‘Out of the huts of history's shame I rise':
Maya Angelou’s ‘Names’ in the English classroom

I.

In raising the issues of power and otherness, Maya Angelou’s short story "Names" has wise things to say about American society, its values, and its history. The main character of the short story has to deal with the problems that came with being black, female, and in the South individually, as well as collectively. Its provocative meaning (if we have open enough minds and hearts to let it in) serves the formative dimension of the English secondary curriculum.

With the purpose of motivating students for extensive reading and to deepen their understanding of the way literature and visual art help keep cultural memories and overlooked histories alive, three lesson plans were devised around this short story. In the end, the most interesting question about students’ critical response to the work is: has the story made them think about or influenced their views on the power of the individual to survive and shape his/her future despite adversity?

II.

A. Maya Angelou's 'Names' as autobiographical writing

Aims

Teaching Aims
- To increase students' vocabulary;
- To improve students' ability to extract specific information from a text;
- To improve students' speaking skills.

Educational Aims
- To motivate students for the reading of short stories;
- To develop students' critical attitude;
- To enable students to read Maya Angelou's autobiographical writing in terms of what she intended to accomplish by her writings.

Language

Vocabulary
debutante n; ludicrous adj; poverty-stricken adj; munch v; lag v ~(behind); indulge v; bound adj [pred] ~to do sth; snag v; thread n.

Strategies
- Warming up;
- Recalling the previous lesson;
- Speculating on the title of the novel from which the short story was extracted;
- Predicting the contents of the short story ‘Names’;
- Reading the opening paragraph of Maya Angelou’s short story for detail.

Aids
- Photocopies of the text;
- Blackboard and chalk.

Procedures

Warming up
- Some volunteer students read their homework assignment (they were asked to describe an event in their childhood that affected them: what led up to the event, the event itself, and the after-effects).
Notes

- Students share with the class what their feelings were when they had to describe an incident that affected them in a significant way.
- Students realise that, as they reflected back upon an important event in their lives, they were also recalling their personal feelings about it.
- Students are asked to think about the reasons that might lead people into writing autobiographies.
- Students conclude that an autobiography is a memory that reaches out into different 'times': the time now, the time then, and the time of an individual's historical context.
- Students are told that in Maya Angelou's first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author uses herself as the central figure to recount her life between the ages of three and sixteen years old, as a young black girl growing up in the segregated town of Stamps, Arkansas.
- Students consider the fact that the writer is already an adult when she tells us about her past.
- Students are asked to think about the ways in which this fact could affect the story.

Development

- After writing the title of the autobiographic novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, on the board, the teacher asks students to comment on it, by imagining or visualising what they read.
- The author makes use of metaphors to express her feelings of entrapment; she draws an implied comparison between the American Black (Maya) and a caged bird; a caged bird can be interpreted as the black race being held back from freedom by their skin colour. In the end, blacks are "caged" by their colour; and the freedom, and feelings of a white person's existence are unknown to one who is black. Through her autobiographic writing, Maya "sings" for freedom and equality and, sharing the Black experience, becomes the representation of all Afro-Americans.
- Students are asked to refer to some examples of how blacks have "sung" for equality (Civil Rights Movement, actions of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X...)
- Students are informed that the short story they are about to study was extracted from the novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and that it depicts Maya Angelou's experience in the 1930s after being raped and sent back to Stamps to live with her grandmother.
- Teacher goes on to say that, in this short story, Maya Angelou takes the reader through her life as though the reader is seeing it through her own eyes.
- Students are asked to skim the first paragraphs of Maya Angelou's biography, studied last class in order to predict the contents of the short story.
- While students are thinking about the possible contents of the short story, the teacher writes the sentence *For a week I looked into Mrs. Cullinan's face as she called me Mary* taken from the short story, on the board.
- Students try to predict the events depicted in the short story, taking into account the sentence above and bearing in mind that Maya Angelou's name is Marguerite.
- Students are handed in the opening paragraph of the short story.
- Teacher reads the text aloud.
- Students skim the text for gist.

Conclusion

- Students try to predict the title of the short story, taking into account the opening paragraph and the sentence previously written on the board.

Evaluation

- Direct observation of students' oral participation, interest, behaviour and cooperation;
- Classroom or homework assignments.
B. The power of naming

Aims

Teaching Aims
• To develop students' ability to scan a text;
• To increase students' vocabulary;
• To improve students' listening, speaking and reading skills.

Educational Aims
• To lead students to recognize the act of naming as a way of showing power.
• To develop students' awareness that to name someone was to have power over that person in the ante-bellum South;
• To deepen students' understanding of the short story and characters' development.

Language

Vocabulary
sag v; dinge n; blackbird n; called out of his name; fleeting adj; toss up n; bill of sale; stick v.

