



#8726

## FOR MY PEOPLE: THE LIFE AND WRITING OF MARGARET WALKER

Grade Levels: 8-13+

27 minutes

CALIFORNIA NEWSREEL 1998

### DESCRIPTION

Margaret Walker, born in 1915, is an African-American poet of immense talent and a lifelong advocate of civil rights. Conversations with Walker, commentary from scholars, and readings from her poetry help define who she is and why. Gives a brief biography of her life and the influences that contributed to her powerful poetry.

### ACADEMIC STANDARDS

#### Subject Area: Language Arts Standards

- ◆ Standard: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
  - Benchmark: Understands the effects of an author's style on the reader
  - Benchmark: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature)
  - Benchmark: Understands relationships between literature and its historical period, culture, and society (e.g., influence of historical context on form, style, and point of view; influence of literature on political events; social influences on author's description of characters, plot, and setting; how writer's represent and reveal their cultures and traditions)
  - Benchmark: Relates personal response or interpretation of the text with that seemingly intended by the author
- ◆ Standard: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process



- Benchmark: Writes in response to literature (e.g., responds to significant issues in a log or journal, answers discussion questions, anticipates and answers a reader's questions, writes a summary of a book, describes an initial impression of a text, connects knowledge from a text with personal knowledge, states an interpretive, evaluative, or reflective position; draws inferences about the effects of the work on an audience)
- Benchmark: Uses strategies to adapt writing for different purposes

## INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

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1. To compare Walker's style in her earlier poems to those published in the 1980s.
2. To compare/contrast the novel, *Jubilee* with the poetry forms of expression from sermons and chants, or "folk" tradition.
3. To examine specifically how poetic structures are adjusted and to reflect a more "modern" consciousness.
4. To stimulate discussion on freedom and how it became the main subject of Walker's work.
5. To examine Walker's concerns for balancing the acknowledgement of past oppression with future hope.

## VOCABULARY

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|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. alleviate               | 13. form               | 26. racism      |
| 2. authenticity            | 14. Harlem Renaissance | 27. range       |
| 3. ballad                  | 15. idealism           | 28. realistic   |
| 4. bitter                  | 16. images             | 29. reality     |
| 5. black experience        | 17. inspired           | 30. refute      |
| 6. communist               | 18. intimacy           | 31. revolution  |
| 7. crisis                  | 19. intellectuals      | 32. rhythms     |
| 8. dialectical materialism | 20. manuscript         | 33. sentimental |
| 9. distortions             | 21. Marxist philosophy | 34. social      |
| 10. economic               | 22. meanings           | 35. tone        |
| 11. epitaph                | 23. oppression         | 36. vetoed      |
| 12. factual                | 24. political          | 37. vision      |
| 13. form                   | 25. race relations     | 38. writing-Red |

## BEFORE SHOWING

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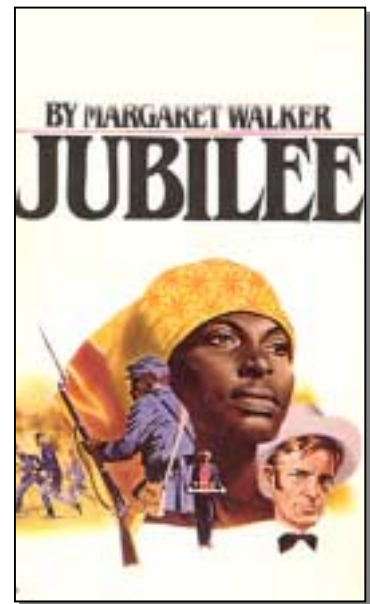
1. Read and discuss the biography of Margaret Walker, poet, novelist and educator. (See RELATED RESOURCES.)
2. Read and discuss the poems: *For My People, I Want to Write, Delta, Sorrow Home, Love Song for Alex, 1979.*

## DURING SHOWING

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### Discussion Items and Questions

1. View the video more than once, with one showing uninterrupted.
2. Pause after Walker says, "...I was eleven or twelve. I was writing poetry."
  - a. Explain what is meant by "folk tradition" in the poem *For My People*.
  - b. Discuss the use of traditional forms: seeing images, finding meaning and developing rhythm.
3. Pause after Walker says, "I want to frame their dreams into words, their souls into notes."
  - a. Discuss how leaving the South impacted her writing.
  - b. Read the poem *I Want to Write* and discuss why Walker wanted to write the songs of her people.
4. Pause after Walker says, "That's exactly how quick it took me to write it."
  - a. Explain how Wright's friendship, Marxist philosophy and the economic and political problems of the African-American people influenced the writing of the poem *For My People*.
  - b. Explain why she changed from a very romantic and sentimental type of poetry to very realistic and factual type.
5. Pause after Walker says, "I feel emotionally satisfied... in this country."
  - a. In reference to the poem *For My People* discuss how "meaning" has always been a driving force in Walker's writing.
  - b. Explain Walker's determination to win the Yale Younger Poets Award and received national recognition for her poem *For My People*.
  - c. Reference the poem *Delta* and discuss the love/hate relationship Walker had for the South.
  - d. Reference the poem *Sorrow Home* and examine how Walker made it essential that the truth about the South be told in everything that she wrote.
6. Pause after Walker says, "Thirty years...honest to God thirty years."
  - a. Reference the poem *Love Song for Alex* and explain how she balanced the relationship between her family and her work.
  - b. Discuss how marriage, family and devotion were important values depicted in her novel *Jubilee*.



## AFTER SHOWING

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### Discussion Items and Questions

1. How does the use of specific names in the poems affect the reader when the "general" context of the poem's language is so controlling?
2. Explain the term "literary foremother."

3. Why was it so important for Walker to see the images and find the meaning and have the rhythm?
4. Why was Walker praised for using a more traditional form of writing verses a radical approach?
5. Why was it so important for Walker to leave the South in order to become a “real” poet?
6. What was Richard Wright’s concept of the problem of an African-American person in this country?
7. How did Walker’s views on racism and race relations influence her style of writing?
8. Why did everything Walker wrote relate to the South – its history, its meaning and its purpose?
9. What did Walker try to make known to her students about writing?
10. Why was it critical to have a rhythm to her life, a very self-conscious rhythm?
11. Discuss how Margaret Walker made her life a poem.

### Applications and Activities

1. Read/discuss the novel *Jubilee* and complete a book summary.
2. Research works by Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, W.E.B Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Phyllis Wheatly, Chekhov.

### RELATED RESOURCES



#### Captioned Media Program

- Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper #3625
- Ralph Ellison: The Self-Taught Writer #3505
- Robert Frost #3651
- Sylvia Plath #3668



### World Wide Web



The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and “kid-safe” sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

- **MARGARET WALKER--COVER PAGE**

<http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/walker/>

An extensive collection of her poems, books and biography.

- **MARGARET WALKER, OBITUARY**

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/walker-margaret.html>

A chronology of her life as a poet and novelist and the details of her death in December of 1998.

- **MARGARET WALKER (B. 1915)**

<http://www.georgetown.edu/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/walker.html>

Provides a lesson guide and includes discussion questions. Contributing Editor: Maryemma Graham.

- **MARGARET WALKER, MISSISSIPPI WRITER**

<http://www.shs.starkville.k12.ms.us/mswm/MSWritrsAndMusicians/writers/Walker.html>

Photos, major works, a biography and a book review.

