

## Poetry Explication

### Physical Freedom

A delicate bird, its wings wisping through the soft air, collides into the iron bars of its prison, its cage. The somber account of this caged bird, “Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, is told through a speaker who knows “how the caged bird feels” (Dunbar line 1). The speaker communicates the idea of the caged bird and how the speaker is able to behold all the things the bird cannot meet. Dunbar uses literary devices like alliteration and rhyme to convey the feelings associated with this trapped creature.

Dunbar begins the poem with three lines containing the whisper-like sounds of alliteration to express the beautiful life of a free bird. “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,” the speaker recalls (Dunbar 2-4). In words like sun, slopes, stirs, soft, springing, grass, flows, stream, and glass all contain the quiet “ss” sound, a calm and tranquil noise commonly associated with peacefulness. Dunbar also brings in the “wh” sound in words like when (which is repeated twice) and wind. Together, the words enhance the image they describe: a cool grassy bank of a calm river, trees whispering softly in the breeze. The reader can almost hear the wind filter through branches and fresh, new grass of gentle slopes. The next images to be placed in the readers mind are those of the caged bird itself. For this set of imagery, Dunbar uses harsher sounds to mirror the pain of the bird. The speaker notes, “Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;/ ...And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars/ And they pulse again with a keener sting” (Dunbar 9, 12-13). Words like cruel, bars, pain, throbs, scars, keener, and sting contain harsh sounds such as “k”, “p”, “ai”, “thr”, “sc”, “st”, and “aiy” that come out sharp to the

**Comment [GE1]:** Beautiful anecdote attention-getter – I love the alliterative “wisp”.

**Comment [GE2]:** The conflict in this first sentence grabs the reader’s attention. Delicate-wisping-soft/collides-iron-prison/cage – the oppositions are balanced and intimate an interesting essay.

**Comment [GE3]:** Nice tone word

**Comment [GE4]:** Thesis previews the content and focus of the essay.

**Comment [GE5]:** Excellent topic sentence, containing the poetic device (alliteration) and an assertion.

**Comment [GE6]:** Evidence fully developed

**Comment [GE7]:** Analysis of the evidence that pulls the reader into the world of the poem

reader and show the bird's suffering in its prison. They can be the noises of the bird as it throws himself against bars of its cage, the clang of his beak on the cold metal. In the last stanza, Dunbar uses dull "b" sounds in the lines, "When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,--/ When he beats his bars and he would be free" (Dunbar 16-17). This sound conveys a rumbling, echoing noise that signals an end. Along with signaling to the end of the poem, it may signal the end to the birds suffering, with freedom from the cage by death. Dunbar also uses a structured rhyming outline in his poem that follows the pattern of A B A A B C C. He writes, "...me,/...sore,--/...free;/...glee,/...core,/...flings-- /...sings!" (Dunbar 15-21). The rhyming brings ideas into groups based on whether they rhyme with other lines. In the last stanza, the first, third, and fourth lines, which rhyme, bring together the ideas of the bird's need to be free. The next set of rhyming lines, the second and fifth, tell of the loss and defeat of the bird. In the last set of rhyming lines, the last two, Dunbar ties back to similar lines and ideas from the poem. The sixth line concludes the stanza, while the last repeats the common phrase found at the start and end of every stanza: "I know why the caged bird...." The rhyming noted in the last stanza applies to all other stanzas where rhyming connects ideas and thoughts.

**Comment [GE8]:** makes a clear connection between poetic device and meaning

**Comment [GE9]:** The writer explores another poetic device and its purpose.

**Comment [GE10]:** Again, the writer displays an understanding of what the poet is creating and how the poetic device enhances that effort.

Dunbar uses these beautiful and unique poetic devices to capture the idea of a trapped bird. The poem is notably titled "Sympathy". If it were to be called "Empathy", the title of the poem would mirror an entirely different idea. In Dunbar's poem, the speaker sympathizes with the caged bird, yet does not empathize. The speaker is observing the bird from outside the cage, not inside along side the bird. The speaker is only an onlooker who, in the limits of the poem, glimpses into the bird's harsh, longing life. The speaker in the poem represents the readers as they read the poem; the speaker is

**Comment [GE11]:** The writer reveals an uncommon and thoughtful investment in understanding the poet's ideas and word choice.

just like the reader. Emotions felt by the speaker can also be felt from the reader. Dunbar structures these emotions of peacefulness, guilt, and remorse accordingly. As read in the first stanza, the speaker is able to experience all the things the trapped bird cannot.

