



NAMES

by Maya Angelou

A - While you read the story make notes on the following:

- a) Time - (When does the action take place?)
- b) Place - (Where does the action take place?)
- c) Characters - (Say their names and nationality.)
- d) Plot - (What happened?)
- e) Narrator's point of view

1st Part

Recently a white woman from Texas, who would quickly describe herself as a liberal, asked me about my hometown. When I told her that in **Stamps**¹ my grandmother had owned the only Negro general merchandise store since the turn of the century, she exclaimed, "Why, you were a **debutante**²." Ridiculous and even **ludicrous**³. But Negro girls in small Southern towns, whether **poverty-stricken**⁴ or just munching along on a few of life's necessities, were given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood as rich white girls shown in magazines. Admittedly the training was not the same. While white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging **behind**⁵, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to **indulge**⁶ them. (Come and see Edna Lomax spending the money she made picking cotton on five balls of ecru tatting **thread**⁷. Her fingers are bound to **snag**⁸ the work and she'll have to repeat the stitches time and time again. But she knows that when she buys the thread.)

We were required to **embroider**⁹ and I had trunkfuls of colorful dishtowels, pillowcases, runners and handkerchiefs to my credit. I mastered the art of crocheting and **tatting**¹⁰, and there was a lifetime's supply of dainty **doilies**¹¹ that would never be used in **sacheted**¹² dresser drawers. It went without saying that all girls could iron and wash, but the finer touches around the home, like setting a table with real silver, baking roasts and cooking vegetables without meat, had to be learned elsewhere. Usually at the source of those habits. During my tenth year, a white woman's kitchen became my finishing school.

Mrs. Viola Cullinan was a **plump**¹³ woman who lived in a three-bedroom house somewhere behind the post office. She was singularly unattractive until she smiled, and then the lines around her eyes and mouth which made her look perpetually dirty disappeared, and her face looked like the mask of an impish **elf**¹⁴. She usually rested her smile until late afternoon when her women friends dropped in and Miss Glory, the cook, served them cold drinks on the closed-in **porch**¹⁵.

¹ Stamps - a city located in Lafayette County, Arkansas.

² debutante - young woman from a rich and elite family

³ ludicrous - ridiculous; absurd

⁴ poverty-stricken - affected by poverty; extremely poor

⁵ lagging behind - failing to keep pace with others

⁶ to indulge - to practice

⁷ ecru tatting thread - unbleached cotton thread which could be knotted into lacy edges for tablecloths, etc.

⁸ to snag - (the rough skin of her fingers is certain) to catch on

⁹ to embroider - to decorate (cloth) with needlework

¹⁰ tatting - (process of making) type of lace that is made by hand, used for decoration

¹¹ dainty doilies - small and pretty ornamental mat or lace

¹² sacheted - containing little bags of a sweet-smelling substance, placed among clothes to scent them

¹³ plump - a little fat

¹⁴ impish elf - mischievous little mythical creature

¹⁵ porch - veranda



Obra de Leitura Extensiva do 11º ano



The exactness of her house was inhuman. This glass went here and only here. That cup had its place and it was an act of impudent rebellion to place it anywhere else. At twelve o'clock the table was set. At 12:15 Mrs. Cullinan sat down to dinner (whether her husband had arrived or not). At 12:16 Miss Glory brought out the food. It took me a week to learn the difference between a salad plate, a bread plate and a dessert plate.

Mrs. Cullinan kept up the tradition of her wealthy parents. She was from Virginia. Miss Glory, who was a descendant of slaves that had worked for the Cullinans, told me her history. She had married beneath her (according to Miss Glory). Her husband's family hadn't had their money very long and what they had "didn't **mount to much**"¹⁶.

As ugly as she was, I thought privately, she was lucky to get a husband above or beneath her station. But Miss Glory wouldn't let me say a thing against her mistress. She was very patient with me, however, over the housework. She explained the dishware, silverware and **servants' bells**¹⁷. The large round bowl in which soup was served wasn't a soup bowl, it was a tureen. There were **goblets**¹⁸, sherbet glasses, ice-cream glasses, wine glasses, green glass coffee cups with matching saucers, and water glasses. I had a glass to drink from, and it sat with Miss Glory's on a separate shelf from the others. Soup spoons, **gravy boat**¹⁹, butter knives, salad forks and carving platter were additions to my vocabulary and in fact almost represented a new language. I was fascinated with the novelty, with the fluttering Mrs. Cullinan and her Alice-in-Wonderland house.

Her husband remains, in my memory, undefined. I **lumped**²⁰ him with all the other white men that I had ever seen and tried not to see.

