



How do we know which season the poet describes?

A. The season is spring, seen in the springing grass, first bird, first bud. Note the simile here, which helps us picture the pastoral scene which the bird so desperately wishes to join.



What figure of speech describes the flower?

A. The poet refers to the fragrance of a flower as it opens. He uses a metaphor to compare the flower to a goblet.



What type of figurative language is used here?

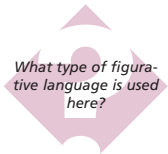
A. The poet uses personification, “cruel bars,” attributing human qualities or emotions to an inanimate object, to intensify the sense of unjust imprisonment.



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Sympathy

Paul Laurence Dunbar

FOCUS: METAPHOR

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,* 5
 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 10
 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, 15
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —
 When he beats his bars and 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 — 20
 I know why the caged bird sings!

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

- opes** — opens.
- chalice** — an ornamental goblet.
- fain** — rather.
- bough** — tree limb.
- keener** — here, sharper.



LITERARY CRITIQUE

1. Why does the poet write about the caged bird's feelings specifically in the spring-time?
2. This poem was written by the son of escaped slaves. How does he know "what the caged bird feels"? Explain how he conveys this sentiment.
3. What makes the second stanza, and especially line 12, so poignant?
4. How does the third stanza emphasize the plight of the bird?
5. Explain the analogy which the poem makes between the caged bird and enslaved humans.



WRITING WORKSHOP

Dunbar uses graphic similes and metaphors to compare human slavery to the bird's captivity. The bird's song represents its plea for freedom. In a brief essay, express what the bird's plea means in human terms; that is, to what is it comparable in the slave experience?



JOURNAL WORKSHOP

Have you ever felt frustrated as you tried to accomplish something very difficult? Describe two possible scenarios, one positive and one negative, which could be the result of your frustrating experience. Try to use extended metaphors in your entry.

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LITERARY CRITIQUE

1. As the wind blows softly, the migrating birds return and begin to sing, the flowers bud, and the bird wishes even more that it were free to join them.
2. The poem is an extended metaphor; the poet expresses his feelings toward human slavery through the concept of a bird put behind bars, deprived of its freedom to fly. While we may not be able to understand how a slave felt, Dunbar helps us imagine his plight, comparing it to that of a caged bird, picturing for us how it wishes to fly, and how it continues to resist imprisonment, knowing all the while that its struggle is futile.
3. The image of the bird futilely beating against the bars of the cage until its wings bleed is very touching. The pain that "throbs in the old, old scars" tells us that the bird has done this several times in the past.
4. Instead of singing a joyous song — as the first bird of spring does in line 5 — its song is a prayer from its innermost heart, a "plea" for freedom.
5. The analogy shows that even when enslaved, humans will fight against their condition (beat upon the bars) although they will be punished; they are compelled to remain in captivity although they yearn for freedom (cling to the perch, fain would be free); their old scars, physical and emotional, are still painful because they cannot heal properly in slavery (a pain still throbs); it is a continued source of pain to be enslaved when others are free (a keener song); the slaves' prayers are always dedicated to freedom (a prayer he sends).



WRITING WORKSHOP

Students should express the idea that the bird's song is congruent to the spirituals that slaves composed and sang, yearning for freedom. The bird's unceasing resistance is similar to the slaves' unyielding rejection of their condition, with old scars throbbing as they unwillingly submitted to injustice.