Strategies
• Recalling the previous class;
• Correcting the homework;
• Skimming 'Names';
• Reading an extract of the short story for gist;
• Asking and answering reading comprehension questions on that extract;
• Writing;
• Registering information on the blackboard;
• Comparing the extract from the short story with a passage from Beloved;
• Debating.

Aids
• Photocopies of the short story 'Names';
• Photocopies of an extract from Toni Morrison's Beloved;
• Blackboard and chalk.

Procedures

Warming up
• Students are led to focus their attention on the 're-naming incident', from 'The very next day...' to 'Momma wouldn't allow me to quit for just any reason'.
• Students are asked to locate the extract in the plot of the short story;
  • Students are expected to refer to what happened previously, i.e., the dialogue between Mrs. Cullinan and a friend, in which the latter remarks that Margaret's name is 'too long' and suggests that she ought to be called 'Mary' instead.
• Students are alerted to the fact that even in the 1930s it was common practice for white people to re-name their black servants to suit themselves, a bitter reminder of slavery.

Development
• Teacher reads the extract of the short story aloud.
• Students are asked what the gist of the extract is.
• Students are asked to think about the reasons why Miss Glory felt sorry for Marguerite and what were the cook's attempts to make her feel better.
• Students account for the reasons why Miss Glory's attempts at calming Maya down seem fruitless, taking into consideration the way the latter reacts to her arguments later on in the short story.
Students compare the way each character deals with the fact of being re-named by their boss.

Students are asked to quote from the text the main reason why Marguerite resented being 'called out of her name' ("It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely constructed as insulting...spooks" — this re-definition was interpreted as a reminder of slavery).

Students are asked to focus on the passage where the author displays a list of insulting terms commonly used to refer to Black people, usually with a reference to their colour and playing on dirt, darkness, smoke and similar concepts.

Teacher exemplifies with the terms 'dinge', a straight lift from 'dingy': a (disagreeably) dark and dull colour or appearance; ...usually implying a dirty colour or aspect due to smoke, grime, dust, weathering, and 'boot' also meaning a Black person, possibly from the fact that boots are regularly thought of as black.

Students become aware of the parallels drawn by the character between the White practice of renaming slaves and what Black people felt when 'being called out of their names', i.e. being called anything other than their own names.

Students conclude that Mrs. Cullinan called Margaret out of her name out of a whim and that her power to name fits the vision of the person doing the naming, i.e. a White person who can not pronounce the name Marguerite correctly and to whom the name Margaret is 'too long', reducing it to 'Mary'.

Students are asked to note the different perspective invited by calling her 'Mary' rather than 'Margaret,' and by terming Glory rather than 'Hallelujah.' (If necessary, a parallel can be drawn with the different vision behind renaming '25 de Abril' the bridge 'Salazar', and renaming the capital of Mozambique 'Maputo', a native name, instead of 'Luanda Marques', a name imposed by Portuguese colonialists.)

Students realise that the debate about definitions is not a debate primarily about the literal meaning of a word — it's a debate about who has the power to name and to define.

Students are asked what this passage shows about Mrs. Cullinan's real feelings towards her servants.

Students are asked to comment on the old nursery rhyme 'Sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can never hurt you.'

Students are invited to consider how they would feel and react if someone addressed them by the wrong name or even re-named them.

In pairs, students are asked to write on their notebooks whatever comes to their mind under the title 'What is in a name?' (5 minutes).

Students' suggestions are registered on the board at random.

- Students are expected to refer to the fact that proper or personal names do not serve simply to pick them out of a crowd; instead, a name provides identity and individuality within family and community and recognises continuity with lives of the past — one's personal name includes one's individual name and one's family name (the former, a matter of parental choice, marks one's identity within the family; the latter, a matter of heritage, gives one an identity in relation to the larger social world and expresses one's ties to a shared ancestral past).

- Students are given further information on the naming practices of slave masters in the ante-bellum South: slaves were given only first names; if they had to receive a surname to distinguish one from another it was 'John's boy', never John's son; the appropriation of slaves' names was done to induce a state of identity loss which made them obedient; in an attempt to insure that no revolt was to occur, and that only submission was to be tolerated.

- Teacher informs that, for instance, in Beloved, a novel by Toni Morrison — the first Black woman to receive Nobel Prize in Literature — all the 'Garner' slaves (Mr. Garner is the owner of 'Sweet Home' plantation) are given the names of the slave owner, e.g. Whitlow. This novel is set after the end of the Civil War, during the period of the so-called Reconstruction, when a great deal of random violence was let loose upon blacks, both the slaves freed by Emancipation and others who had been given or had
bough their freedom earlier; in fact, one of the characters, Baby Suggs, had her freedom bought for her by the Sunday labour of her son Halle.

