



Caged Bird by Maya Angelou

ABOUT THE POEM

Caged Bird is based on another poem, *Sympathy*, published in 1899 and written by Paul Laurence Dunbar, another African-American poet. Both poems describe a caged bird and the world outside its cage. Whereas *Sympathy* has a structured rhyme scheme, *Caged Bird* is an example of unstructured verse. Each stanza has a different number of lines with irregular beats and no set rhyming scheme. By doing this, Angelou can express herself freely, without constraint.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maya Angelou was an American author who was born in Missouri in 1928. She had a difficult childhood: not only were her family extremely poor, but as an African-American she experienced discrimination. Despite this, she went on to have a diverse and successful career. Early on she was a professional dancer and singer in San Francisco, before moving to New York to concentrate on her writing. She then moved to Cairo and Ghana. Later in life she worked in the film industry. As a writer, she is best known for her seven autobiographies; however, she also wrote a number of poems. She died at the age of 86 in 2014.

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1 The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
5 and dips his wings
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

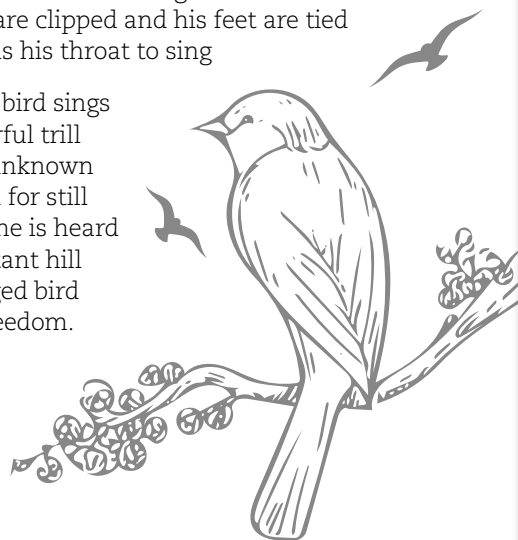
2 But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
10 can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

3 15 The caged bird sings
with fearful trill
of the things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
20 on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom

4 The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
25 and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

5 But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
30 so he opens his throat to sing

6 The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
35 and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.



VOCABULARY FOCUS

downstream (line 3): in the direction that a river or stream is flowing

current (line 4): a strong movement of water in one direction

stalks (line 8): walks angrily

seldom (line 10): not often

clipped (line 12): wings cut to reduce their ability to fly

trill (line 16): a musical sound made by a bird

trade wind (line 24): a wind that blows continuously towards the equator

lawn (line 25): an area of grass that is cut short, especially in a garden



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Before reading

- 1 You are going to read a poem by Maya Angelou, an American author. Read *About the author*. How does her childhood contrast with her adult life?
- 2 The title of the poem is *Caged Bird*. Work in pairs. Brainstorm adjectives and other words you might use to describe the life of a bird that lives inside a cage, as well as words to describe a bird that doesn't live in a cage.

lives in a cage	
doesn't live in a cage	

While reading

- 1 Read the poem. Are any of your words from *Before reading 2* mentioned?
- 2 Read the poem again. Which stanzas refer to the free bird? Which stanzas refer to the caged bird? Note down the words and phrases the author uses to convey the sense of freedom and captivity.

	stanzas	words and phrases
free bird		
caged bird		

- 3 Read the summaries and match each one to the correct stanza. One of the summaries relates to two stanzas.

- a It lazily thinks about a better wind it could catch and the food that is waiting for it.
- b It doesn't have to make its own way but just flies along with the wind. It owns the sky.
- c It dreams of freedom and, despite being limited in its movement, sings of it.
- d It is angry and, despite having limited movement, sings.
- e Its song is so proud it is frightening and it can be heard from far away.

- 4 Work in pairs to discuss these questions.

- 1 The caged bird and free bird in the poem are used by the author as symbols. What do you think they symbolise?
- 2 The author uses a number of metaphors to show the birds are symbols and not real. One example of this is the line *But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams*. Find three more metaphors in the poem. In pairs, discuss what you think they could mean.
- 3 The author also uses one example of personification (where an object is given human characteristics). Find the example in the poem. What do you think it represents?
- 4 Stanza 4 mentions the 'fat worms'. Do you think these are real worms? If not, what do you think they could be?

After reading

- 1 Work in groups to discuss these questions.

- 1 Read *About the author* again. What connections can you make between the two birds in the poem and Angelou's life?
- 2 Think about the period in which Angelou grew up. Why do you think she used symbols to represent what she wanted to say, rather than just writing a realistic depiction? What are the advantages of this?

- 2 Look at the poem again, focusing on the last line of each stanza. What does each last line always describe?

- 3 You are going to write your own poem using a symbol to represent something you feel strongly about. First work alone to think of something you would like to write about. Then think of something you could use as a symbol for this. There are some ideas in the box below, or you can use your own ideas.

a type of flower • a type of tree • the sun • the moon
day • night • an animal • the earth • a house
some kind of weather (storm, rain, wind) • the sea

- 4 Now write your poem. Try to make the end of each stanza an expression of the symbol you choose to use.