

# I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

MAYA ANGELOU

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## About the Author



*Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist whose writing explores identity, resilience, justice, and the power of voice. Born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, Angelou spent much of her childhood in Arkansas, where experiences of racism, trauma, and silence later shaped the themes of her work. She became one of the most influential literary figures of the twentieth century, known for writing that blends personal narrative with broader reflections on history, culture, and human dignity. Angelou first gained international recognition with her 1969 memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which recounts her childhood and her journey toward reclaiming language after a period of self-imposed silence. The book helped redefine the modern memoir and remains widely taught for its exploration of race, gender, and personal agency. She went on to write several additional autobiographies, poetry collections, essays, and plays. Throughout her career, Angelou was deeply involved in the civil rights movement and worked with leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Her writing often reflects the moral urgency of that historical moment while emphasizing empathy, courage, and the transformative potential of language. Angelou’s poetry reached a broad audience in 1993 when she recited “On the Pulse of Morning” at the inauguration of Bill Clinton, becoming the first poet to deliver an inaugural poem at a U.S. presidential inauguration since 1961. Her work has received numerous honors, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Today, Maya Angelou’s writing remains widely read for its clarity, emotional honesty, and belief that words can confront injustice, affirm human worth, and inspire social change.*

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The free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wings  
in the orange sun rays

and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks

down his narrow cage

10 can seldom see through

his bars of rage

his wings are clipped and

his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings

with fearful trill

of the things unknown

but longed for still

and his tune is heard

20 on the distant hill

for the caged bird

sings of freedom

The free bird thinks of another breeze

and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees

and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn

and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams

his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

his wings are clipped and his feet are tied

30 so he opens his throat to sing

The caged bird sings

with a fearful trill

of things unknown

but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.