On our way home one evening, Miss Glory told me that Mrs. Cullinan couldn't have children. She said that she was too delicate-boned. It was hard to imagine bones at all under those layers of fat. Miss Glory went on to say that the doctor had taken out all her lady **organs**²¹. I reasoned that a pig's organs included the lungs, heart and liver, so if Mrs. Cullinan was walking around without those essentials, it explained why she drank alcohol out of unmarked bottles. She was keeping herself **embalmed**²².

When I spoke to **Bailey**²³ about it, he agreed that I was right, but he also informed me that Mr. Cullinan had two daughters by a colored lady and that I knew them very well. He added that the girls were the spitting image of their father. I was unable to remember what he looked like, although I had just left him a few hours before, but I thought of the Coleman girls. They were very light-skinned and certainly didn't look very much like their mother (no one ever mentioned Mr. Coleman).

¹⁶ 'mount - (US Southern dialect) amount

¹⁷ Servants' bells - bells to summon the servants

¹⁸ goblets - glass drinking-vessel (for wine) with a stem and base, but no handle

¹⁹ gravy boat - vessel in which gravy is served at table

²⁰ lumped - put together

²¹ lady organs - womb and ovaries

²² embalmed - preserved (in this case by soaking in alcohol)

²³ Bailey - Maya Angelou's brother, who was one year older than her



Understanding the story

B – Now that you have read the first part of the story, decide whether these sentences are *true* or *false*. Correct the false ones:

- a) The white lady Marguerite met was being honest when she called her a debutante.
- b) The narrator's grandmother lived in Stamps.
- c) Black and white girls learned the same sort of things.
- d) Marguerite was eleven when she started working as a maid.
- e) Mrs. Cullinan only smiled when her friends turned up for tea.
- f) Mrs. Cullinan was very easygoing.
- g) Miss Glory was a descendant of a line of slaves who had always worked for the Cullinan family.
- h) Mrs. Cullinan's husband's family was very rich.
- i) Miss Glory was hardworking and knowledgeable about how to manage a home.

C – Match the two halves to make complete sentences:

1. Miss Glory	a) the details of Mrs. Cullinan's life.
2. She teaches the girl	b) because she had had a hysterectomy (her womb removed).
3. She also shares with Marguerite	c) that Mr. Cullinan has two daughters by a black lady.
4. Glory tells her	d) becomes Marguerite's patient tutor.
5. Mrs. Cullinan couldn't have children	e) but she has trouble picturing Mr. Cullinan even though she sees him every day.
6. Bailey later tells his sister	f) about cleaning, cooking, cutlery, and kitchenware.
7. Marguerite can picture the faces of these unknown daughters	g) that Mrs. Cullinan cannot have children.



2nd Part

My pity for Mrs. Cullinan preceded me the next morning like the Cheshire cat's **smile**²⁴. Those girls, who could have been her daughters, were beautiful. They didn't have to **straighten their hair**²⁵. Even when they were caught in the rain, their **braids**²⁶ still hung down straight like tamed snakes. Their mouths were pouty little cupid's bows. Mrs. Cullinan didn't know what she missed. Or maybe she did. Poor Mrs. Cullinan.

For weeks after, I arrived early, left late and tried very hard to make up for her **barrenness**²⁷. If she had had her own children, she wouldn't have had to ask me to run a thousand **errands**²⁸ from her back door to the back door of her friends. Poor old Mrs. Cullinan.

Then one evening Miss Glory told me to serve the ladies on the porch. After I set the tray down and turned toward the kitchen, one of the women asked, "What's your name, girl?" It was the speckled-faced one. Mrs. Cullinan said, "**She doesn't talk much**²⁹". Her name's Margaret."

"Is she dumb?"

"No. As I understand it, she can talk when she wants to but she's usually quiet as a little mouse. Aren't you, Margaret?"

I smiled at her. Poor thing. No organs and couldn't even pronounce my name **correctly**³⁰.

"She's a sweet little thing, though."

"Well, that may be, but the name's too long. I'd never bother myself. I'd call her Mary if I was you."

I **fumed**³¹ into the kitchen. That horrible woman would never have the chance to call me Mary because if I was starving I'd never work for her. I decided I wouldn't **pee**³² on her if her heart was on fire. Giggles drifted in off the porch and into Miss Glory's pots. I wondered what they could be laughing about.

White folks were so strange. Could they be talking about me? Everybody knew that they stuck together better than the Negroes did. It was possible that Mrs. Cullinan had friends in St. Louis who heard about a girl from Stamps being in court and wrote to tell her. Maybe she knew about Mr. Freeman.

My lunch was in my mouth a second time and I went outside and **relieved myself**³³ on the bed of four-**o'clocks**³⁴. Miss Glory thought I might be coming down with something and told me to go on home, that **Momma**³⁵ would give me some herb tea, and she'd explain to her mistress.

