



Caged Bird by Maya Angelou

Before reading

- 1 Ask if students have heard of Maya Angelou. If any have, elicit what they know about her. Refer them to *About the author* and ask them to read about her childhood and her adult life. Elicit the contrast between the two.

Answer

Her childhood was very poor and she suffered discrimination. By contrast, she was very successful as an adult and travelled widely.

- 2 Read the title of the poem. In pairs, students brainstorm any words they would associate with a caged bird, and any they would associate with a free (i.e. uncaged) bird. Discuss their ideas briefly as a class.

While reading

- 1 Students read the poem and check if any of their ideas from *Before reading* 2 are mentioned.
- 2 Students read the poem and decide which stanzas relate to the free bird, and which relate to the caged bird. They note down the descriptive language used to convey freedom and captivity. When you check answers, you could ask students why they think the stanzas are arranged as they are.

Suggested answers

Free bird – stanzas 1 and 4

Caged bird – stanzas 2, 3, 5, 6

The stanzas are probably arranged like this to show the contrast between the free and the caged bird. The poem ends with stanzas about the caged bird to emphasise its situation and leave the reader thinking about it, rather than the free bird.

free bird: *leaps, floats, dips his wings, dares to claim the sky, fat worms waiting, names the sky his own*

caged bird: *stalks, narrow cage, bars of rage, clipped, tied, fearful trill of things unknown, longed for, sings of freedom, grave of dreams*

- 3 Students read the summaries and match them to each stanza. Point out that as one of the stanzas is repeated, one of the summaries relates to two stanzas.

Answers

a 4 b 1 c 5 d 2 e 3/6

- 4 Students work in pairs to discuss the questions. Make sure you check answers to question 1 before students move onto question 2. If they need extra support, you could discuss question 1 as a class instead, guiding them to focus on the fact that the birds represent human freedom and oppression. You could also give them the stanza numbers (given in brackets) where they can find the different examples of metaphors and personification. If they need more help with working out the meaning of the metaphors, you could establish as a class what the sky/cage/bars/grave represent first.

Possible answers

- 1 They symbolise freedom (the free bird) and oppression/imprisonment (the caged bird). The imprisonment of the caged bird does not mean actual imprisonment, but a restriction on freedom to do the things that the free bird can.
- 2 *dares to claim the sky* (1) This refers to people who are free being able to own things and govern society in general (the sky represents society). *narrow cage* (2) This refers to the situation of being oppressed/not free to do what you want; *bars of rage* (2) This represents the anger of oppressed people.
- 3 *His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream* (5) Shadows cannot really shout so this is an example of personification. This illustrates that although the caged bird seems happy on the outside, on the inside (his 'shadow') he is not (the scream).
- 4 The 'fat worms' represent hope and opportunity only available to the free bird (i.e. those who have freedom).

After reading

- 1 Students work in groups to discuss the questions. For question 2, it might be worth discussing the era with the class first (see *Cultural information* below) to make sure students are aware of the historical context of the poem.

Suggested answers

- 1 The caged bird represents her early life, whereas the free bird represents her later life.
- 2 Using symbols is a more subtle and sensitive way of a writer getting their point across, particularly if they are writing during a time of hostility and tension.

CULTURAL INFORMATION

Although the poem was published in 1983, Angelou's life was greatly affected by the injustices that African-Americans faced prior to the civil rights movement in 1969. During that time they faced discrimination. They were segregated in schools and did not have the same freedom or opportunities that white people had. The poem on which it is based, *Sympathy*, was written at a time when African-Americans faced even more hostility, prior to the Civil War.

- 2 Now focus on the last line of each stanza and see if students can work out what they all have in common.

Answer

The last line always describes the bird expressing itself in some way.

- 3 Students work alone to choose a situation to write a poem about and a symbol to represent that situation.
- 4 Working alone, students write their poem. When they have finished, invite some students to read their poems aloud for the class.