

# Caged Bird



## SUMMARY

A free bird flies on the wind, as if floating downstream until the wind current shifts, and the bird dips its wings in the orange sunlight, and he dares to call the sky his own.

But a bird that moves angrily and silently in a small cage can barely see through either the cage bars or his own anger. His wings are cut so he cannot fly and his feet are tied together, so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings fearfully of things he does not know, but still wants, and his song can be heard from as far away as distant hills, because the caged bird sings about freedom.

The free bird thinks about another breeze, and about the global winds that blow from east to west and make the trees sound as if they are sighing, and he thinks of the fat worms waiting to be eaten on the lawn in the early morning light, and he says he owns the sky.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of his own dead dreams, and his dream-self screams from the nightmares he has. His wings are trimmed down and his feet are tied, so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings fearfully of things he does not know, but still wants, and his song can be heard from as far away as distant hills, because the caged bird sings about freedom.

instead, the poem further describes the bars as being "bars of rage"—the bird is imprisoned and certainly the physical bars of the cage limit its line of sight, but the bird can "seldom see" because these conditions make the bird *blind with rage*. By fusing the limits imposed by the cage with the emotional impact those limits inspire, the poem makes clear that the environment and the anger can't be separated from one another. The oppression of the cage doesn't just keep the bird captive; the captivity *changes* the bird, and in so doing robs the bird of its very self.

As an extended metaphor used to convey the pain of the oppression faced by Black people throughout (and before) the history of the United States, aspects of the poem can be read as directly related to that particular experience. For instance, the caged bird's song can be seen as an [allusion](#) to Black spirituals. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy." Additionally, Angelou's image of the "caged bird" is one borrowed from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," which states, "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me [...] / it is not a carol of joy or glee [...]" What both Dunbar and Douglass are saying is that the oppressed sing not because they are happy, but because they are *unhappy*. The cause of the caged bird's song explicitly mirrors Douglass and Dunbar's insights: though the song is full of the hope of freedom, the fact that the caged bird can only hope of freedom makes clear that it *lacks* that freedom. The song may be full of hope, but it is born from a place of deep pain, and the hope can be seen as primarily an attempt to cope with an intolerable situation.

The poem's point about the bird's song springing from sadness is critically important, because, historically, many defenders of slavery and other forms of oppression argued that the song and dance that was a part of Black American culture indicated that Black people were in fact joyful and content with their situation. The idea that such music might be an expression of cultural or emotional pain was ignored (in large part because ignoring it meant that those who benefitted from such oppression could also justify the oppression as not being oppressive at all).

"Caged Bird" actively and explicitly disputes the notion that the musical expression of an oppressed group is a sign of contentment. It is instead an assertion that the *opposite* is true. In making such an assertion, the poem refuses to bend to the convenient and racist interpretation of African-American song by white oppressors and instead asserts that the anguish forced on Black communities by white oppression must be acknowledged.



## THEMES



### OPPRESSION AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The poem describes a "caged bird"—a bird that is trapped in a "narrow cage" with limited mobility, only able to sing about the freedom it has never had and cannot attain. This caged bird is an [extended metaphor](#) for the Black community's past and ongoing experience of racism in the United States in particular, and can also be read as portraying the experience of any oppressed group. The metaphor captures the overwhelming agony and cruelty of the oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of the caged bird.

The poem uses the metaphor of the bird to capture not just the way that oppression imposes overt physical limitations on the oppressed, but also the way that those limitations emotionally and psychologically impact the oppressed. For instance, in lines 10-11 the poem states that the caged bird "can seldom see through his bars," which seems at first as if the poem is going to explain how being in the cage limits the bird's line of sight. But

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 8-14
- Lines 15-22
- Lines 27-38

**FREEDOM VS. CAPTIVITY**

The poem “Caged Bird” compares and contrasts the experience of a free bird with that of a bird held in captivity. While part of this contrast is meant to convey the injustice forced upon the captive bird, the comparison also allows the poem to explore how a free being thinks and acts, and to argue that freedom is a natural state for living beings. As an [extended metaphor](#) for the historical oppression of Black people in the United States, the idea that freedom is a human’s natural state of existence further demonstrates the cruelty and injustice of racism. The caged bird’s longing for freedom also demonstrates the Black community’s resilience against this oppression.

The poem’s first key insight about freedom pertains to what a free being is allowed to think about. Putting that more concretely: because the free bird is, well, *free*, it never has to think about its own freedom. Instead, the free bird spends its time *living*, and doing what it wants. When the free bird thinks, it is only of “another breeze” or “fat worms.” Thus, for the free bird, freedom is natural, subconscious. The free bird never has to think about freedom. It simply *is* free.

It is also worth noting the ways in which freedom gives the free bird a sense of entitlement: the speaker notes in line 7 that the free bird “dares to claim the sky,” as its own, and repeats this sentiment later in line 26. Despite all the freedom the bird already has, it continues to seek more from the world—it sees its freedom as naturally implying that it should “own” the world. It is difficult not to see this insight as referring more broadly to the way that free people, such as slaveholders in the American pre-Civil War South, saw their own freedom—and the lack of freedom of the Black people they owned—as indicating that their ownership of their slaves was *how things should be*. They saw their freedom, rather than a privilege or a natural right, as a signal that they should own everything else.

The caged bird, on the other hand, because it lacks freedom, spends all of its time thinking and singing about freedom. Much like breathing, freedom is experienced as something that is only thought of when it is no longer there. When one can breathe freely, there is no need to think about it—however, when one *can’t* breathe, of course, it becomes the only thing one can think of. In this way, the poem makes clear the emotional and even intellectual exhaustion that comes from a lack of freedom, the way it creates a prison not just for a physical body but also for the mind.

The caged bird, unlike the free bird, is completely

immobilized—not only is the bird held captive in a cage, but its wings are clipped and its feet tied; thus, even if the bird were to escape his cage, he would *still* be unable to move or fly. The total immobilization of the caged bird is likely representative of the layers of discrimination a marginalized person can face, from overt and official policies of slavery and discrimination, to racially-motivated violence, to being written out of history or culture. The caged bird, being tied and clipped, seems to represent the ways oppression not only imprisons individuals and communities, but also how it seeks to limit them in ways that can then be used to justify their imprisonment: for instance, a bird with clipped wings and bound feet couldn’t possibly survive outside a cage, so the person who put it there can then justify keeping the bird in the cage to keep it safe. The imprisonment of the bird becomes self-perpetuating, and conveniently (for the one keeping the bird caged) self-justifying.

In a similar vein, the immobilization of the bird could also be read as demonstrating just how overwhelming and cruel oppression can be. A bird that is already caged does not need to *also* have its wings clipped or its feet tied—in this poem, the bird is subjected to all three. The poem, then, serves as a nuanced and damning portrait of all forms of racism and discrimination, and in particular of the racism and oppression perpetrated by the United States against Black people.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-38

**FREEDOM AS A UNIVERSAL AND NATURAL RIGHT**

Even as “Caged Bird” explores the behavior of the free and the captive, it also makes clear that the *desire* for freedom is an organic, universal impulse that cannot be bound or destroyed. The poem states that the caged bird sings “of things unknown / but longed for still.” The speaker then clarifies: “the caged bird / sings of freedom.” Because freedom is a thing “unknown” to the caged bird, the implication is that the caged bird was not taken from his natural environment, but rather was likely born in his cage and has never known anything else. The caged bird has never known freedom but still understands what freedom is, and yearns for it. That the understanding of freedom seems to be universal suggests that freedom is the natural state of living things.

