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Critical appreciation of i know why the caged bird sings

"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. Form & Structure 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. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: Explanation of the poem Stanza 1 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 experience 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. Stanza 2 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. Stanza 3 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. Stanza 4 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. Stanza 5 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. Stanza 6 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. _____ Take the Test Quick test (5 questions) There may be single / multiple correct answers. Choose all correct answers to score full marks. Full Test (20 questions): Take the Full Test -- Read more: 'Caged Bird' is written by Maya Angelou, an American poet largely known for her autobiographical works. It was first published in the collection "Shaker, who don't you sing?" in 1983. It is a long poem dealing with the inherent need for freedom in human beings. Angelou's life is a testament to the whole Black American's lives and the way they have struggled throughout history against every form of exploitation and looked for freedom. This poem sings that narration through the traditional metaphor of bird. The poem has 38 lines which are divided into 6 stanzas. There is no particular form to this poem, it is largely written in free verse. Poem Stanza 1 Adding contrast to the title of the poem, the poet begins with a description of a free bird. It describes how a bird that is free to fly performs all kinds of tricks in the air. A free bird can flow with the wind stream. It reminds us of the people who are free to live as they wish. They can do whatever they want to. A free bird dips his wing in the orange sun rays. A person who is free can take part in the brightness of this world. Only a free person can dare to claim the sky. Freedom knows no limit. Stanza 2 The poet then talks of a bird who is limited to a narrow cage. Such a bird can not see through his bars of rage. Restriction from freedom fills us with hesitation towards life. In such anger, one can not see ahead. A bird inside the cage has no wings to fly because they are clipped and his feet are tied. He can not go anywhere so he can use his mouth only which is free to sing. It reminds us of the poet's own life in which she faced so much but kept singing poems. Stanza 3 Again the poet compares the free bird to a caged bird who can only sing fearfully. Due to the lack of freedom, most of the things from the outer world are unknown to the caged bird so he longs for them. A song travels from place to place so the song of the caged bird can also be heard in distant hills. It means, her claims for freedom through her poetry are now known in distant places too. Stanza 4 Here, the poet primarily draws out the fact that only in freedom, one can see the beauty of this world. The free bird thinks of a comfortable breeze. For him, the wind goes softly through trees. He has good food ready to eat. The fat worms are waiting for him on a beautiful lawn where he can freely fly and eat them. He has the freedom to name his own sky. The lack of freedom doesn't allow a person to even name things for him. Stanza 5 Alternatively, the poet speaks of a caged bird who can never act on his dreams. His dreams remain dreams without any fruition into reality. He stands on the grave of his own dreams which died out slowly. A caged bird is afraid of its own shadows. His dreams are now turned into nightmares and his shadow reminds him of that. It is the unimaginable exploitation which the poet and her people went through. As a caged bird, whose wings are clipped and feet are tied, she can only sing now. Stanza 6 The poet finally ends with a gleaming picture of a caged bird who sings a rapidly alternating tune full of fear. The poem as a song repeats its earlier images of longing for the unknown in a caged bird. There is still hope because his tune is traveling across distant places and everyone is noticing because he sings of freedom. Here are 10 important questions on Caged Bird by Maya Angelou PPT Maya Angelou ABOUT THE POET Maya Angelou was an acclaimed American poet, storyteller, singer, memoirist and autobiographies. She was born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri on April 4, 1928. She is widely regarded as the "Black Women's Poet Laureate". She spent much of her childhood in there of her paternal grandmother in rural Stamps, Arkansas. When she was nearly eight years old, she was ravished by her mother's boyfriend and told of it, after which he was murdered; the traumatic situation left her dumbstruck for nearly five long years! She was best known for her seven autobiographical books: Mom & Me & Mom (Random House, 2014); Letter to My Daughter (Random House, 2008); All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes (Random House, 1986); The Heart of a Woman (Random House, 1981); Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas (Random House, 1974); and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (Random House, 1969), which was nominated for the Nation Book Award. Her poetry: Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiee'(1971), was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Her autobiographies reflect the themes of economic, racial and sexual oppression. She found encouragement for her literary talents at the Harlem Writers' Guild. Among numerous honours was her invitation to compose and deliver a poem, "On the Pulse of Morning", for the inauguration of U.S President Bill Clinton in 1993. One of her famous quotes is " There is no agony than bearing an untold story inside you". These lines portrayed her utmost zeal to voice her opinions. Further, critic Robert B. Stepto praises her for borrowing " various folks rhythms and forms and thereby buttresses her poems by evoking aspects of a culture's written and unwritten heritage". ABOUT THE POEM The poem " I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" also known as " Caged Bird" was published in the year 1983 in the poetry collection "Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?" It describes the early years of the American writer and poet and conveys the notion of how the strength of character and love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. It is said that the writers James