

Not quite free: the
theme of persistent
discrimination in
"sympathy"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" is a twenty-one line, three-stanza poem that metaphorically compares African-American life to that of a caged bird. The author suggests that African-Americans are trapped in an inescapable cage. It is interesting to note that Dunbar was never a slave because he was born after the Union's victory in the American Civil War. He did, however, experience the racism that existed in its aftermath. These facts prove that the poem is not only about slave life but what life was like for supposed "free" African-Americans after the Emancipation Proclamation. Dunbar's use of figurative language in "Sympathy" illustrates the fact that even though slavery is nonexistent, African-Americans are still treated as second-class citizens.

"Sympathy" is a very lyrical poem as it follows a consistent rhyme scheme and is very easy to read. Since it is written in formal English, rather than in dialect, readers have an easier time seeing what the author is trying to say. Poems written in dialect help preserve authenticity by showing the audience the accents that the people spoke in at the time and region. However, it is hard for the audience to read and understand it the first time through.

Rhyme schemes tend to make poems more appealing to readers because the lines seem to flow together. Dunbar's first and third stanzas follow an "A, B, A, A, B, C, C," rhyme scheme while his second stanza follows an "A, B, A, A, B, A, A," form. Either way, each stanza ends with a rhyming couplet.

The poem's lyrical rhyme scheme and formal English language helps to make "Sympathy" one of Dunbar's most remembered poems. Dunbar uses repetition throughout the poem to illustrate the importance of the caged bird. The first stanza, for instance, starts with the line, "I know what the

caged bird feels, alas!" and ends with the phrase, " I know what the caged bird feels" (180)! It is important to notice his use of punctuation because he ends these lines with exclamation points. It is almost as if the author has reached some sort of epiphany in understanding what the caged bird feels. The second stanza starts and ends with similar phrases, " I know why the caged bird beats his wing," and, " I know why he beats his wing" (180)! Here, Dunbar refers to the caged bird as " he." The reason for this pronoun use is because the author wanted to keep the poem's rhythm: each stanza starts with a nine-syllable line and ends with a seven-syllable line. The third stanza concludes Dunbar's epiphany and use of repetition with, " I know why the caged bird sings, ah me," and " I know why the caged bird sings" (181)!

The use of repetition in " Sympathy" proves the significance of the caged bird. Dunbar displays his use of brilliant imagery within the first stanza. The audience can easily picture the image that the author conveys in the following line, " When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass" (180). He even uses a simile in the next line, " And the river flows like a stream of glass" (180). By comparing the river to glass, Dunbar suggests the smoothness and ultimate calmness of the water. He puts the audience in a tranquil and scenic environment to make them feel sympathetic for the trapped bird that cannot be outside enjoying itself. The poem continues with, " When the first bird sings and the first bud opes, and the faint perfume from its chalice steals" (180). These lines suggest that it is early springtime because the first flower bud is just appearing. It is again important to notice the dash that Dunbar places after the word " steals." It is almost as if he wanted to continue showing the audience how beautiful the environment

was, but had to abruptly end his phrasing to remind them that the bird is trapped. Even though the bird appears to be able to observe the beauty of springtime, it still is not free. The bird's freedom is just out of reach and Dunbar knows what this feels like. He was labeled a "free man" but was caged by the racism of the time. Dunbar taunts readers with beautiful images in an attempt to show them what it feels like to be caged. Dunbar illustrates the caged bird's determinism in the second stanza by showing the audience its will to fight for its freedom. "I know why the caged bird beats his wing," Dunbar writes, "Till its blood is red on the cruel bars" (180). According to the author, the bird beats its wings in hopes that the cage will someday break open. He notes that the bars are cruel for keeping the innocent bird trapped for so long.

In another thematically important detail, the bird has tried this escape many times before, as Dunbar makes clear with the line, "And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars" (180). The bird has fought so hard and so many times for its freedom that it has injured itself so badly that there are scars. Dunbar places emphasis on the word "old" by repeating it to show readers how long this fight has been going on. Furthermore, the bird has not built up a tolerance to the pain because Dunbar says that it gets sharper: "And they pulse again with a keener sting" (180). Dunbar is metaphorically comparing the bird's scars to those that slavery has made on African-American society. He suggests that those scars are being reopened as they continue to fight for freedom. The final stanza of "Sympathy" illustrates the bird's anticipation for freedom. Dunbar explains, "When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore" (181), the bird sings. "It is not a carol of joy or glee," Dunbar

writes of the bird's song, " But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core" (181). In other words, even though the bird is hurt, it still continues to pray in enthusiasm of finally gaining its deserved independence. These lines reinforce the determinism that was displayed in the second stanza. The bird never gives up in believing that it will one day be successful in its fight for freedom. Metaphorically speaking, African-Americans continued to pray for their freedom in its entirety even though it seems like there was always something that was holding them back.

Even though Dunbar wrote this poem in 1899, the themes that it conveys are still relevant to today. Over one hundred years has passed since the American Civil War ended but racism definitely still exists; today, discrimination and prejudice continue to afflict African-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and LGBTQ Americans. It is amazing to think that a poem written over one hundred years ago can still have such a significant relevance to twenty-first century issues. Dunbar uses repetition, a simile, imagery, and a consistent rhyme scheme to embellish the poem's giant metaphor of comparing a caged bird's life to that of African-Americans. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation labeled African-Americans as being free, this certainly was not the case. The Jim Crow laws were being enforced and they were intended to repress the newly freed slaves. During Reconstruction and even decades afterwards, African-Americans were being discriminated against. Dunbar uses " Sympathy" to illustrate how African-Americans were being caged by racism that existed after the American Civil War.

Works Cited

Dunbar, Paul L. "Sympathy." 1899. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter. 6th ed. Vol. C. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010. 180-81. Print.