

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 3

SUBJECT: Literature-in-English
TOPIC: Non-African Poetry; "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou
CLASS: SS1
WEEK: 3

THEMES

1. Man's desire and longing for freedom is instinctive

This theme is seen in the poem. Despite being cloistered in a closed space practically all its life, 'the caged bird sings of freedom.' By implication, the poet suggests that the yearning for freedom is instinctive. The conclusion from this idea is that, it is unnatural for a man to put fellow man in bondage. However, this is what happened for many years in the American society, blacks were carted away from their homelands to plantation in Haiti and other parts of the world. Many of them survived a tortuous journey, only to get to their destination and realize that they were doomed to live as slaves to white masters. After many years of slavery was abolished in the America society, but the blacks continued to live lives characterized by oppression and hardship and they continued to yearn for freedom. In the third and last stanza, the poet states that the bird 'sings of things unknown but longed for still.' In the same vein, the African-Americans sought to be liberated from their oppressive status in the society. Even though they had never enjoyed freedom and all its perks, they continued to fight for it. They understood that, as humans, they deserved to be free to live their lives and bring their ideas into reality.

2. Discrimination in society

Maya Angelou uses the images from the free bird and caged bird to convey the theme of freedom and bondage. The birds are symbolic; the free bird represents the whites in American society, while the caged bird represents the African-Americans in the American society. The whites were granted full constitutional rights and were allowed to enjoy all the benefits that come with them. on the other hand, the blacks were stripped of most of their rights, including basic human rights. They were barred from many of the social amenities and benefits that the whites had easy access to. They led difficult lifestyles. There was a sharp difference between the lifestyle of the whites and that of the blacks in the American society. In the same vein that the caged bird 'shouts on a nightmare scream', the blacks made attempts to fight for themselves, to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo. However, they were nothing but shadow(s) in the society. They were unseen and unheard, and so, for along time, their agitations were simply dismissed or met with force.

3. The theme of limitation

In this poem, the theme of limitation highlights the enslavement of African-Americans for more than 300 years. The words: 'caged', 'cut' and 'tied' all represent different types of limitation. The caged bird is

narrowed down in space, in dreams, in life, in opportunities and hope. The idea of the narrow cage is to make him 'narrow' both externally and internally. At the metaphorical spheres of life. Line 10 also indicates that the caged bird 'can seldom see through his bars of rage'. This implies that the caged bird is also limited in its ability to see into the future and shape its destiny. The cage represents the oppressive society, while the bird as mentioned earlier symbolizes the oppressed African-American blacks in the society. For the poet, the various forms of limitation are not just the suppression of the numerous innovations and developments that could have risen out of that group of people, whose potentials have been stifled by years of oppression.

4. The benefits of limitation

It might seem ironic but this poem also expresses the benefits of limitation. It is convincing for one to note that for one to rise above limitation, one must be limited in the first place. Freedom, has good qualities but it is the obstacles and oppositions in life that bring out the genius in man. In reality, though the bird is free, its freedom makes it a myopic bird; it will never try to go beyond its natural abilities and it would never value the freedom that it has. It is the limitation of the caged bird that leads it to sing. Although the caged bird is in a restricted space, it has made its voice to be heard. It is important to note that African-Americans have been able to overcome many of the obstacles that have come their way to become people worthy of reckoning in the American society. They are well represented in different fields: education (Maya Angelou), civil rights movement (Martin Luther Jnr.), film making (Tyler Perry), politics (Barrack Obama), etc. If these African-Americans had not come from a group of people that had been marginalized for so long, they might not have been inspired to work hard to strive to be the best in their different fields of endeavor. Sometimes, freedom comes with comfort that can stand as a bane to development.

OTHER THEMES INCLUDE

- Life is evil
- Music as a channel of emotion, action and independence
- The beauty of nature

STRUCTURE

'Caged Bird' is a 38-line poem, made up of six stanzas of unequal lines which two constitute a refrain. In the first two stanzas, there are end rhymes, but they are not exactly regular; line 9 'cage' and line 11 'rage'. In the third stanza, there are three successive rhyming words in alternate end rhyme. Also, the fourth and fifth stanzas are arranged in couplets, that is, two rhyming lines each. For example, 'breeze' and 'trees' (lines 23-24), 'lawn' and 'own' (visual rhyme) (lines 25-26) and 'dreams' and 'scream' (lines 28-28), etc.

POETIC DEVICES

1. Diction

The choice of words used by the poet in the poem is imagistic. She makes use of words that convey images; 'leaps', 'wind', 'floats downstream', 'wings are clipped', etc. all these expressions create visual imagery in

the mind of the reader. She also makes use of words that create auditory imagery that creates sounds and ideas in the mind of the reader. Examples are 'sing', 'fearful trill', 'tune', etc.

2. Storytelling style

The style of the poet in rendering this poem is a descriptive, storytelling style.

3. Imagery

The poem contains visual imagery with words like: 'grave', 'nightmare', 'dawn bright lawn', 'orange sun rays', 'tied', 'clipped', etc. the poem also contains tactile imagery; 'soft', auditory imagery; 'sings', 'thrill', 'screams' and 'shout'. Kinesthetic imagery (has to do with movement), 'leaps', 'stalks'.

4. Personification

This is seen in line 'and trade winds soft through the sighing tree' trees cannot sigh. Line 28 'his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream'.

5. Metaphor

This is seen in line 11....'bars of rage' and line 27 '...the grave of dreams'. The poet's use of these words is contrasted with the bars of iron that make up the cage where the bird is trapped. 'the grave of dreams' is contrasted with the bird's dreams and it becomes the grave in which many lofty ideas are buried.

6. Alliteration

This device is employed in: line 8, 'but....bird', line 10, 'seldom see', line 25, 'worms waiting, etc.

7. Symbolism

The caged bird and the free bird are symbolic. The free bird is a symbolic representation of the whites in America while the caged bird is a symbolic representation of the African-Americans in that same country.

8. Repetition

'Caged bird, 'free bird' were repeated.

9. End rhyme

End rhyme is found in stanza three and six: 'trill', 'still' and 'hill'.

10. Tone

The tone of the poet is reflective.

11. Mood

12. The mood changes from stanza to the next. In the first and fourth stanzas, it is joyful. In the second, third and sixth stanzas, it is depressing and mournful.

13. Irony

The title of the bird is 'Caged Bird' yet the poem starts with the 'free bird'. From the title, one would expect to see only the description of the happenings in the life of the caged bird but the poem also has the description of the happenings in the life of the free bird.

14. Refrain

The third and sixth stanzas are repeated, thus serving as a refrain.

HOMEWORK

'Caged Bird' is a reflection of the life of the African-American in twentieth century America. True/false?

Discuss.