Given that the caged bird in the poem is an extended metaphor for the historic struggle of the Black community under historical and ongoing racist oppression, the idea that freedom is a biological impulse argues against the inhumane cruelty of oppression. The metaphor also demonstrates the resilience of the black community. Because of the omnipresence of racism throughout the United States history, the poem implies, Black

people—like the caged bird—have never experienced true freedom, at least not in the same way that those who are not forced to endure systemic oppression do. That they nonetheless continue longing for this “thing unknown” illustrates that, despite the hopelessness that the metaphor of the caged bird conveys, the Black community’s desire for freedom, and determination to achieve it, remains.

The repetition of the entire third stanza—which also appears, word for word, as the poem’s sixth stanza—further demonstrates the resilience of the black community. In the third stanza, the speaker tells the reader that the caged bird “sings with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still / and his tune is heard / on the distant hill” which demonstrates that, despite the hopelessness of the situation, the bird continues to sing loudly enough that he is heard from far away, inspiring others. The repetition of the stanza as the sixth and final stanza of the poem conveys that the caged bird does not simply give up, but rather will *continue* to sing for freedom— thus, this repetition seems to suggest that even as Black Americans endure its intolerable circumstances, it will continue to yearn and work for freedom.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 15-22
- Lines 31-38



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-7

*A free bird ...  
... claim the sky.*

The first four lines of "Caged Bird" focus on the life of a "free bird"—that is, one that *doesn't* live in a cage. The free bird is able to "leap / on the back of the wind" and simply float "downstream" without a destination in mind, continuing "till the current ends." These actions demonstrate its easy-going, carefree lifestyle.

The first stanza as a whole also introduces the free-flowing nature of the poem, which lacks a concrete rhyme scheme. This technique reflects the lack of restrictions faced by the free bird. At the same time, the combined use of [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) allows sounds to flow into one another, further contributing to this bird's sense of unrestricted ease. Note the many /b/, /w/, and /d/ sounds that dominate the stanza, in words like "bird," "back," "wind," "wing," "dips," and "dares."

This free bird is not only able to go wherever it pleases, but its sense of freedom also makes it feel powerful: it "dares to claim the sky." Here, the speaker complicates the previous graceful [imagery](#) of the bird by introducing this subtle notion that the free bird believes its freedom gives it permission to claim

ownership over something that does not belong to it. This idea (which is repeated later in the poem) is likely an [allusion](#) to white colonialism and the American concept of Manifest Destiny, in which white European and American colonizers felt free to take control over land that belonged to others.

This allusion also begins to demonstrate that this poem is an [extended metaphor](#) for the oppression faced by marginalized communities (most specifically, by Black people in the United States). The experiences of the free bird are later [juxtaposed](#) against those of the caged bird, thus implying that the free bird is a symbol of the privileges afforded to a dominant social group.

### LINES 8-14

*But a bird ...  
... throat to sing.*

The second stanza of "Caged Bird" introduces the caged bird of the poem's title. Unlike the free bird presented in the first stanza, this bird "stalks / down his narrow cage" with clipped wings, its feet tied. This stanza thus establishes a [juxtaposition](#): the *free* bird is able to fly and leap as it pleases, and is so free that it feels it can "claim the sky," while the *caged* bird is unable to fly or even see through its "bars of rage."

This particular phrase—"bars of rage"—reflects how this stanza describes the caged bird's *physical* environment while also constructing its *emotional* landscape. To demonstrate the severity of the caged bird's suffering, the speaker fuses its emotions into the images, transforming the bars of the cage into "bars of rage." Note also the rhyme between "cage" and "rage," which further connects these words and underscores the cruelty of the cage.

The caged bird continues the poem's [extended metaphor](#) and can be understood as a representation of marginalized groups. More specifically—given the poem's context within Maya Angelou's life and larger body of work—the bird can be taken as a representation of the oppression of African Americans.

The cage itself is a multilayered [image](#) that is symbolic of the different injustices faced by Black Americans throughout history. On one level, it could be seen as a representation of the physical bonds of the United States slave trade, as well as the other legal and cultural discriminations directed towards Black people. The cage could also be seen as a representation of the emotional restraints self-imposed by Black communities in response to their oppression, out of fear of retribution from the dominant group (that is, white society).

The fact that the caged bird has "clipped" wings and "tied" feet reflects how marginalized communities are often stripped of their autonomy. It also suggests the self-perpetuating and self-justifying nature of oppression: even if the bird were to escape, it would not survive in the world because of its clipped wings. Thus, whoever put the bird in the cage could argue that the

cage is in fact the safest place for the bird.

The speaker ends the stanza by telling the reader that, as a result of the intolerable conditions, the caged bird "opens his throat to sing." Though the caged bird's circumstances are fairly bleak, the caged bird begins to make music. This perhaps conveys a sense of hopefulness, or that the bird has discovered a coping mechanism that alleviates some of its pain and suffering.

The last three lines of this stanza are repeated again in the poem, becoming the poem's [refrain](#). The repetition of these final lines later in the poem at once underscores the pain of the caged bird and the bird's way of coping with its oppression.

### LINES 15-22

*The caged bird ...  
... sings of freedom.*

The third stanza describes the caged bird's song. This song is "fearful" and revolves around something the bird has never experienced yet still desires. The speaker later clarifies that the bird is specifically singing about "freedom." The fact that the bird's song is "fearful" might suggest an initial hesitation—which again contrasts with the behavior of the "free bird" of the first stanza. Where that bird is so bold as to "claim the sky," this caged bird is hesitant to even dream of freedom. This, in turn, underscores the sheer weight of oppression.

The speaker then explains the caged bird's song can be heard from a distance, again giving the impression that there is, perhaps, some level of hope for the caged bird's situation. If the bird's song of suffering is loud enough to be heard from far away, it could mean that someone may hear it and possibly assist the bird in some way. This also illustrates that the bird is not singing quietly to itself as a means of comfort, but is singing loudly—perhaps conveying that the bird's confidence has not been completely shaken yet. This could also establish the bird's righteous anger at its situation.

In this stanza, the reader discovers that the caged bird has never been outside its cage—the freedom it sings about has not been taken away recently, but has never been there to begin with; it is a thing "unknown." As part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#), this demonstrates the prolonged oppression—and, by that extent, the prolonged suffering—of Black communities.

This song for freedom is also likely an [allusion](#) to Black American spirituals that were sung during the legal institution of slavery in the United States, as many of these songs were also about freedom. This song could also demonstrate the depth of the bird's emotional suffering; Frederick Douglass, a man who became a leader of the abolitionist movement after escaping slavery, noted in his own slave narrative that the songs of slaves were not ones of joy, but rather were sung "when they were most unhappy."

This stanza features the poem's most regular use of perfect [end-rhyme](#):

but longed for **still**  
and his tune is *heard*  
on the distant **hill**  
for the caged *bird*

The combination of perfect end-rhyme heightens the musicality of the stanza and essentially embodies the song of the caged bird.

### LINES 23-26

*The free bird ...  
... sky his own*

The fourth stanza returns to the perspective of the free bird. The speaker continues to explain the free bird's day-to-day life. While the caged bird sings its song of freedom, the free bird is focused on the comparative calm of "the trade winds" as they pass "through the sighing trees."