- Students are handed in an extract of Morrison's novel Beloved.
- Teachers read the text aloud.
- Students skim the text in order to answer what the gist of the text is.
  - Baby Suggs/Jenny Whitlow has no knowledge of her husband's whereabouts, yet she keeps his name Suggs, and the nickname he gave her, Baby, so that if he were trying to look for her he would find her.
- Students realise that Baby Suggs is given the name 'Jenny' which means nothing to her and that such a lack of self-esteem is the inevitable consequence of systematic brutalisation.
- Students are asked which of the characters present in the extract read previously can be compared to Baby Suggs.
- Students are expected to realise that both Baby Suggs/Jenny Whitlow and Hallelujah/Glory are not fully aware of the power of naming.
- Students are asked to contrast these attitudes to the one displayed by Maya.
- Students realise that, for Maya, the prospect of having a completely new name, losing the most valuable property she possesses seems too great a leap — it signifies a break with her past, her history, her family, making her uncomfortable.

Conclusion

- Students realise that the struggle for Black identity begins with an insistence on being named correctly — love of self can only come from a discarding of labels imposed by Mrs. Cullinan and begins with unmasking the power of naming; Maya denies Mrs. Cullinan the power of naming by taking control of the naming process and overcoming de-humanisation.
- Students are asked to consider who has the power to name — for instance, conquerors name their territories, parents name their children, men name their wives...
- Students become aware that to name someone is to have power over that person — the power to name is the power to possess.

Evaluation

- Direct observation of students' oral participation, interest, behaviour and cooperation.

C. 'Names' as an ironic play on the idea of a finishing school.

Aims

Teaching Aims
- To develop students' ability to analyse an image;
- To increase students' vocabulary;
- To improve students' listening, speaking and reading skills.

Educational Aims
- To develop students' awareness of art as a vehicle for confronting issues of race, gender and class;
- To deepen students' understanding of the way art helps keep cultural memories and overlooked histories alive;
- To enable students to describe the reversing and manipulation of stereotypes employed by Saar.

Language

Vocabulary
apron n; clenched adj; grin v; mammy n; plump adj; trademark n; rifle n.
Strategies
- Recalling the previous class.
- Warming up.
- Student presentation of homework.
- Discussing the history of the Aunt Jemima figure.
- Analysing Saar's 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima.'
- Debating.

Aids
- Transparency of Saar's 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima';
- OHP;
- Photocopies of Saar's 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima';
- Blackboard and chalk.

Procedures

Warming up
- Students recall the previous class by means of dialogue with the teacher.
- Students are expected to focus on the fact that to name someone is to have power over that person – the power to name is the power to possess.
- Students recall that, as a reaction to the prejudice and oppression around her, Marguerite emerges from the private world of muteness into which she has withdrawn and confronts her boss – she is no longer a victim but a champion of her own identity.
- Students consider if it is fair to state that the whole of 'Names's plot is an ironic play on the idea of a 'finishing school'.
- Students are asked to share with the class how they felt at the end of the story and what they think Maya Angelou wanted to show.
- Teacher goes on to say that when people are not satisfied with things the way they are, they sometimes protest or try to persuade others to change their ideas; they work to change things by criticising or protesting the old ways and replacing them with new ways.
- Teacher explains further that artists in many cultures have used their artworks for revolutionary functions, such as protesting injustice, promoting ideas, communicating to the illiterate, or as a method of persuasion.
- Students are led to conclude that sometimes a painting, a sculpture, or a building can persuade just as well or better than words can – art can protest, propose and provoke ideas.
- Teacher explains that some African American artists have made artworks to contradict stereotypical notions society has held about their people.
- Students are led to conclude that oppression can be also the result of stereotyping.

Development
- As a way of defining the idea of a stereotype, students are asked to write down a list of ten words or phrases that describe Marguerite (these words can describe the character’s physical qualities, personality, actions, and likes and dislikes.)
- Students are asked to pick one of the character’s attributes, such as her black hair.
- Students are then asked to consider what they would think of this character if this was the only thing they knew about her.
- Students are asked to consider the following questions: “What if everyone who met this character reacted to her based on her black hair? What if they decided they didn’t like her because they didn’t like black hair? Would that be fair? How would you feel if people decided they didn’t like you because you had black hair? Would that be fair?”
- Students sum up what they understand by 'stereotype': ‘a conventional and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image’ or ‘a prejudicial notion or set of notions a per-
son uses to define members of an ethnic or other social group outside one's own direct experience.

