

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 2

SUBJECT: Literature-in-English
TOPIC: Non-African Poetry; "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou
CLASS: SS1
WEEK: 2

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Introduction

'Caged Bird' is a powerful poem about restricted movement that comes alive within the context of the unpleasant African-American community's experiences in the United States of America. The poet's thematic thrust, which hints at the enslavement of black people in America between 1526 and 1863, is pungent and it resonates with the vitality and vibrancy of the African-American essence. The poem portrays the harsh reality of life in the United States of America, where racism has been institutionalized (formalized), encouraged and sustained by a large number of official and unofficial policies, which privilege some races more than others. In the United States of America, for a long time, the blacks were marginalized and treated as second-class citizens in the society. They suffered severe exclusion and segregation because of the colour of their skin. Job opportunities were scarce for the blacks, and they were disenfranchised continuously and stripped of their fundamental human rights. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (a post-Civil War American secret society advocating white supremacy), hounded the blacks, lynching and brutally killing them. This social atmosphere caused Maya Angelou to write this poem.

When America became a British colony in the 15th century, its first European inhabitants were made up of different people; adventurers, wanderers, fortune seekers, etc. had been pushed out of the conservative European society. This punishment of being sent to America for grievous offences rather than facing death sentences was for many of these Europeans, a better alternative. In America, the settlers discovered that to build a prosperous and economically flourishing country, they needed much labour, more than was being supplied by indentured labourers and prisoners. Therefore, this desire to find means of very cheap labour to develop the American economy led to the importation of slaves from Africa. So, the first Africans to set foot in America did not do so out of their free will. Ironically, in recent times, this same America has become an attractive destination for numerous Africans who have dubbed it a 'greener pasture'

From 1526, the Africans forced from their countries and made to work as slaves were systematically stripped of their cultural identity. They were given new names and new religion. These Africans were stuck in a country they could not call their own and had no ideas of any other place to go. They were culturally rootless. Before the 1863 emancipation of slaves, there were attempts made by African-Americans to

assert their rights to self-determination through arts; literature and music. Some of the prominent Africa-American activists, who drew the attention of the world to the suffering of Africa-Americans in order to counter the fixed stereotypical mindset amongst the whites that black people were inferior, included Elijah Mohammed, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jnr., etc.

STANZA 1 (LINES 1-7)

In these lines, the poet talks about a carefree, free bird that uses the elements of nature to its advantage. The poet creates a vivid image of freedom and defiance through the precise description of a bird enjoying its natural habitat. By qualifying the word 'bird' with the adjective 'free' in these lines, the poetic persona presents to the readers all the things that a free bird can do; it can 'leap, float downstream and dip its wings in the sun rays'. The only reason why this bird can do all these, is because it is free. Here, the poet symbolically portrays the power of freedom; It shows that the free bird can overcome all the obstacles that come its way simply because it is free. In these lines, the choice of words such as 'leaps', 'floats' and 'dips' are used to convey a sense of energy about the bird's movements. The bird is energetic and lively as it enjoys its freedom.

STANZA 2 (LINES 8-14)

This stanza begins with the description of another bird. Contrary to the image of freedom and joy that is shown in the first stanza, what we are presented with here is an image of bondage and anger. The bird here is forced to an enclosed environment, one that closes it on all sides. The picture of bondage and severe limitation is foregrounded by the use of expressions such as 'narrow cage', 'clipped...tied'. The bird's wings have been clipped to prevent it from soaring to the skies; its restriction is such that even in the cage which prevents the bird from flying, its feet are tied to restrict its movement further. However, despite its pathetic state, the bird is still able to raise a song. The bird's feet and wings are symbols of its freedom or things which it can use to gain its freedom or things which it can use to gain its independence. Hence the bird is not just caged by the cage; it is caged by the way its life has been stripped of the very things that make it free. In line 14, the bird having been deprived of the things that would have made its life worthwhile, 'opens its mouth to sing'. This act of singing is symbolic; for African-Americans having gone through different periods of oppression in America, music and literature became a veritable means of overcoming pain.

STANZA 3 (LINES 15-22)

In this verse, the caged bird expresses its longing for freedom through a song. The song is described as having a 'fearful trill'. This shows that the song is filled with so much emotion. A trill refers to a vibration in a voice while singing. For the fear to be trilled, it means that the fear has heightened to the point of being contagious. Most times, anger and fear need a channel through which one can release them. In this case, the bird has channeled these emotions into a song. The bird's cry for release from its captivity is so desperate and strong that it is 'heard'...on the distant hill. The poet notes that the caged bird's voice

reaches the 'distant hill'; this could be a symbolic reference to African-American speakers, poets and activists, people like Martin Luther Jnr. Whose oratory skills shocked Americans, irrespective of creed, shade or religion; who lent their voices in the fight for freedom and agitated for freedom for the African-American. This view is further highlighted by the last line where the caged bird sings of 'freedom'. It is saddening that the caged bird is singing of freedom while being held captive.

STANZA 4 (LINES 23-26)

In this stanza, the poet switches to the free bird; the pleasures enjoyed by the free bird are mentioned in this stanza. The bird thinks of 'trade winds', 'sighing trees' and 'fat worms'. These are luxuries that the free bird can afford to indulge in and enjoy. The expression 'fat worms waiting on a bright dawn lawn' indicates that the free bird can think and decide what it wants to eat. So, it does not just pick anything; it picks the best, the 'fat worms'. This contrast between the two birds allows the reader to be drawn into the poem. It also ensures that the depth difference between the two birds is fully recognized.

STANZA 5 (LINES 27-30)

Here, the poet switched to the caged bird again. Unlike the free bird that 'thinks of another breeze'; the caged bird 'stands on the grave of dreams.' Once again the difference between the living conditions of the free bird and caged bird is brought into sharp relief. The caged bird due to its inability to achieve its hopes and dreams now stands on their grave driven to grief and pain, it 'shouts on a nightmare scream' the bird's life is a nightmare of broken dreams and clipped wings, driven by its anguish. It is important to emphasize that the caged bird is a metaphor for black people in America. Although by this time, they had been given a measure of recognition in the society but they were still restricted in many ways. There were still certain ventures that were deemed fitting for only white people.

STANZA 6 (LINES 31-38)

This stanza is a complete repetition of stanza three. Although the caged bird seems to be afraid of freedom because it does not know what it entails or what changes it might bring, it continues to yearn for it and to express this yearning in song. The circumstances surrounding the bird are unable to stop it from showing its desire to be true. The stanza also attains the status of a refrain and gives the poem a musical quality. (A refrain is a word, phrase or any expression that occurs at regular intervals in a poem.) Although slavery no longer exists in America, African-Americans, the 'caged bird' represent, still suffer a lot of injustice and marginalization as a result of racism which subtly, is still an integral part of the American society. The average African-American is no longer in shackles. However, he is caged by a host of debilitating socio-political factors. For instance, by virtue of the abduction of the ancestors of these African-Americans from different parts of the sub-Saharan Africa and the inability of these people to find their way back to Africa, most African-Americans are stuck in a geographical space that has no place for them and where they are considered to be inferior. Unfortunately, they cannot just leave America and return to Africa.

SETTING

The setting of the poem 'Caged Bird' is specifically within the African-American perspective of twentieth century America. Twentieth century America, for the average black was not a hospitable place.