

I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: About the poem

“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” is a free verse written by the American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou is widely regarded as the “Black Woman’s Poet Laureate.” Her reflections on the society and the times she lived in are vividly expressed in her poetry.

Outwardly the poem “I know why the caged bird sings” or “Caged Bird” as it is often interchangeably known, can be seen as a reflection on social disparity, and the ideals of freedom and justice. Angelou, with the metaphor of birds, represents the inequality of justice seen in the society of her time which differentiates between the African-American community and its White American counterpart. Through her poem, she also illustrates the nature of both freedom and captivity by creating a stark contrast between the two using birds as the metaphor.

The poem is divided into six stanzas, describing the state of two birds, where one is free and ‘floats’ and ‘dares to claim the sky’, while the other is caged in his ‘bar of rage’. The first and the third stanza shows the delight of the free bird experiencing freedom, whereas the rest of the stanzas concentrate on the plight of the caged bird.

Angelou puts greater emphasis on the lamentable state of the caged bird, and contrasts this with that of the free bird.

Although the poem *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has no definitive rhyme scheme, it creates the illusion of rhyme with the clever use of consonance. The enjambment in the poem draws the reader's eye to things of importance in a blunt manner.

Stanza wise analysis : I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

First Stanza

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

The opening lines show a bird leaping 'on the back of the wind' demonstrating the freedom it experiences to move about and glide freely through the air. It hovers over a stream of wind and floats downwards to where the current of the stream ends and the wind is calm. It dips its wing in the sea of orange sunlight.

The bird is shown in a state of great tranquility. It has the freedom to move about wherever it desires. It is so utterly free and without restraints that it ‘dares to claim the sky’. The whole firmament is his one big home.

Second stanza:

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

Here, poet Maya Angelou contrasts the situation by presenting the image of a caged bird. The caged bird tries to go after his cage in vain. The cage is narrow and its metaphorical bars are of rage. The caged bird is seen to be angry with its situation. It desires with all its heart to escape its plight. But the caged bird cannot see beyond his cage.

Its wings are clipped, that is, its freedom is taken away. Wings are associated with flight, which in turn is associated with freedom. The words ‘his wings are clipped’ mean that its freedom is forcibly taken away. It cannot fly even if it desires to. Its feet are tied.

A bird tied to the ground represents an image completely opposite to its true nature of flight. This represents the fact of alienation of the bird. But the most important thing is that despite being in this utterly despondent predicament, the caged bird ‘opens his throat to sing.’ That seems to be his only joy and achievement in life.

Third Stanza:

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

The caged bird has a wavering voice. He is singing of freedom, something he does not have. The idea of freedom is his dream, one he cannot achieve. So, he sings about it. There is fear in his voice. He had never known what freedom tastes like, but hopes to have it for his own. His voice can be heard from distant places, on hills where it inspires others to dream of freedom. The caged bird doesn't sing of sadness, but of hope, inspiration and of freedom.

Fourth stanza:

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

The free bird on the other hand revels in his freedom. He enjoys flying through the trade wind that blows through the trees. 'Sighing trees' probably refers to the sighing sound made by the breeze while passing through the leafy branches. It gives an indication to their lack of freedom, as the trees are also 'tied' to the ground like the caged bird.

The free bird thinks of the fat worm that will be his food. With the wind in his feathers, water and earth beneath him, and the whole sky with him, he feels majestic in his freedom and calls the entire sky his own domain. By 'names the sky his own' the poet's wishes to express that the bird knows himself to be the proprietor of this whole universe. Here the sky stands for the universe.

Fifth stanza:

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
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged, inversely, knows that he is not flying in the sky, that he is not free, but a captive, a prisoner. He thus ‘stands on the grave of dreams’ He knows his dreams of flying in a free firmament, to experience freedom is futile. He had lost all hope of freedom. His shadow ‘shouts on a nightmare scream’. It is more pitiable, more adverse than a nightmare. His wings are clipped and feet are tied; there is only a little hope of freedom, and so the bird opens his throat to sing. The bird wishes to travail against all adversities. There is a faint but kindling voice of hope in his song.

Sixth stanza:

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

This refrain recurring as a stanza justifies the bird’s stout determination to keep going after his dream of freedom. Moreover, the caged bird chooses to sing as this

is the only freedom available to him, that he can enjoy without any restriction. His wings are clipped, feet are tied, but his throat is not choked yet. This is something the poet have felt at heart and that's why she uses **the title** 'I Know Why the Cages Bird Sings'.

This might be seen as the poet's **message** to raise our voice, to express ourselves even though the stronger wants to suppress the weaker and to never ever give up, no matter what situation we are in.

In many ways the poem 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' can be considered as the poet's personal expression. Maya Angelou can be regarded as the caged bird in the poem. A stanza in the poem is repeated to catch the attention to the idea of the caged bird singing for freedom. The poem uses a metaphor to compare caged birds to African Americans fighting for equality during the civil rights movement.