The [imagery](#) of the wind quietly moving through the trees, to the point where the trees seem to sigh in relaxation (a moment of [personification](#)), reflects the free bird's contentment and enhances the [juxtaposition](#) of its situation with that of the caged bird's. The [consonance](#) of /s/ and /z/ sounds in line 24 ("trade winds soft through sighing trees") further emphasizes the sound of the breeze.

The speaker continues to describe the free bird's fantasies in line 25. The bird thinks about "the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn." As the caged bird suffers, only able to sing, the free bird is able to think ahead to the food it will eat and the winds it will ride. As a part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#), these fat worms represent the resources that are easily available to the privileged (again demonstrating, by contrast) the limitations on those who are members of marginalized communities.

The [internal rhyme](#) in the phrase "dawn bright lawn," also insinuates the sense of lightness the free bird feels, enhancing the bird's association with the concept of freedom. The speaker then, again, remarks how the free bird "names the sky his own," further establishing this line's [allusion](#) to white colonialism. Because in this line the bird actually *names* the sky rather than "daring" to claim it, this moment reflects the ways in which white colonizers actually *do* manage to conquer the lands that belong to others.

The mention of the "trade winds" can also be taken as a subtle, but deeply significant allusion. The "trade winds" are a global pattern of winds that blow from east to west. Their name comes from the fact that these winds powered trading ships, when those ships were powered by sails. In the context of this poem, though, the trade winds were particularly important in

the development of the slave trade, powering slave-trading ships from Africa to the Caribbean, from which they then sailed up to North America. This allusion, then, even more fully connects the "free bird" with white colonialists and slave-traders. The free bird should not just be seen as offering a contrast to the caged bird. Rather, the free bird in the poem should be seen as a symbol for the American white society that perpetrated the slave trade and the post-slavery oppression of Black Americans.

### LINES 27-30

*But a caged ...  
... throat to sing.*

The [juxtaposition](#) of the caged bird's and the free bird's experiences continues into the fifth stanza, as the speaker again describes the caged bird's suffering. The caged bird "stands on a grave of dreams," which demonstrates an utter loss of hope. The haunting image of "a grave of dreams" evokes the mass killings associated with slavery and racism in America. Furthermore, it links those killings to the death of dreams—to the inability to even imagine a better future.

The speaker then explains that the bird's "shadow shouts on a nightmare scream," capturing how the caged bird's suffering is so profound it's even present during sleep. This evocative phrase suggests that the bird's very shadow, which is by definition always connected to him, is in so much pain it "shouts" like a "nightmare." Furthermore, the phrase "nightmare scream" not only conjures the bird waking in fright from dreams of being trapped, but even implies that the dreams themselves have a scream-like quality.

As part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#), lines 27-28 cement the deep emotional pain that is experienced by Black communities as the result of their centuries-long oppression. The caged bird's suffering is so intense that the bird cannot even escape briefly through sleep. This contrasts with the poem's descriptions of the free bird, whose freedom is depicted as being almost thoughtless. Thus, the poem seems to suggest that losing one's freedom produces an intense, painful, and inescapable form of self-consciousness.

The [refrain](#) of the poem begins in line 29-30, though this time the lines are [end-stopped](#), rather than being [enjambéd](#) as they were when the [refrain](#) was first introduced in lines 12-14. This makes the lines literally look longer on the page. This shift to end-stopped lines in the repeated language signals a passage of time, as if even the same language has gotten longer since it was last spoken—demonstrating just how long the bird has been in captivity. The stability of the end-stopped lines also suggests a greater permanence of the bird's intolerable physical conditions; perhaps the bird has begun to accept its fate.

On the other hand, these end-stopped lines can be read as demonstrating the resoluteness of the caged bird and its

determination to sing through its suffering. Read this way, line 30 ("so he opens his throat to sing") functions as a repeated assertion of strength and faith in song (and, by extension, poetry).

### LINES 31-38

*The caged bird ...  
... sings of freedom.*

The sixth and final stanza of "Caged Bird" is a word-for-word repetition of the third stanza, thus functioning as a [refrain](#), almost like the chorus of a song. While nothing has changed in terms of language, the fact that the stanza concludes the poem demonstrates its importance, doubling down on the poem's most important themes.

The repetition of this stanza could be interpreted as representing the passage of time for the caged bird, and by extension, for Black communities. Because this poem is an extended metaphor for Black people's struggle against racism, the repeated stanzas capture the feeling that suffering continues to repeat, rather than end.

In turn, this repetition also demonstrates the resilience of Black Americans, who have fought against their own oppression. Despite living in a society oriented against them, Black people continue to express themselves and imagine better forms of life. The repeated stanza thus could be seen as an instance of the caged bird "singing"—as if it's the chorus of a song expressing the desire for freedom.

The repeated assertion that the bird sings loudly enough to be "heard / on the distant hill" suggests that, though the bird cannot travel far from his cage, his song can. And whereas the bird cannot open his wings and fly away, he *can* open his throat and let his song travel to "the distant hill." The bird, like this poem, "sings of freedom." And like the bird's song traveling through the air, this poem has become available to anyone who wants to experience it. That's why it has been read and taught for so long; for anyone who longs for freedom and justice, this poem gives voice to that longing.

Thus, the "Caged Bird" ends on what could be interpreted as a hopeful note, suggesting that people will continue to struggle through their oppression to finally achieve freedom.



## SYMBOLS



### THE CAGE

The cage—which is described as "narrow"—holds the bird captive, preventing it from living and moving freely. This cage comes to *define* the bird and strip it of its identity, indicated by the fact that the bird is referred to as the "caged bird" for the majority of the poem.

As a symbol, the cage is meant to evoke the cultural and

historical oppression of Black Americans and their suffering as a result of that oppression—thus, the cage could be seen as representing the literal and legal enslavement of Africans in the United States, which ended in 1865. The cage could also be a representation of the less overt, but still oppressive legal and cultural limitations (such as racial segregation, voter suppression, etc.) imposed on Black people following the end of slavery and into the current day.

The cage can also be seen as a representation of the emotional limitations that Black people have self-imposed out of fear of legal or social retribution. The fact that the cage has come to define the bird's identity (thus making it a *caged* bird, rather than simply a *bird*) perhaps represents how race-based oppression reduces people to their race, rather than being fully realized human beings. In turn, this can represent how a marginalized group can come to feel defined by their oppression—how oppression not just limits those who are oppressed, but changes them against their will.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "narrow cage"
- **Line 11:** "his bars of rage"
- **Line 15:** "caged"
- **Line 21:** "caged"
- **Line 27:** "caged"
- **Line 31:** "caged"
- **Line 37:** "caged"



#### THE FREE AND CAGED BIRDS

The birds in "Caged Bird" can be seen as symbolizing two different racial groups. The caged bird, which has been forced to live its entire life in captivity, can be seen as representing Black Americans, who suffer from racist oppression. The cage holding the caged bird can be seen as symbolizing the bird's oppression, whether in the form of slavery, race-based segregation after the end of slavery, or the more subtle but still pervasive and pernicious forms of oppression that continue to oppress Black communities today. The "bars of rage" through which the bird can't see capture the way that oppression faced by Black people is not just physical, but also emotional and psychological. The caged bird's song recalls Black spirituals and musical traditions, which often focused on a freedom denied to those who were singing them. In all, the caged bird portrays a Black community that has been terrorized by oppression, but that nonetheless continues to yearn and work for freedom.

