Dolly Parton: How One Singer Won Over a Divided America

Name Date Class

Reading

1 When Dolly Parton died in Nashville on August 25, 2026, at the age of 80, the reaction crossed lines that very little in American life crosses. Within hours, President Donald Trump ordered flags lowered across the country for a week, while former presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton posted their own tributes. Her team said she had died of cancer after a short illness, which she had not made public. In September, California made September 25 an annual Dolly Parton Day, through a law sponsored by one Republican and one Democratic senator. How did a country singer become one of the few things Americans still seemed to agree on?

2 Her story began far from fame. Born in 1946 in a one-room cabin in the Great Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee, she was the fourth of twelve children in an **impoverished** farming family. She sang on local radio as a child, joined a popular television program, The Porter Wagoner Show, in 1967, and was soon a solo star. Over nearly seven decades she sold more than 100 million records, wrote thousands of songs, including “Jolene” and “9 to 5,” acted in films, and opened her own theme park, Dollywood, in 1986.

3 Behind the wigs and the jokes was a **shrewd** businesswoman. In the mid-1970s, Elvis Presley planned to record her song “I Will Always Love You.” The day before the session, his manager said Presley would record it only if he received half of the **publishing rights**, the share of income a song earns whenever it is sold, played, or used. Parton, by her own account, cried all night and then said no. Having kept the rights, she earned the **royalties** when Whitney Houston’s 1992 version for the film The Bodyguard spent 14 weeks at number one in the United States. Her influence on other stars was also personal: Miley Cyrus, her honorary goddaughter, has described Parton as a second mother.

4 Her broad appeal was partly a matter of choice. Parton almost never **endorsed** candidates, and when reporters raised **divisive** issues, she usually **deflected** them with a joke. She turned down the Presidential Medal of Freedom twice during Trump’s first term, giving practical reasons, and later said that accepting it from President Joe Biden might look political. Yet she was not silent on everything. She wrote a song for Transamerica, a 2005 film about a transgender woman, and in 2020 she said publicly that Black lives matter. Supporters on the left and the right tended to notice different parts of her story. In a March 2026 poll by the University of Massachusetts Lowell and YouGov, 70 percent of Americans viewed her **favorably** and only 5 percent unfavorably, a far better result than any politician in the survey.

5 The cause most closely linked to her name began with her father, who could not read or write. In 1995 she started the Imagination Library, which mailed a free book every month to young children in her home county. Now run with local partners in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia, it had given away more than 325 million books by June 2026. A 2025 study by Claire Galea of United Way Australia surveyed over 86,000 **caregivers** and reported that enrolled children were read to more often and showed stronger early **literacy** skills than children not yet in the program. However, the data came from parents’ own answers, not a controlled experiment, so the results are encouraging rather than **conclusive**.

6 Her giving also responded to emergencies. When wildfires destroyed hundreds of homes near Dollywood in November 2016, she set up the My People Fund within days. Nearly 900 families who had lost their homes received $1,000 a month and then a final check, about $10,000 each in total. In April 2020, **prompted** by her friend Naji Abumrad, a surgeon, she gave $1 million to COVID-19 research at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Her fund was later listed among the sponsors of early research on the Moderna vaccine, although headlines saying she paid for the vaccine **overstated** her role.

7 Ordinary workers felt her influence too. In 2022, Dollywood’s operating partner, Herschend, announced that it would pay full tuition for employees in selected study programs, including seasonal and part-time staff. Her family asked for donations to the Imagination Library **in lieu of** flowers. It now mails more than 3.5 million books a month. Whether it keeps growing without its most famous supporter will be one clear test of her **legacy**.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**impoverished**	_____	**A**	clever at judging situations, especially in business
2	**shrewd**	_____	**B**	described something as bigger than it really is
3	**publishing rights**	_____	**C**	instead of; in place of
4	**royalties**	_____	**D**	people who look after a child or someone in need
5	**endorsed**	_____	**E**	in a positive way that shows approval
6	**divisive**	_____	**F**	the lasting effect of a person's life or work
7	**deflected**	_____	**G**	publicly said you support a person or product
8	**favorably**	_____	**H**	ownership of a song and a share of its income
9	**caregivers**	_____	**I**	avoided a question by turning attention elsewhere
10	**literacy**	_____	**J**	proving something so that no doubt remains
11	**conclusive**	_____	**K**	encouraged or caused to do something
12	**prompted**	_____	**L**	payments to a creator each time a work is used
13	**overstated**	_____	**M**	causing strong disagreement between groups
14	**in lieu of**	_____	**N**	very poor, lacking money for basic needs
15	**legacy**	_____	**O**	the ability to read and write