Baldwin and cartoonist Julie Feiffer inspired her to write this famous workpiece. The poem can be seen as a portrayal of social disparity, and the ideals of freedom and justice. Angelo, with the use of metaphorical birds, represents the inequality of justice seen in the society of her time which differentiates between the African-American community and its White counterparts. It is a heart-wrenching poem that reflects on the mindless oppression the Blacks were subjected to back in olden days. Maya Angelou takes her title from Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem entitled Sympathy. Dunbar's caged bird sings from the frustration of imprisonment; its song is a form of prayer. In addition, Angelou's caged bird sings also from frustration, in doing so, she uncovers the fact that the song transforms the cage from a prison that denies selfhood to a vehicle for self-realization. STRUCTURE OF THE POEM THE POEM A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream till the current ends and dips his wing in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky. 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. 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 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 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 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 poem is a free verse. There are a total of six stanzas in the poem with the third stanza being repeated at the end. Each line begins with a capital letter and the rest are in small letters. The poet has not used any comma, semicolon at the end, indicating the rhythmic flow of the verse. Angelo does not allow meter, rhyme, and stanza to control her poetry. She allowed the unrestricted flow in the sentences to intensify the importance of freedom in life. In the 36 lined poem, all the lines are very unembellished which helps to convey the complete meaning. In each sentence of the poem, the noun is placed in front of the verb, which might be because the poet wanted the readers to focus on the differences between the lives of the two birds that are caged and free and bring out their different dreams. This poem derives its power from rich vibrant imagery that encourages the readers to appreciate and interpret the poem in a variety of ways. The number of syllables in each line is inconsistent. There is a repetition of the word "freedom". Also, the third stanza is also repeated at the end which brings out the importance of freedom in the life of every being. LITERARY DEVICES OF THE POEM There are many poetic devices in the poem. Some of them are discussed below:- 1. Metaphor – A figure of speech in which a comparison between two different things is implied, but not clearly stated. Examples in the poem are: . " Caged Bird" . " Bars of Rage" . "Narrow cage" 2. Repetition – The third stanza is repeated at the end. "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." 3. Personification–The abstract ideas are invested with personality and both inanimate and abstract ideas are endowed with the attributes of living beings. The example of personification in this poem is " His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream", here shadow is personified. 4. Hyperbole– It is identified as an extravagant exaggeration, not to be taken literally but used figuratively to create emphasis. 5. Allusion– The title of the poem is a reference to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy", THEME OF THE POEM There are various themes of the poem and it touches a wide arena of perspectives. 1. Freedom versus Enslavement: The theme of freedom and confinement i.e. enslavement is prominent throughout the poem. The portrayal of the free bird living a life of phenomenal joy and liberty stands for freedom, while enslavement is symbolized by the shackled life of the caged bird whose "wings, are clipped and his feet are tied". The poem begins with a free leaping bird gliding in the open sky and is exposed to all the pleasures of freed self. A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream However, the caged bird lives an enslaved life in a "narrow cage". It represents the social disparity between the Whites and the African-American communities during the times of the Civil War. Moreover, the free bird is aware of its freedom and dares to claim the sky it's own. It flies through the orange hue of the sky and dips its wings. With the use of the colour imagery of orange rays, the effect heightens -as orange is a colour associated with glow and contentment. The free bird thinks of another breeze i.e. the wishes to get the most of his liberty and also feeds on " fat worms"; on the contrary, the only thing attainable for the caged bird is his voice through which it can sing his song of unmeasured melancholy. Singing is symbolic of his rebellion against oppression. The idea of freedom is "unknown" to him yet the bird yearns for the long awaiting enjoyment. An abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, " Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy". The poem ends on a positive remark as the voice of the caged bird is heard on a distant hill " and his voice is heard on a distant hill". 2. Racism and Slavery: The poem conveys the pent up sentiments of the poet against racial discrimination and social injustice in the form of slavery which was prevalent in America in the Civil War era. Though the poet never mentions it directly. The "free" bird represents the privileged Whites whereas the "caged" bird an extended metaphor depicts the enslaved African – American community of America. It captures the overwhelming agony and barbarity of oppression of the marginalized communities by relating it to the misery of the forever caged bird. Until 1965, under a system of racial segregation, named " Jim Crow" the blacks of the Southern United States, lived in poverty. They were denied basic needs like the right to vote, public transport owing to their colour. The caged bird is the reference to the social, mental suffering of the African-American Blacks. The bird could not fly on his own will and ambition. content created by ANISHA DAS Badal Paul is an educator, blogger, and writer. The author keeps keen interest in writing poems, novels and short stories. "WHISPERS OF THE INVISIBLES" is an unmatched paranormal detective story series which comes with the first book under the title of "NACHIKETA AND THE MYSTERY OF THE DARK SHADOWS". Besides, the author has penned another novel – "KALCHAKRA –OOM AND THE CHOSEN FIVE".

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