The free bird symbolizes the white community, which has oppressed Black people. In particular the way that the free bird assumes that its freedom gives it the right to "claim the sky" seems to capture the way that the white community has and often continues to see the oppression of Black people not as a

crime, but rather as a sign of white superiority.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-38



#### MUSIC

Throughout the poem, there are several mentions of the caged bird's song, which the speaker describes as being "of freedom." Along with the musical quality that is achieved through the meter and sense of rhyme throughout "Caged Bird," the caged bird's song is also a symbolic representation of Black culture, emotions, and resilience.

The song, which is described as being sung with a "fearful trill" about "things unknown, but longed for still" is likely an [allusion](#) to Black spirituals, which were sung by those enslaved in the United States prior to the Civil War. Historians consider many of these spirituals— many of which are songs that express Christian values, and the desire to be "freed from sin"— a coded way for the enslaved to express and cope with their suffering under slavery. Thus, the mention of the caged bird's "song" is likely a nod towards the historic suffering of Black people under oppression, as well as a demonstration of a cultural coping method. By extension, the caged bird's "song" could be seen as a representation of profound pain.

The caged bird's song could also be interpreted more metaphorically, perhaps representing an outcry from Black people against their oppression rather than a literal song.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "so he opens his throat to sing."
- **Lines 15-22:** "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."
- **Line 30:** "so he opens his throat to sing."
- **Lines 31-38:** "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."



#### POETIC DEVICES

##### ALLUSION

The poem contains [allusions](#) to literature and historical events related to the oppression of Black Americans.

The most prominent allusion in the poem is the "caged bird" itself, which Angelou borrows from an earlier poet, [Paul Laurence Dunbar](#). In his poem "Sympathy," Dunbar compares his experience as a Black man to that of a bird in captivity,

writing:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core

Angelou's poem clearly builds off of Dunbar's ideas. Dunbar's "Sympathy" was published in 1889, while Angelou's poem was written almost ninety years later, in 1983. By alluding so clearly to Dunbar's poem, Angelou's poem both pays homage to an earlier Black American poet, while also making the forceful argument that the image of the caged bird is still relevant, and by extension, that the racism the cage symbolizes is still alive and well.

The poem also makes an allusion to the slave trade of the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries when it mentions the "trade winds" in line 24. The importation of slaves to the United States was part of a larger *Triangular Trade*, in which:

- Sugar, tobacco, and raw cotton were shipped from the United States to Europe
- Textiles, rum, and other manufactured goods were brought to Africa
- Slaves were brought to America

These trade routes were significantly influenced by the *trade winds*, which blow east to west from Africa toward the Caribbean. The reference to the "free bird" thinking of the "trade winds" is part of what makes it clear that the free bird symbolizes white America, which sees its freedom as justifying the exploitation of the rest of the world (or, as the poem puts it, "dar[ing] to claim the sky.")

Finally, the caged bird's song itself is likely an allusion to spirituals, which were created and sung by enslaved Black communities and often expressed a longing for freedom, much like the song of the caged bird. Many people defended slavery by arguing that such spirituals were expressions of joy that implied that slaves were happy with their lot. The poem—building on a tradition of pushback against this racist idea among Black Americans, including Frederick Douglas and Paul Lawrence Dunbar—makes clear that such songs arose not as expressions of joy, but rather of pain. These songs did not justify slavery or other racist oppression, but condemned it.

The bird's song can also be read as an allusion to poetry—specifically to this poem and more generally to the speaker's desire to write poetry. Just as the enslaved Black community expressed longing in their spirituals, so too has the speaker found a way to express their caged life through poetry.

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A free bird"
- **Line 7:** "and dares to claim the sky"
- **Line 14:** "so he opens his throat to sing."
- **Line 15:** "The caged bird sings"
- **Lines 21-22:** "for the caged bird / sings of freedom."
- **Line 23:** "The free bird thinks of another breeze"
- **Line 24:** "and the trade winds"
- **Line 26:** "and he names the sky his own"
- **Lines 30-31:** "so he opens his throat to sing. / The caged bird sings"
- **Lines 37-38:** "for the caged bird / sings of freedom."

#### ASSONANCE

Throughout "Caged Bird," [assonance](#) contributes to the poem's musicality, so that the entire poem can be seen as the song of the caged bird.

Assonance first appears in line 1, capturing the experience of the *free* bird. Right off the bat, the poem begins with the strong assonant long /e/ sounds of "A free bird leaps," and then fades into the subtler assonance of the stanza's last three lines:

and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

Though not quite assonant, the similar /a/ sounds of "orange" and "dares" add to the effect. The free bird's stanza is filled with repeating vowel sounds that convey a relaxing, easy life as each sound flows into the next. By beginning in this way, the poem associates musicality with *freedom*.

However, that isn't to say the stanzas related to the caged bird don't have *any* assonance. Particularly, the final line captures the bird's musicality which results precisely because of his lack of freedom: "so he opens his throat to sing." The long /o/ sounds capture the low, somber notes of the bird's song. The /o/ sounds also cause one's mouth and throat to open in order to produce them, thus mirroring the very feeling of openness that the poem describes.

As the poem transitions into the stanzas that describe the caged bird's song "of freedom," the quality becomes distinctly more musical. This demonstrates that the caged bird is currently singing while simultaneously evoking a subtle sense of peacefulness:

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

Short /u/ and short /i/ sounds play against each other throughout this stanza like notes in a melody. The increased assonance in these stanzas (3 and 6, which function as part of the poem's [refrain](#)), along with the [end rhyme](#), evoke the song of the caged bird, almost as though the refrain is the song itself. Additionally, because of the established association between assonance and a more relaxed emotional state, the increased use of repeated vowels in stanzas 3 and 6 can be read as conveying how singing soothes the caged bird's tortured soul, if only for a moment.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ee," "ea"
- **Line 4:** "e," "e"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "i," "a"
- **Line 7:** "ai"
- **Line 11:** "i"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "i"
- **Line 14:** "o," "o," "i," "oa," "i"
- **Line 15:** "i"
- **Line 16:** "i," "i"
- **Line 17:** "i," "u"
- **Line 18:** "u," "i"
- **Line 19:** "i," "i"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i"
- **Line 22:** "i"
- **Line 23:** "ee," "i," "ee"
- **Line 25:** "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 27:** "a," "a"
- **Line 29:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 30:** "o," "e," "o," "i," "roa," "i"
- **Line 31:** "i"
- **Line 32:** "i"
- **Line 33:** "i," "u"
- **Line 34:** "u," "i"
- **Line 35:** "i," "i"
- **Line 36:** "i," "i"
- **Line 38:** "i"

## CONSONANCE

"Caged Bird" uses plenty of [consonance](#) to infuse the lines with a song-like sound, as if the entire poem is the song of the caged bird.

The regularity of consonance (along with the fairly regular use of [iambic meter](#)) helps maintain a consistent and uniform sense of musicality, while also emphasizing the [juxtaposition](#) of the caged bird and the free bird.

For example, lines 8-11 use consonance to capture the experience of the caged bird.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage

The consonance, combined with [end rhyme](#), helps maintain the poem's musical quality, despite its toned-down use of [assonance](#). Furthermore, whereas assonance captures a sense of freedom and openness (as in the phrase "so he opens his throat to sing"), here consonance mimics the bars of the cage, locking each word in place with repeated /b/, /t/, /n/, /c/, /s/, and /r/ sounds.

