

# BLAZING TORCHES

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM *I KNOW WHY  
THE CAGED BIRD SINGS* BY MAYA ANGELOU  
R.MANO SOWMIYA

Maya Angelou is a much-renowned African-American writer and civil rights activist who is known for her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which made literary history as the first non-fiction best-seller by an African – American Woman. *I know why the caged bird sings* is an autobiographical writing and the first of a seven-volume series. It is a coming-of-age story that illustrates how strength of character and love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma.

‘I know why the caged bird sings’ was nominated for a National Award in 1970. In this poem Maya, who has been described as a “symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America”, goes from being a victim of racism with an inadequacy complex to a self-aware individual who responds to racism with dignity and a strong sense of her own identity.

Angelou and the other female writers in the late 1960s and 1970s used autobiography to reimagine ways of writing about women’s lives and identities in a male- dominated society. In 1993, Angelou was conferred with the honour of reciting her poem, ‘On the pulse of morning’, at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration. She demonstrates an evolution of female identity throughout her autobiographical works.

As a displaced girl, Maya’s pain is worsened by an awareness of her displacement. She lives in a hostile world that defines beauty in terms of whiteness and that throw-outs her simply because she is a black girl.

When she was eight years old, she was sexually abused and raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Freeman who was later killed by her uncles. She remains painfully silent for six years after this incident. Maya thinks of herself as an orphan and finds comfort in the thought that her mother is dead. Maya’s feelings



for and relationship with her own and mother, whom she blames for her desertion, express themselves in ambivalence and subdued brutal hostility. During Maya's final year of high school, she worries that she might be a lesbian and she initiates sexual intercourse with a teenage boy which results in her becoming pregnant.

The poem *I know why the caged bird sings* was written by Angelou when she was 40 years old and in the poem she breaks her decades of silence and expresses her long-suppressed emotions. This poem is a contrast between the caged bird and a free bird and their different characteristics. The poem begins by the speaking of the free bird and it has the freedom to go wherever and whenever, to claim the sky, because no other birds to contest with.

**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 for freedom**

Angelou uses the metaphor of the bird struggling to escape its cage, described in Paul's Laurence Dunbar's poem, as a prominent symbol throughout her series of autobiographies. The caged bird metaphor also invokes the "supposed contradiction of the bird singing in the midst of its struggle". The stanza shows us that the free bird is lazy and would rather float on the wind instead of making its own path and she introduces the limitations set upon the caged bird, and how this affects the bird, as the bird is still proud and cries out for freedom. The third stanza emphasizes the caged bird and its plight and it tells how the caged bird sings for freedom, as if it still has hope for things it does not know of. The caged bird "heard on the distant hill", the

bird is shown to rebel against all that holds it back in attempt to breed.

The fourth stanza is about the free bird again, and the bird is not content and is greedy to have even more freedom, but again it is shown to be lazy and then describes how easy things seem to come to the free bird, as there are worms waiting for it at dawn on the lawn. The fifth stanza depicts the bird in its cage- the cage that has now become the grave of the bird's dreams and once again the caged bird sings of freedom. In the final stanza is repetition of three stanza which serves as an emphasis on the caged bird. The bird song is to be feared and respected.

In this poem she portrays the enslaved African-American people, and she explores how people really feel about the freedom of others and how it is all taken for granted. She also focuses on the dehumanizing effects of racism and segregation in America, and she assists the readers in understanding the situation of slavery from her perspective.

Angelou's title alludes the poem *Sympathy* by the African-American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar, in which a bird hurls itself repeatedly against the bars of its cage even as it sings it longs for freedom. Angelou's title, a line repeated in the poem, establishes the central theme of her poetry.

Angelou identifies the bars of the "cage" as racism, sexism and the powerlessness of their victims, whose disabling responses of "fear, guilt, and self-revulsion" merely become additional bars. Angelou shows this imprisonment exactly how it is because it is so unnatural and it also naturally produces the response of "song", in the form of struggle, survival, self-affirmation, and at last freedom.

Angelou suggests that, by nature, humans are expressive. She illustrates many restrictions that are placed on expressive selfhood by acts of injustice committed because of self-centeredness and prejudice. When these are experienced Angelou explains, one internalizes the patterns of understanding that may last for life.



Angelou's description of the strong and cohesive black community of Stamps demonstrates how Africans subvert repressive institutions to withstand racism. Arsenberg insists that Angelou demonstrates how she, as a Black child, evolves out of her "racial hatred", common in the works of many contemporary Black novelists and autobiographers.

The poem is ultimately positive because although the caged bird has no freedom, his hope cannot be dimmed by his 'Bars of his rage' and 'dipped wings'. His song is so loud that it is 'heard on the distant hill', perhaps forcing the free bird to take notice. This could be compared to slavery in USA, the caged bird being a slave, and free bird a Whiteman, importantly the African-American often used to sing while working. This had the effect of raising their spirits and maintaining unity and producing a sense of hope.

Maya felt tremendous difficulties in finding her independence and gaining self-esteem in a society that makes things complicated for her because of her colour and gender. Maya Angelou compares herself to a caged bird, one that always sings, although it is trapped within a cage. The cage would be our ruthless society and the bird victims of our evil human nature.

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