive** mood was shot through with shafts of gaiety, as a black sky is streaked with lightning."* (paragraph 2)

Even if you don't know the exact meaning of the word **apprehensive**, you do know the following:

- This was a serious event for the African American people listening.
- The mood is compared to a black sky streaked with lightning.

So you can infer that **apprehensive** means "serious, maybe a little scary or nervous."

Reread paragraph 17. In the space below, write what you think the gist of the word **hewers** is. Then identify your reasons for drawing that conclusion.

I think **hewers** means . . .

because . . .

Read with Understanding Which of the following *best* describes what the title “The Fight” *symbolizes* besides the boxing match itself?

- ① the fight of the African Americans for equal rights
- ② the fight to keep Joe Louis champion
- ③ the fight to keep the Store open
- ④ the fight for the women to be able to listen to the radio with the men



Understand by Seeing It

As stated in the Heads Up section, *symbolism* is an object or action that suggests further meaning. It can also be defined as something you can see that has taken on a meaning beyond itself.

Complete the chart below by describing what you think the object or action from “The Fight” really symbolizes.

Words	Symbolism
“ ‘master’s voice’ ” (¶12)	
“our people falling” (¶16)	
“This might be the end of the world.” (¶17)	
“Champion of the world” (¶27)	