Consonance is also used to enhance the juxtaposition present throughout the poem. For example, in line 23, there is a repeated /s/ and /z/ sound as the free bird fantasizes about the possibilities the day holds:

and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees

Here, the repeated /s/ and /z/ sounds convey a quiet, almost meditative tone as the light breeze shifts through the trees. In line 27-28, the same sounds are repeated, but to a much different effect:

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

When describing the caged bird's circumstances, the /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds convey a more complicated tone of sadness and anger. Although these sounds are quite similar, they do different work, and thus further establish the contrast between the free and caged birds.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "r," "b," "r"
- **Line 2:** "th," "b," "th," "w," "n," "d"
- **Line 3:** "n," "d," "t," "s," "d," "w," "n," "s," "t"
- **Line 4:** "t," "n," "t," "n," "d"
- **Line 5:** "n," "d," "d," "w"
- **Line 6:** "n," "r," "n," "n," "r," "s"
- **Line 7:** "d," "d," "r," "s," "c," "sk"
- **Line 8:** "B," "t," "b," "t," "s," "t," "k," "s"
- **Line 9:** "w," "n," "n," "w," "c"
- **Line 10:** "c," "n," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "h," "s," "r," "s," "r"
- **Line 12:** "h," "s," "s," "r," "d," "d"
- **Line 13:** "h," "t," "t"
- **Line 14:** "s," "h," "s," "h," "s," "t," "t," "s"
- **Line 15:** "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 16:** "th," "f," "r," "f," "l," "r," "ll"
- **Line 17:** "th," "n," "g," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 18:** "t," "n," "g," "t"



- **Line 19:** "n," "h," "s," "t," "n," "s," "h," "d"
- **Line 20:** "n," "d," "t," "n," "t," "h"
- **Line 21:** "r," "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 22:** "f," "f," "r," "d"
- **Line 23:** "Th," "r," "r," "b," "r," "th," "th," "r," "b," "r"
- **Line 24:** "n," "d," "tr," "d," "n," "d," "s," "s," "th," "gh," "th," "s," "gh," "tr," "s"
- **Line 25:** "n," "t," "w," "w," "t," "n," "n," "t," "n"
- **Line 26:** "n," "h," "n," "s," "h," "s," "n"
- **Line 27:** "B," "t," "d," "b," "r," "d," "t," "n," "d," "s," "n," "r," "r," "s"
- **Line 28:** "s," "sh," "sh," "t," "s," "n," "n," "t," "m," "r," "s," "r," "m"
- **Line 29:** "h," "s," "s," "r," "d," "d," "h," "s," "t," "r," "t," "d"
- **Line 30:** "s," "h," "s," "h," "s," "t," "t," "s"
- **Line 31:** "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 32:** "th," "f," "r," "f," "l," "r," "ll"
- **Line 33:** "f," "th," "n," "g," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 34:** "t," "ng," "t"
- **Line 35:** "n," "h," "s," "t," "n," "s," "h," "d"
- **Line 36:** "n," "d," "t," "t," "h"
- **Line 37:** "r," "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 38:** "f," "f," "d"

## REFRAIN

Due to the continuous suffering of the caged bird, the poem employs multiple instances of repetition, most prominently via its [refrain](#). Spanning lines 12 to 22, and repeating in lines 29 to 38, this lengthy refrain is like the chorus of a song. It captures the facts of the caged bird's experience that have led him to sing in the first place.

Initially, these lines explain the caged bird's circumstances:

his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing

The bird sings because that his only way of expressing his longing for freedom. The following stanza describes the nature of this song, which has a "fearful trill," is full of "things unknown / but longed for still," and can be "heard / on the distant hill." In other words, it's full of fear, hope, and strength.

When the poem reintroduces these same lines again as a refrain in stanza 5, this indicates that the caged bird's day-to-day experiences consist of the same actions: the bird suffers and sings, suffers and sings on a loop, thus conveying the seemingly endless agony of captivity. As part of an [extended metaphor](#) for the history of Black oppression in the United States, this refrain demonstrates how long Black communities have suffered under a social and political regime fueled by racism.

On the other hand, the refrain also speaks to the resilience of Black communities by demonstrating how the caged bird

continues to sing despite this repeated racism. For instance, the phrase "so he opens his throat to sing" conveys how Black people have remained undeterred in their self-expression. And the fact that the bird's song "is heard / on the distant hill" captures how the bird's powerful song travels great distances, even if the bird himself can't.

Note how the refrain changes from stanza 2 to stanza 5—although the words remain the same, the refrain in stanza 2 is [enjambéd](#), with a line break appearing between lines 12 and 13, while the refrain in stanza 5 is [end-stopped](#).

This change in structure can be read as demonstrating how, despite changes in circumstance (such as the shift from slavery to segregation in the south), American racism has remained constant. It contains to clip wings and tie feet, metaphorically speaking. This moment can also be seen as the speaker adding variation to a repetitive structure, conveying how the caged bird asserts his creativity despite these constraints.

## Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "his wings are clipped and / his feet are tied"
- **Line 14:** "so he opens his throat to sing."
- **Lines 15-22:** "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."
- **Line 29:** "his wings are clipped and his feet are tied"
- **Line 30:** "so he opens his throat to sing."
- **Lines 31-38:** "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."

## PATHETIC FALLACY

"Caged Bird" compares the experiences of a free bird to those of a bird trapped in captivity. The poem uses the [pathetic fallacy](#) to indicate that this comparison is an [extended metaphor](#) for the experiences of a group of people, rather than just birds. That is, the birds are described in terms of human experiences that reference the history of Black oppression in the United States.

The first suggestion of the pathetic fallacy comes in line 7, when the free bird "dares to claim the sky." Here, the speaker attributes two emotions to the bird: that of *daring* (that is, boldness or audacity), and that of the desire to own things, to "claim" them for oneself.

Later, in line 24, this bird thinks of "trade winds," which is a particularly human way of thinking about the winds that blow over the Atlantic Ocean and enable trade between continents. The speaker, then, attributes a very specific set of human emotions to this free bird: namely, those of a (probably white)

person who wants to profit from everything he sets eyes on.

The speaker also describes the caged bird's emotions as similar to humans. By employing a particularly figurative construction in the phrase "bars of rage," the speaker encourages the reader to consider the metaphorical meaning behind this image. That is, the bird's "rage" suggests anger over how black people have been oppressed in America.

The speaker uses similarly figurative language to describe how the bird "stands on the grave of dreams," and "his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream." Again, readers attuned to the historical context of this poem will find metaphorical resonances in these lines, recognizing the nightmarish effects of the human phenomenon of racism.

As might be apparent, it's easy to blur the line between the pathetic fallacy and reality, especially when it comes to animals. After all, animals have emotions too. For this reason, the poem's use of the pathetic fallacy could also be thought of in terms of [anthropomorphism](#), or even just a straightforward depiction of the lives of two different kinds of birds.

That said, the poem is most often interpreted as representing distinctly human—and, even more specifically, distinctly *American*—experiences. Its themes of ownership, freedom, and individuality are American values that have a long and problematic history. Given the context of Angelou's larger body of work, particularly her book [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#), it makes sense to treat these birds as projections of larger, human issues that Angelou engaged with throughout her career.

The reader may wonder, then, if the poem is about people, wouldn't Maya Angelou just write about people instead of birds? Aside from its elegance as a symbolic gesture, the use of birds enhances the poem's themes of freedom and captivity. Culturally, birds are often used as a symbol for freedom because birds seemingly have no limitations: they are able to both fly and walk on land, and many can even swim. As a result, it is even more devastating when a bird is captured and put into captivity, because it strips the bird of its natural freedom. Thus, the symbolic use of birds and pathetic fallacy works to engage the reader in the struggle against racism.

#### Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "dares to claim the sky"
- **Line 11:** "his bars of rage"
- **Line 15:** "The caged bird sings"
- **Lines 16-18:** "with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still"
- **Lines 21-22:** "for the caged bird / sings of freedom."
- **Lines 23-24:** "The free bird thinks of another breeze / and / soft through the sighing trees"
- **Line 24:** "the trade winds"
- **Line 26:** "he names the sky his own"

- **Line 27:** "But"
- **Lines 27-28:** "a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams / his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream"
- **Lines 31-34:** "The caged bird sings / with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still"
- **Lines 37-38:** "for the caged bird / sings of freedom."

#### JUXTAPOSITION

Throughout "Caged Bird," the speaker [juxtaposes](#) the experience of the free bird with that of the caged bird, demonstrating the vast and unjust difference between the two birds' lives. To further accentuate this point, the speaker presents each bird's circumstances in structurally similar ways, which enhances just how different they are. For example, a "free bird":

... leaps  
on the back of the wind  
[...]  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays

Meanwhile the "caged bird":

... stalks  
down his narrow cage  
[...]  
his wings are clipped

Note how the first line of the first and second stanzas have a [line break](#) after the verb: the fact that the free bird "leaps" is presented as [parallel](#) to the way that the caged bird "stalks." The speaker draws another parallel when discussing the birds' wings—because the free bird is able to fly, it can "dip its wing" in the light of the sun, while the caged bird's "wings are clipped," thus rendering it unable to fly at all.

The juxtaposition of the two birds can ultimately be read as the difference in experience between two groups of people. As part of an [extended metaphor](#) for America's historical oppression of Black people, the free bird represents white people. In a system based on white supremacy, the average white person can move through life much like a free bird, able to do as they please, go where they will, and "claim" what they want. On the other hand, in such a system a Black person doesn't have the same freedoms a white person does, due to social and legal limitations—from policing practices to economic exploitation.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14
- Lines 15-22

- Lines 23-30
- Lines 31-38

## IMAGERY

The [imagery](#) throughout "Caged Bird" is often used to enhance the poem's [juxtaposition](#) between the free bird and the caged bird. For example, when the free bird thinks of "the trade winds soft through the sighing trees," the imagery promotes feelings of relaxation associated with the free bird. To the free bird, the trade winds move so delicately through the trees it almost sounds like the branches are sighing in contentment. Thus, the bird's perspective of his environment conveys his perspective towards life in general as being easy and simple.

Meanwhile, the caged bird "can seldom see through his bars of rage," demonstrating that the caged bird's own perspective is one fueled by anger. Thus, the bars of his cage are represented as "bars of rage," illustrating how the caged bird's environment, similar to the free bird's, is infused with his own emotions.

This effect reaches a feverish pitch when the speaker says:

a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

Here, the poem's mysterious, even terrifying imagery evokes the depths of the caged bird's suffering.

The imagery in the poem is also used to enhance particular ideas: for example, when describing the free bird's life, the poem mentions the "fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn." The free bird is never depicted as working hard to track and hunt his meal— instead, the food "waits" out in the open for the free bird to take it. This image promotes the idea that the free bird has an easy life in which everything he needs is available, thus demonstrating the advantages white people (or any other privileged group) have over marginalized groups, such as accessibility to resources.

Meanwhile, when the caged bird prepares to sing, "he opens his throat." Rather than simply say something like, "he prepares to sing," this line creates a much more visceral, almost violent image that represents the pain of the caged bird. This image also conveys the notion that the song is difficult for the caged bird to sing, which reflects the ways oppression tries to limit the voices of black people.

However, the song of the caged bird is still "heard on the distant hill," thus demonstrating how Black people continue to speak truth to their suffering and overcome the limitations imposed on them. The caged bird may not be capable of opening his wings and taking flight, but he can open his throat and sing.

## Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 8-14
- Lines 19-20
- Lines 23-26
- Lines 27-30
- Lines 35-36

## REPETITION

Throughout "Caged Bird" there are various instances of [repetition](#) that, in part, insist upon the continuous suffering of the caged bird. This includes the poem's long [refrain](#), which is covered in its own section of this guide.

Besides its refrain, the poem's most prominent use of repetition is [anaphora](#), which often works to deconstruct the two birds' environments. For example, when describing the caged bird's circumstances, the speaker repeats the word "his" at the beginning of lines 11-13:

his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied

This use of repetition breaks the image down into separate lines, allowing the reader to take in each piece of information individually, gradually becoming overwhelmed. This helps engage the reader's empathy for the caged bird.

The repetition of "his" also creates a sense of claustrophobia, contrasting with the free bird's situation, which is evoked by repeating the word "and":

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

Again, this anaphora deconstructs the free bird's day and environment into its various parts, but this use of "and," "and," "and" instead creates a building sensation, where the speaker continues to add more and more to the image. This, in turn, demonstrates just *how much* the free bird has available to him in comparison to the caged bird, conveying the difference in privilege between members of a dominant group and those of an oppressed group.

The poem also repeats the phrases "caged bird" and "free bird" throughout, emphasizing the central role these two birds play in the poem. Relatedly, the phrase "dares to claim the sky" reappears in the modified form of "names the sky his own." Again, this repetition emphasizes the fact that the free bird feels entitled to claim ownership of the world around him.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "A free bird"
- **Line 7:** "dares to claim the sky."
- **Line 8:** "But a bird"
- **Line 11:** "his"
- **Line 12:** "his"
- **Line 13:** "his"
- **Line 15:** "The caged bird"
- **Line 23:** "The free bird"
- **Line 24:** "and"
- **Line 25:** "and"
- **Line 26:** "and," "names the sky his own"
- **Line 27:** "But a caged bird"
- **Line 28:** "his"
- **Line 29:** "his"
- **Line 31:** "The caged bird"

**ENJAMBMENT**

In general, the poem uses [enjambment](#) to break up its relatively straightforward sentences into smaller bits. On one level this helps draw attention to the poem's musicality, allowing for the creation of both [slant](#) and full rhymes. For example, the enjambment in lines 1 and 3 positions the words "leaps" and "stream" at the ends of their respective lines, highlighting their sonic similarity (both contain a long /e/ sound).

On a conceptual level, the enjambment in the first stanza also mimics what the lines are describing: the free bird "leaps" and "floats" right across the line breaks! Here, enjambment creates the sense of lines flowing down the page without obstruction—perhaps evoking the freedom the caged bird so longs for.

Yet in the second stanza, the enjambment feels a bit different. This stanza describes the caged bird's horrible circumstances, and the enjambment creates a feeling of restless pacing. The first three lines are all enjambed, not finishing their thought until the fourth line is added. The sentence's meaning is suspended, mirroring the caged bird's sense of both hope and anxiousness.

It's worth pointing out that while "Caged Bird" generally eschews punctuation, except for periods at the ends of stanzas, that doesn't mean the entire poem is enjambed. In fact, many lines that don't have punctuation here are probably better thought of as being [end-stopped](#), because the reader *experiences* these lines as being complete grammatical units/ thoughts.

For example, line 11 is clearly end-stopped despite not having any punctuation; it brings the first sentence of the second stanza to a conclusion (the bird is trapped in a cage and filled with anger), and the following line then begins to relate something *new* to the reader (that is, the fact that the bird's "wings are clipped").

