

How Does the Artist Relate to the Life of a Caged Bird?

Sympathy

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
(5) When the first bird sings and the first bud opes [opens]
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals –
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wings
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
(10) 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!

(15) 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 the heart's deep core,
(20) But a plea that upward to Heaven he flings –
I know why the caged bird sings!

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," 1899.

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