

Caged Bird

Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream till the current ends 5 and dips his wing in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky. 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. 15 The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still and his tune is heard 20 on the distant hill	for the caged bird sings of freedom. 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 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. 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.
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Questions for Discussion and Writing

- To gain insight into the poem's basic meaning, apply the SOAPStone method. Keep these questions in mind as you read through and reflect on the poem.
 - What is the **subject** of the poem?
 - On what **occasion** do you think the speaker is saying the poem?
 - Who is the intended **audience** for the poem?
 - What do you think the **purpose** of the poem is?
 - Who is the **speaker** in the poem?
 - What is the **tone** of the poem (the speaker's attitude toward the subject)?
- Discuss the **form** of the poem—elements such as **meter**, **structure**, **sound devices**, and **rhyme scheme**. How does the poem's form contribute to its meaning?
- What is the central **juxtaposition** in the poem? Compare and contrast the two things that the speaker juxtaposes. Discuss examples of the speaker's **diction** that develop this contrast (e.g., "leaps" in line 1 and "stalks" in line 8). What metaphorical meaning(s) might the birds in the poem have?
- In the first stanza, to what is the speaker comparing air? What is the effect of this **metaphor**? In what sense might a bird "claim the sky" (line 7), and in what ways might doing so require courage?
- Identify the **rhetorical device** used in lines 10-11 and discuss its meaning.

6. What is the significance of singing in the poem? If the bird is singing of things unknown and feared, why does he still long for them? Why is his tune heard “on the distant hill” (line 20)?
7. Why is the free bird thinking of “another breeze” (line 23) and “trade winds” (line 24)? What do the **images** of “sighing trees” (line 24) and “fat worms” (line 25) suggest, and what might they represent **metaphorically**? In what sense might the bird “name the sky his own” (line 26), and how would you characterize the act of doing so? What political and historical meanings do you think the references and **metaphors** in this stanza might have?
8. What is the “grave of dreams” (line 27), and what **rhetorical device** is this an example of? What things are contrasted with singing in this stanza, and what difference(s) is the speaker suggesting?
9. Discuss the speaker’s use of **imagery**. How are elements such as **theme** and **tone** developed through this imagery? Cite specific images in the poem.
10. Discuss the use of **anthropomorphism** in the poem. Why is this an effective way to explore the poem’s **themes**?
11. The title of Angelou’s first autobiography is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. What does her choice of that title suggest about her personal relationship to this poem?