I **realized**³⁶ how foolish I was being before I reached the pond. Of course Mrs. Cullinan didn't know. Otherwise she wouldn't have given me the two nice dresses that Momma cut down, and she certainly wouldn't have called me a "sweet little thing". My stomach felt fine, and I didn't mention anything to Momma.

That evening I decided to write a poem on being white, fat, old and without children. It was going to be a tragic ballad. I would have to watch her carefully to capture the essence of her loneliness and pain.

The very next day, she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway. "Mary?"

²⁴ Cheshire cat - a character from *Alice in Wonderland*

²⁵ straighten their hair - curly African hair was not thought to be beautiful at this time, as standards of beauty, like everything else, were determined by whites. In the 1960s, the popularity of the 'Black is beautiful' slogan, which embodied the change in political thinking, was also reflected in natural-look hairstyles, of which the Afro and Soul look were among the most popular

²⁶ braids (AmE) - plaits (BrE)

²⁷ barrenness - inability to have babies

²⁸ to run... errands - to take a message, get or deliver goods, etc

²⁹ she doesn't talk much - Maya was mute at that time, as a result of the shock of having been raped by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman

³⁰ couldn't even pronounce my name correctly': Maya's real name was Marguerite (pronounced 'Mar-ger-eet', with the accent on the last syllable). Mrs. Cullinan had called her Margaret. Although Maya's real name was Marguerite, her brother, Bailey, always called her Maya.

³¹ fumed - was very angry

³² pee - urinate (impolite)

³³ relieved myself - urinated (polite); (here) vomited

³⁴ four-o'clocks - daisy-like flowers that dose their petals at four o'clock

³⁵ Momma - Marguerite (or Maya) called her grandmother Momma; Granny

³⁶ realized - understood



3rd Part

For a week **I looked into Mrs. Cullinan's face**⁴⁷ as she called me Mary. She ignored my coming late and leaving early. Miss Glory was a little **annoyed**⁴⁸ because I had begun to leave egg yolk on the dishes and wasn't putting much heart in polishing the silver. I hoped that she would complain to our boss, but she didn't.

Then Bailey solved my dilemma. He had me describe the contents of the cupboard and the particular plates she liked best. Her favorite piece was a casserole shaped like a fish and the green glass coffee cups. I kept his instructions in mind, so on the next day when Miss Glory was hanging out clothes and I had again been told to serve the old **biddies**⁴⁹ on the porch, I dropped the empty serving tray. When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, "Mary!" I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor.

I could never absolutely describe to Bailey what happened next, because each time I got to the part where she fell on the floor and **screwed up**⁵⁰ her ugly face to cry, we burst out laughing. She actually **wobbled**⁵¹ around on the floor and picked up **shards**⁵² of the cups and cried, "Oh, Momma. Oh Dear Gawd It's Momma's china from Virginia. Oh, Momma, **I sorry**⁵³."

Miss Glory came running in from the yard and the women from the porch crowded around. Miss Glory was almost as broken up as her mistress. "You mean to say she broke our Virginia dishes? **What we gone do**?"⁵⁴

Mrs. Cullinan cried louder, "**That clumsy nigger**⁵⁵. **Clumsy**⁵⁶ little black nigger."

Old speckled-face leaned down and asked, "Who did it, Viola? Was it Mary? Who did it?"

Everything was happening so fast I can't remember whether her action preceded her words, but I know that Mrs. Cullinan said, "Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret." And she threw a **wedge**⁵⁷ of the broken plate at me. It could have been the hysteria which put her aim off, but the flying crockery caught Miss Glory right over her ear and she started screaming.

I left the front door wide open so all the neighbors could hear.

Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn't Mary.

Maya Angelou, 1998, *Names*, in *Quartet of Stones*, Longman.

Understanding the story

A – Read the third part of the story and answer the following questions with complete sentences:

- How did Mrs. Cullinan react when her friend asked if Mary had broken the chinaware?
- What did she do in her anger?
- Did she hit Marguerite?
- What did Marguerite do after the incident?
- Why did she leave the door wide open?

⁴⁷ I looked into Mrs. Cullinan's face - among the Black community, it was regarded as very rude for a child to look an adult in the face.

⁴⁸ annoyed - rather angry

⁴⁹ biddies - old women (or chickens)

⁵⁰ screwed up - tensed the muscles of the face

⁵¹ wobbled - moved from side to side unsteadily

⁵² shards - broken pieces of crockery (pottery, glass, etc.)

⁵³ sorry - (US Southern dialect) I'm sorry

⁵⁴ What we gone do? - (US Southern dialect) What are we going to do?

⁵⁵ nigger: this insult is a contrast to calling Maya a "sweet little thing". Both reveal Mrs. Cullinan's racist and patronizing attitude to Black people.

⁵⁶ clumsy - awkward and ungraceful in movement

⁵⁷ wedge - piece (of the broken plate) that is thick at one end and narrows at the other to a sharp edge