Dunbar begins his poem light, with images of gorgeous nature, barely touching on the pain of the bird despite the obvious that the reader assumes from a trapped animal. Then,

Dunbar smashes the reader with images the horrors of the caged bird. “And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars,” Dunbar writes (Dunbar 12). The images of a scarred, desperate bird crashing again and again into its cage evokes pity to the bird from the reader, then guilt, for the reader is able to experience all the images from the first stanza, then to hear of this poor creature who cannot experience them. In the third stanza, the remorse has set in, for both the bird and speaker, and unwilling acceptance is positioned in both. The bird has finished physically fighting its enclosure, but instead calls out for some help to release him. In Dunbar’s poem, the bird may be calling out to the speaker, but there is an underlining message with the line, “But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings” (Dunbar 20). The trapped bird can only find freedom in death. The bird’s acceptance of his condition- the one he will never physically escape- can only be cured by the loss of the bird’s life. Throughout the poem, as the speaker learns more about the trapped bird, the bird himself comes to realization with his surroundings and fate. Like all stories, there is conflict, both in the bird and speaker, along with some type of resolution. The resolution for the bird is death, while the resolution for the speaker is the understanding of this creature. As for the conflict, the bird fights against the borders of its enclosure, but also grapples between itself. In the line, “Till its blood is red on the cruel bars,” Dunbar uses the pronoun possessive “it,” opposed to the constant use of male

**Comment [GE12]:** Nice distinction – “by” – “from”

**Comment [GE13]:** Fine notation of movement and change. Serves as a reminder of that attention-getting sentence

pronouns in the rest of the poem (Dunbar 9). This line is describing the pain and suffering of the caged bird as he tries to be free. When Dunbar uses “it,” he gives the bird an object-like quality not found in the other parts of the poem. At this point in the poem, the bird has lost all conscience and doesn’t even think as it hurtles itself against its cage. The conflict is quickly over when Dunbar uses male pronouns in the next line, “For he must fly back to his perch and cling” (Dunbar 10). In this line the bird is recalling the memories of his past- those of his own tree and freedom. The bird’s conflict proves more contrasting than the speaker’s. The speaker learns sympathy for the bird in the short lines of the poem. Just like the reader, the speaker learns of what has been missing in the bird’s life, and what the reader or speaker can easily observe. The speaker then learns of the bird’s suffering, and then, at the end of the poem, both the bird and speaker resolve their conflicts in understanding of their lives. The bird is forever physically trapped in his cage, while the speaker can experience what the bird cannot, but must live with the guilt of having something another is not able to grasp.

The image of this trapped bird immediately brings the reader back to the life of Boo Radley, locked up in a dark old house, in Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*. But as put out by Jem, “Scout, I think I’m beginning to understand something, I think I’m beginning to understand why Boo Radley’s stayed shut up in the house all this time...it’s because he *wants* to stay inside;” Boo, or Arthur Radley, is so afraid of society and the people of Maycomb that he stays inside his house on his own choosing, not from force like the caged bird of “Sympathy” (Lee 227). In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the caged bird is Tom Robinson, behind the bars of his race. Although he spends most of the book behind bars at the jailhouse, his real borders are not physical. Even before being convicted, Tom,

**Comment [GE14]:** The writer pursues a sophisticated connection between the reader and speaker and provides a detailed analysis of the link.

**Comment [GE15]:** Terrific topic sentence that forges the connection with *To Kill a Mockingbird* – the intent to compare is explicit through the transition language.

like the rest of the African American community in Maycomb, finds few liberties from his oppression. These factors against Tom eventually lead to the conviction of him raping Mayella Ewell. Tom is suddenly trapped in a cage he knows there is no escape from. When an African American man is convicted, no matter what the evidence suggests, he is guilty. The other members of Maycomb county, especially the jurors of his trial, have little choice of what to vote. First, most are racist, and their vote automatically goes to guilty. The others, the few who may be leaning towards Atticus' strong evidence, fear what would happen if they voted not guilty. They have seen the treatment of Atticus for defending an African American man, but to vote to free this man would yield far worse treatment. The good people of Maycomb themselves are trapped in tight boundaries, fearing to speak out for fear of those who are racist. Tom Robinson, after the trial that, on an equal level, had seemed to be leaning towards him, is now guilty for a crime he did not commit. Atticus assures him that they will repeal, but deep in his heart Tom knows that Atticus could present all the evidence in the world, but nothing can surpass the obstacle of a black man against a white woman. He, like the caged bird, knows the only way of escaping these boundaries is death, and he willingly lets himself be shot despite the warnings of his captors. The final correspondence between "Sympathy" by Dunbar and Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* is the literal similarity of the poems. In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Tom Robinson is the mockingbird, a harmless creature who suffered for no reason. In "Sympathy," the bird also suffers, and both escape the harsh boundaries of their world by leaving their physical selves behind and finally flying to the bright sun.

**Comment [GE16]:** The writer brings this fine explication/comparison to a satisfying close. "The final correspondence..." is graceful internal transition language.