- Teacher checks if students have done their homework (in the previous class, students were asked to collect commercial images in popular magazines or newspapers that show stereotypes of people of any age and race).
- Students are asked to explain why they chose those particular images and why they think the picture is a stereotype or unrealistic.
- Students are asked if they feel insulted by certain images.
- Students discuss how these images contribute to the assumptions they hold and how the pictures make them feel about who they are and how they should look and act.
- Students conclude that visual images that represent groups of people sometimes present those people as stereotypes rather than as individuals with human feelings and values.
- Students discuss further the idea that stereotypes influence how we treat other people.
- Students are asked what it takes to turn a stereotype around.
- Students realise that to turn a stereotype around it is necessary to be extreme, to depart from accepted norms.
- Teacher projects a transparency of Betye Saar's 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima'.
- Students are asked what they see in this image.
- Students might see what looks like a doll or a cartoon of an African American woman; the figure is holding a broom and a rifle; behind the figure is a pattern of commercial images; in front of the figure is another image of an African American woman holding a White baby.
- Students are asked how the picture of a smiling domestic worker is changed by adding a rifle.
- Students consider why they think this artwork is called 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima'.
- Students are informed that 'The Liberation of Aunt Jemima' incorporates a stereotype of an African American woman used in advertising. The mammy (the ultimate stereotype of the contented slave and a figure who epitomises everything White America demanded of its Black females – loving her White master and mistress, and even more so her gold-colored charges, and making no waves) as Aunt Jemima was the advertising strategy of a cake flour company. The company endowed this stereotype with several versions of a biography used in advertising campaigns – Aunt Jemima was the jolly, happy former slave who was visited by her former master for whom she dishes up plates of steaming pancakes; in the end, he buys her recipe so everyone can enjoy her delicious pancakes.
- Teacher goes on to say that the Aunt Jemima is sometimes referred to as 'handkerchief head'.
- Students attention is drawn to the fact that there are three Aunt Jemimas here: pancake box labels showing Aunt Jemima's face are pasted like wallpaper on the inside back of a box in a Warhol-like grid; the front plane is a postcard showing a picture of a stereotype in which a grimacing woman holds a crying White baby under one arm, she stands behind a white picket fence with a white sheet (an object with complex associations, probably a symbol of the KKK) draped over it; and in the middle, between past and present, stands a Jemima with a broom and pistol in one hand and a rifle in the other.
- Students are led to notice – if they have not noticed yet – that a clenched black fist, the emblem of the Black Power movement, covers her skirt, almost obliterating the white sheet.
- Students are asked to think about the significance of this emblem being 'hidden' in her skirt:
  - In this picture, Jemima is transformed into a revolutionary – this work can constitute a strong warning: violence can erupt when people are not treated as human beings.
• Students are asked to think about what lies behind that innocent smile with the placing of a broom in one hand and a gun in the other:
  • students realise that, by putting certain objects together, the artist gives them new meaning; the image has been altered, transforming a negative stereotype into an assertive, independent human being.
• Students describe how Betye Saar transformed a stereotyped version of an African American woman taken from advertising images, contradicting negative images of African Americans:
  • stereotypes are robbed of their power to hurt people when they are turned into strong or positive images; giving a realistic and dignified face to a person helps us to see them in human terms.
• Students are asked to think about what the artist intended with this work, i.e. what they think she is trying to tell us by using such objects:
  • perhaps she wants people to look at stereotypes and question how and what they think about different cultures.
• Students are asked if they think she succeeded in convincing their values.

Conclusion
• Students demonstrate how Betye Saar was able to use one of the most used racial stereotypes, the mammy-like Aunt Jemima, against itself and against the racism which produced it — the stereotype of every (white) man's good-natured servant was armed with a grenade and rifle.
• Students become aware that Saar confronts stereotype and racism and effectively employs this racial stereotype and derogatory image in art as a weapon, transforming it into a symbol of political and social relevance.
• Students are handed in photocopies of a sheet containing some concepts and values discussed during the study of the short story, to be dealt with next class.
• As homework, students write a story about the person they thought was a stereotype, redrawing him/her as a person free of stereotype: giving him her a name, a personality, and telling about his her dreams and aspirations.

Evaluation
• Direct observation of students' oral participation, interest, behaviour and cooperation;
• Classroom or homework assignments.

Note: The first part of the article's title was taken from Angelou's poem 'Still I Rise'.

Appendix

1. Extract from Toni Morrison's Beloved

Baby Suggs thought it was a good time to ask him something she had long wanted to know.

'Mr. Garner,' she said, 'why you all call me Jenny?'

'Cause that's what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name? What you call yourself?'

'Nothing,' she said. 'I don't call myself nothing.'

Mr. Garner went red with laughter. 'When I took you out of Carolina, Whitlow called you Jenny and Jenny Whitlow is what his bill said. Didn't he call you Jenny?'

'No, sir. If he did I didn't hear it.'

'What did you answer to?'

'Anything, but Suggs is what my husband name.'

'You got married, Jenny? I didn't know it.'

'Manner of speaking.'

'You know where he is, this husband?'

'No, sir.'
2. The Liberation of Aunt Jemima

Betye Saar
The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972