

Sympathy

I KNOW what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals —
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting —
I know why he beats his wing!

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,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!

Q: Why does the poet call the poem "Sympathy"? What does the title suggest about the theme?

Q: Is the poet simply expressing sympathy for the caged bird?

CLARIFY: The speaker gives the birds emotions that are more likely to be felt by human beings. It seems that the caged bird represents...

LISTEN: Hear the rhyme pattern.

PARAPHRASE: The caged bird's song is...

Vocabulary

Chalice – a cup or goblet; here, the cup-shaped part of a budding flower

Fain - gladly; eagerly

The Poet

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the son of former slaves who had been freed before the outbreak of the Civil War. He was the first black writer to support himself entirely through his writing.

1. In the first stanza, the speaker identifies with, or knows, how the caged bird feels, in what five situations?

2. In the second stanza, why does the caged bird beat his wings?

3. In the last stanza, why does the caged bird sing?
4. What is the situation of the bird?
5. Why do you think the speaker refers to “old, old scars”? Why do they “pulse again with a keener sting”?
6. What do you think the cage symbolizes? EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER.
7. What do you think the bird represents? EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER.
8. Keeping these symbols in mind, what insight into life do you think the poem provides?
- 4.