Some readers might argue that the entire first stanza is actually enjambed—that the lack of punctuation is a deliberate signaling on the part of the speaker that each line is meant to flow into the next. This isn't necessarily an *incorrect* reading, but we'd argue that, within the broader context of this particular poem, lines 2, 4, and 6 are actually experienced as end-stopped. While these lines do indeed lack punctuation, they are complete in and of themselves; the subsequent lines *add* information but are not *necessary* to understanding the meanings of lines 2, 4, and 6 on their own.

This contrasts with the very clear enjambment at the start of the second stanza, where prepositional phrases—"stalks / down," "through / his bars"—are split in two. Presented alongside the undeniably strong enjambment of these lines, the first stanza feels much more controlled and self-contained—again, likely reflecting the sense of carefree self-possession experienced by the "free bird." As such, it's best to consider each line within the broader, overall *feel* of the poem. We talk more about this in our entry on end-stopped lines.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "leaps / on"
- **Lines 3-4:** "downstream / till"
- **Lines 5-6:** "wing / in"
- **Lines 8-9:** "stalks / down"
- **Lines 9-10:** "cage / can"
- **Lines 10-11:** "through / his"
- **Lines 12-13:** "and / his"
- **Lines 15-16:** "sings / with"
- **Lines 16-17:** "trill / of"
- **Lines 17-18:** "unknown / but"
- **Lines 19-20:** "heard / on"
- **Lines 21-22:** "bird / sings"
- **Lines 31-32:** "sings / with"
- **Lines 32-33:** "trill / of"
- **Lines 33-34:** "unknown / but"
- **Lines 35-36:** "heard / on"
- **Lines 37-38:** "bird / sings"

**EXTENDED METAPHOR**

Although a reader could choose to interpret the story of the two birds literally, the poem's historical context and use of [pathetic fallacy](#) signal to the reader that the birds are also an [extended metaphor](#), meant to represent the historic and ongoing oppression of Black people in the United States.

Much of this poem consists of [juxtaposing](#) the circumstances of the free bird against that of the caged bird—the free bird is able to fly, act out its whims, and access whatever resources it wants, while the caged bird can hardly move or see from its place in captivity. In the context of Black oppression, the free bird represents white people as a whole.

The average white person (who is free from large-scale racial oppression, since, historically, they have benefited from systems of white supremacy) can move through life much like the free bird. White people often have privileges and access to resources that allow them to get what they want in the moment, while also planning for future success—hence, the free bird "leaps / on the back of the wind" but also "thinks of another breeze" and of "the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn."

The poem also mentions twice that the free bird is seeking to "claim" the sky as its own. In the first stanza, the free bird "dares to claim the sky," while in the fourth stanza the free bird "names the sky his own." This is likely a reference to white colonialism, a mode of conquest in which white Europeans and Americans claimed land that belonged to others. Thus, the free bird's enterprising attitude towards the world represents not just freedom, but exploitation and oppression.

A Black person, on the other hand, cannot act as the free bird does, due to the racial oppression perpetrated by white Americans. Thus, the black community is represented through the experiences of the caged bird, trapped behind the bars of a racist society. The caged bird can't live freely or even plan for the future, because its past and present moment is entirely within the cage.

The cage that imprisons the bird can have several interpretations. It could be read as a physical representation of the history of slavery in the United States prior to the Civil War. It could also be seen as a metaphorical representation of the legal and social limitations imposed on the black community even after the abolition of slavery. The cage can even be seen as a representation of the emotional restraints that marginalized communities impose upon themselves as a reaction to oppression—such as, for instance, a sense of insularity. Because this poem represents the past *and* present history of abuses against the black community, these interpretations can all be applied to the cage simultaneously.

#### Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-38

## END-STOPPED LINE

As noted in our discussion of [enjambment](#), many lines here that lack punctuation are nevertheless best categorized as being [end-stopped](#). This is because they relate complete thoughts/grammatical units on their own; subsequent lines may *add* some information but aren't *essential* to understanding the meaning of these end-stopped lines.

For instance, as previously noted, while the first stanza may *seem* like one long, enjambed sentence, within the broader context of the poem, it's clearly not. Note how the second stanza opens by splicing prepositional phrases in two, not

coming to a rest until line 11; to really get the full sense of what the speaker is saying, readers *have* to keep moving down the stanza.

By contrast, the first stanza largely alternates clearly enjambed lines with lines that *feel* complete, creating a sense of breath and leisurely pacing that the second stanza notably lacks. The first stanza, then, seems to use end-stopped lines to suggest the carefree self-possession of the "free bird." You can easily tweak lines 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6 to be standalone sentences by simply swapping in a subject: "The bird leaps on the back of the wind"; "The bird floats downstream till the current ends." You simply can't do that with the second stanza!

Broadly speaking, the end-stops could also be seen as representing a pessimistic sense of racial justice as a dead end. That is, although there are a few moments that demonstrate the resilience of Black communities, there are also many more moments of pain and hopelessness—after all, the caged bird "stands on a grave of dreams." Thus, the end-stopped lines can be read as conveying the fear that the difference between the two birds and their situations is permanent, each line cemented in place like the bars of a cage.

#### Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wind"
- **Line 4:** "ends"
- **Line 6:** "rays"
- **Line 7:** "sky."
- **Line 11:** "rage"
- **Line 13:** "tied"
- **Line 14:** "sing."
- **Line 18:** "still"
- **Line 20:** "hill"
- **Line 22:** "freedom."
- **Line 23:** "breeze"
- **Line 24:** "trees"
- **Line 25:** "lawn"
- **Line 26:** "own"
- **Line 27:** "dreams"
- **Line 28:** "scream"
- **Line 29:** "tied"
- **Line 30:** "sing."
- **Line 34:** "still"
- **Line 36:** "hill"
- **Line 38:** "freedom."

## ALLITERATION

As noted in our discussions of [consonance](#) and [assonance](#), "Caged Bird" is brimming with repeated sounds that infuse the poem with a sense of musicality. It's almost as if the poem itself is the "caged bird's" song. Strict [alliteration](#) is relatively restrained in comparison to these other two sonic devices, though the alliterative sounds are often amplified through the

poem's use of consonance. In other words, sounds that repeat at the *start* of words are often also found *within* words in close proximity—meaning that even if the alliteration here looks somewhat sparing, it's still an important component of the poem's musicality.

Because the lines here are all pretty short, sounds may also echo across entire stanzas. For instance, the /d/ sounds of the first stanza ("downstream," "dips," "dares") might look on the page like they are too far apart to constitute genuine alliteration, but when reading the poem aloud, these sounds clearly ring out to the ear. Ditto the harsh /k/ sound in the second stanza, repeated in "cage," "can," and later "clipped" (and, via consonance, in "stalks"). This sound is inescapably sharp and, indeed, "clipped" itself—allowing the stanza to sonically echo the caged bird's captivity. Alliteration, then, not only contributes to the poem's musical tone, but often reflects its lines' thematic content.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "f," "b"
- **Line 2:** "b"
- **Line 3:** "f," "d"
- **Line 5:** "d"
- **Line 7:** "d"
- **Line 8:** "B," "b"
- **Line 9:** "c"
- **Line 10:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "c"
- **Line 14:** "h," "h"
- **Line 19:** "h," "h"
- **Line 20:** "h"
- **Line 23:** "b," "b"
- **Line 24:** "t," "r," "s," "s," "tr"
- **Line 25:** "w," "w"
- **Line 27:** "B," "b"
- **Line 28:** "sh," "sh"
- **Line 30:** "h," "h"
- **Line 35:** "h," "h"
- **Line 36:** "h"

**Stalks** (Line 8) - "Stalks" is a verb that, here, conveys a menacing or angry walk.

**Clipped** (Line 12) - The term "clipped" refers to a procedure in which a bird's wings are precisely cut to prevent them from being able to power flight. A bird with clipped wings cannot fly.