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

caregivers	**conclusive**	**deflected**	**divisive**	**endorsed**	**favorably**	**impoverished**	**legacy**	**literacy**
overstated	**prompted**	**publishing rights**	**royalties**	**shrewd**				

1 She grew up in an _____ family that could not afford new shoes.

2 A _____ businesswoman, she refused a deal that would have cost her future income.

3 The singer kept the _____ , so she still owns her song and earns from every cover.

4 Every time the song is played on the radio, the writer earns _____ .

5 The newspaper _____ the mayor two weeks before the election.

6 Gun control is a _____ issue in many countries.

7 The actor _____ questions about his divorce with a joke.

8 Most people who tried the new phone reviewed it _____ .

9 The survey asked parents and other _____ how often they read to children.

10 The program aims to improve early _____ before children start school.

11 The survey was encouraging, but it was not _____ proof.

12 _____ by a friend, she donated to medical research.

13 Some headlines _____ her role in developing the vaccine.

14 The Imagination Library is the most important part of her _____ .

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 When and where did Dolly Parton die, and what did her team say about the cause?

2 Describe Parton's childhood and family background.

3 What happened when Elvis Presley wanted to record "I Will Always Love You"?

4 How did Parton's decision about Elvis Presley help her later?

5 How did Parton usually handle political questions, and why might this have helped her appeal?

6 What evidence does the reading give that Parton was not completely silent on social issues?

7 What did Claire Galea's study find, and what is its main limitation?

8 How did the My People Fund help families after the 2016 wildfires?

9 Why does the writer say that some headlines overstated Parton's role in the Moderna vaccine?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Dollywood's tuition program covers every course of study in full."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes the Imagination Library study proves the program causes better reading skills."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer open with the reactions of presidents from both parties and a law sponsored by senators from both parties?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** President Trump ordered flags lowered for one week after Parton died.

2 **T / F** Parton had talked publicly about her cancer for several years before she died.

3 **T / F** Dollywood opened in 1986.

4 **T / F** Elvis Presley recorded "I Will Always Love You" in the 1970s.

5 **T / F** Miley Cyrus has described Parton as a second mother.

6 **T / F** Parton accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom during Trump's first term.

7 **T / F** In the March 2026 poll, 5 percent of Americans viewed Parton unfavorably.

8 **T / F** The Imagination Library now operates only in the United States.

9 **T / F** Parton gave $1 million to COVID-19 research at Vanderbilt in 2020.

10 **T / F** Herschend said it would pay full tuition for every possible course of study.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Had you heard of Dolly Parton before this lesson? If so, how did you first learn about her?

2 Is there a singer, actor, or athlete in your country whom almost everyone seems to like? Why do you think that is?

3 Parton often used jokes to avoid difficult questions. Is humor a good way to handle questions you do not want to answer? Why or why not?

4 Would you have turned down Elvis Presley, as Parton did? What would you have been thinking about that night?

5 Parton started a book program because her father could not read. Has a family member's experience ever shaped your goals?

6 Do you remember the first books you owned as a child? Who gave them to you?

7 Should famous entertainers share their political views, or stay out of politics? Does it depend on the issue?

8 Parton turned down a national honor partly because she worried it might look political. Was that a wise choice?

9 The Imagination Library study relied on parents' own answers. Why might parents' reports be less reliable than a controlled experiment?

10 When a celebrity gives money to a cause, headlines sometimes exaggerate their role. Does that matter, and who is responsible?

11 Parton helped wildfire victims with cash rather than goods. What are the advantages and disadvantages of giving cash after a disaster?

12 Would an employer that pays for your education make you more loyal to it? Should companies be responsible for their workers' education?

13 In a divided society, can shared heroes help people get along, or do they only hide deeper disagreements?

14 How would you like to be remembered? What would you want your own legacy to be?

Language Focus: Participle Clauses

A participle clause begins with a participle (born, prompted, run, giving, having kept) and has no subject of its own. It adds background information to a main clause. The subject of the participle clause is the same as the subject of the main clause.

In the reading:

- "**Born in 1946 in a one-room cabin** in the Great Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee, she was the fourth of twelve children…"
- "**Having kept the rights**, she earned the royalties when Whitney Houston's 1992 version…"
- "She turned down the Presidential Medal of Freedom twice during Trump's first term, **giving practical reasons**…"

Practice: Combine these two sentences using a participle clause: *"Parton grew up without money. She understood how much a free book could mean to a child."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/dolly-parton-legacy

Notes