

## 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.

### 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?