**Trill** (Line 16) - A quavering sound that is often associated with the sounds that birds make.

**Trade winds** (Line 24) - Trade winds are a pattern of winds that blow across the surface of the earth from east to west. The trade winds are a global phenomenon, and are called "trade winds" because they empowered trade across the sea. That the free bird is thinking about the trade winds captures that the bird is free to travel and feels connected to the entire world.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Caged Bird" does not follow any specific form. Although it does use features of formal poetry, such as meter and rhyme, these features do not follow any rigid or distinct pattern. Instead, the poem is written in [free verse](#).

The poem contains five stanzas. These stanzas vary in the number of lines they contain, and the length of those lines. The third and sixth stanzas match word-for-word, which puts extra emphasis on those stanzas.

### METER

"Caged Bird" is written in [free verse](#). However, it does regularly employ [iambic](#) meter, which enhances the poem's sense of musicality—a musicality that mirrors the poem's focus on the song of the caged bird. Iambics also create a sense of "rising," since each foot rises from an unstressed to a stressed syllable. This sense of "rising" may also be connected to both the caged bird's song and the general themes of the poem, which are deeply engaged with the goal of both the bird (and of the African American community that the bird symbolizes) to rise up from their oppression.

While the poem uses a lot of iambic meter, it doesn't exclusively use iambs. The most common variation from iambic meter in the poem occurs when the speaker replaces the unstressed-stressed pattern of an iamb with the unstressed-unstressed-stressed of an [anapest](#). For example, here are the first four lines of the poem:

A **free** bird **leaps**  
on the **back** of the **wind**  
and **floats** **downstream**  
till the **current** **ends**

In the second line the speaker uses two anapests rather than



## VOCABULARY

**Back** (Line 2) - The word "back" is often a word used to convey a direction towards the rear end of something—on a human, the rear surface from the shoulders to the hips is called a "back." In the poem, the word personifies the wind, and demonstrates how the wind seemingly *carries* the bird, almost like how an adult would carry a child on their back.

**Current** (Line 4) - The word "current" refers to a body of air or water that moves in a specific direction, usually moving *through* another body of air or water.

any iambs, while using one anapest and an iamb in the fourth. In each case, the anapest injects a little more speed and vigor into the line. In these particular lines, that vigor captures the flight of the free bird as it flies and dives on the currents of the wind. In each place where an anapest appears, it adds a jolt of energy that emphasizes that part of the poem.

While anapests are obviously different from iambs in that they contain three syllables rather than two, anapests are considered quite similar to iambic feet because they, too, "rise" from unstressed syllables to stressed syllables; anapests just have one more unstressed syllable.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Caged Bird" has no set rhyme scheme, but it does *use* rhyme in various ways. For example, the third and sixth stanzas (which are word-for-word identical) mix lines that rhyme perfectly with rhymes that don't:

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

The words "trill," "still," and "hill" all rhyme, as do the words "heard" and "bird." But the other three lines in the stanza don't rhyme at all. The lacking rhymes may thematically represent how the caged bird does not truly *know* the freedom it sings of— thus, it does not match with the rest of the rhymes in the stanza. In addition, in a line with many rhymes, it is actually the words that *don't* rhyme that are emphasized. So after the four lines of alternating rhymes (still/hill, heard/bird) the reader becomes trained to expect another rhyme, which makes the unrhymed "freedom" hit all the harder.

The speaker also uses [slant rhyme](#) at various places in the poem— for example, the entire first stanza uses slant rhyme as its end-rhyme, with the long /ee/ sounds and the /nd/ sounds of the alternating lines chiming:

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends

The use of slant rhyme throughout the first stanza likely demonstrates the free bird's unrestricted life— just as the free bird is uncaged and able to do as it pleases, the rhyme scheme refuses to box the free bird in. However, the use of slant rhyme still works to uphold the distinct musical quality of the poem.



## SPEAKER

There is no distinct speaker of this poem; instead, the speaker acts more like a third-person omniscient narrator, able to shift between the perspectives of the caged and free bird.

While the speaker is anonymous and unidentified, the reader could reasonably assume that the speaker, perhaps, empathizes with the caged bird, and perhaps even see themselves as being like a caged bird— hence, their focus on expressing the caged bird's circumstances.

It is reasonable to assume that Maya Angelou—the author of the poem—is the speaker of the poem, given that her work often touches on similar themes and she even wrote a memoir with a very similar title ([I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#)). That said, in the poem Angelou is not trying to represent *her* experiences specifically but rather the more general experiences of the Black American community to which she belongs. Given that fact, it is worthwhile to note that there isn't much reason to argue about whether Angelou is the speaker, as the answer either way doesn't yield much more insight into the poem.



## SETTING

The setting of "Caged Bird" shifts between the perspectives of the two birds. When the speaker describes the free bird, the setting is generally outside—among the wind, trees, and sun. Beyond those general details, the poem offers no specific location in terms of a setting. This is by design. The lack of specificity helps to make clear that the free bird can go anywhere, can be anywhere—that it is free.

When the speaker describes the caged bird, the setting shifts to the cage. In these stanzas, there is not much else described beyond the cage. This conveys a sense of claustrophobia and sameness, which is the caged bird's entire experience—nothing but the cage.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou was a memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist. Though several of Angelou's poems ("Still I Rise," "Caged Bird," and "Phenomenal Woman") remain popular, Angelou was best known for her memoirs. After a period of time as a child during which Angelou refused to speak, she developed a love of language and cited Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Laurence Dunbar as influences on her writing. Paul Laurence Dunbar specifically inspired several of her major works: alongside "Caged Bird," her most famous memoir, [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#), draws again from Dunbar's poem

"Sympathy." Angelou also wrote a companion piece to Dunbar's poem "[We Wear the Mask](#)."

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Maya Angelou's work regularly features references to the long-standing oppression of Black Americans. From the early colonial days until 1865, slavery subjected Black Americans to unimaginable physical, emotional, and psychological cruelty. After the abolition of slavery, the oppression of Black communities continued with the institution of racial segregation, racial violence, and more.

As a civil rights activist, Angelou was also deeply affected by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.'s respective assassinations, which likely informed the complicated sense of hope, determination, and resilience that infuses much of Angelou's work.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](#) – Video of Maya Angelou performing and reading her work. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhRICYO\\_JNg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhRICYO_JNg))
- [Angelou's Life and Work](#) – A brief biography of Maya Angelou by Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou>)
- ["Sympathy"](#) – Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, which inspired Angelou's image of the "caged bird." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46459/sympathy-56d22658afbc0>)

- [Angelou at the Presidential Inauguration](#) – A clip of Maya Angelou reading "Still I Rise" at the presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQQThtav41o>)
- [An Oprah Interview](#) – A video clip of Maya Angelou being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey in 1993 (<http://www.oprah.com/own-oprahshow/full-episode-conversation-with-oprah-and-maya-angelou-video>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- [Harlem Hopscotch](#)
- [Life Doesn't Frighten Me](#)
- [On Aging](#)
- [On the Pulse of Morning](#)
- [Phenomenal Woman](#)
- [Still I Rise](#)
- [When Great Trees Fall](#)
- [Woman Work](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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