Sympathy Essay, Research Paper

The poem “Sympathy”, by Paul Laurence Dunbar suggests to the reader a comparison between the lifestyle of the caged bird, and the African American in the nineteenth century. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s focus of “Sympathy” is how the African American identifies and relates to the frustrations and pain that a caged bird experiences. Dunbar begins the poem by stating, “I know what the caged bird feels, alas!” which illustrates the comparison of a caged bird to an African American.

Dunbar writes a poem with vivid and descriptive language throughout. Dunbar uses this to emphasize his point that someone tied up in bondage and chains figuratively is not fortunate enough to enjoy the finer things in life. Sadly, “springing grass”, a flowing river, and budding flowers are things that unoppressed people might take for granted (For a slave or someone struggling to get on their feet post slavery, could not take the time to enjoy life’s pleasures in which Dunbar symbolically uses nature.) Dunbar uses language that reaches out, striking a personal chord with the reader. Grass, river, or flowers may be objects we enjoy, but underprivileged people, not necessarily minorities, cannot enjoy because of social or economic circumstances. Underprivileged people may see white people doing what they enjoy and work themselves into a frustrated frenzy because try as they might, the deck is stacked against them.

Ironically, the life of the caged bird is the life of the African American. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the black population was enslaved and tortured by the white population. African Americans were looked down upon with disgust and inequity. The whites forced the blacks to become slaves to them because the white population possessed all of the power and wealth in America at that time; therefore, the black population had no choice but to be enslaved. African Americans were not given the chance to flourish and grow. In essence, African Americans were prisoners in their own home i.e. like the caged bird.

The life of a caged bird is similar. Caged birds too are like prisoners in their own home. A caged bird is not allowed to use its ability to fly, to explore, and to be free. Instead, the caged bird is forced to be on “his perch and cling when he fain would be on the bough a-swing.” (Lines 10, 11) Dunbar identifies the African American lifestyle with what the caged bird feels. In the first stanza, Dunbar writes about the beauty of nature. He writes of “when the sun is bright on the upward slopes; And the river flows like a stream of glass; When the first bird sings and the first bud opes, And the faint perfume from its chalice steals” and then Dunbar writes “I know what the caged bird feels.” (Lines 2-7) Interpretivly, Dunbar seems to be relating the caged bird’s sadness that stems from not being allowed to enjoy the mysterious beauties of nature. Dunbar attempts to bring the reader into the first stanza by evoking emotion and refection of the beautiful things that all humans should be able to experience.

In the second stanza, Dunbar refers to the emotional and physical abuse that imprisonment and enslavement evokes both in the caged bird and the African American. He begins this stanza with, “I know why the caged bird beats his wing.” (Line 8) Meaning, Dunbar understands why the caged bird fights both physically and emotionally to be set free. The remaining portions of the second stanza portray the self-inflicted and non self-inflicted physical wounds of the caged bird to the African American. The self-inflicted wounds come from the battle for freedom. Dunbar describes “why the caged bird beats his wing till its blood is red on the cruel bars” because “he must fly back to his perch and cling when he fain would be on the bough a-swing.” (Lines 8-11) The African Americans experienced this same kind of pain from fighting for their freedom. Lynching, or being put to death by hanging or burning without legal sanction, were the prominent choices of deadly torture in the 1800’s and early 1900’s. Lynching or beating occurred when a slave tried to escape or disobey his/her white master. It seems that Dunbar is metaphorically referring to this in his second stanza.

“I know why the caged bird sings, ah me”, begins the third stanza of “Sympathy.” Singing, for the most part, is thought to be out of happiness and contentment. On the other hand, singing can be borne out of misery such as we see in the history of African American song, singing for the slaves was for this reason. Slaves sang to express their unhappiness; to release the emotions African Americans were not allowed expressing without severe punishment. Dunbar refers to this singing in the last stanza of “Sympathy” and compares it with why the caged bird sings. Dunbar writes that the caged bird sings ” not a carol of joy or glee, but a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core, but a plea that upward Heaven he flings.” (Lines 18-20) Therefore, singing is a plea for help and freedom for the blacks and the caged bird. Slaves sang not out of joy, but to drown out their sorrow. Singing was a life jacket for African Americans during slavery as it is for the caged bird. The song was a plea for compassion and freedom.

A reader could look at the poem “Sympathy” as a piece of entertainment seeing as he is purely talking about past slave time and think it bears no relevance to present day. Other readers could think it to be directed at blacks that were in a struggle during the time of Reconstruction and years following. This poem could be directed to anyone in any given situation. That is, the poetry of beauty. It could be subjective to your frame of reference. Whether it be a job, school, family, or relationship situations, Dunbar could be saying you (the reader) are trapped like the caged bird and you (the reader) have no other option but to expend your energy to get out i.e. of the cage. The longer you (the reader) stay in a bad situation, the worse the situation gets, the more beat up emotionally you become.

I interpret Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Sympathy” as his way of expressing the suppressed life of African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He eloquently compares an innocent creature’s lifestyle to the lifestyle of the African Americans. The language chosen for this poem evokes compassion, sympathy, and understanding in the reader. In reality, African Americans were denied the right to life, just like the caged bird. This in turn allows the reader to empathize with the lives of slaves.

Dunbar, Paul lawrence, “Sympathy” in Black Voices