

Paul Laurence Dunbar was an African American poet who wrote in the late 1800s and early 1900s. His poem “Sympathy” speaks of the feelings of a bird in a cage. Read the poem and answer the questions that follow.

SYMPATHY

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
5 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,¹
And the faint perfume from its chalice² steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
10 For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain³ would be on the bough⁴ a-swing;
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

15 I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
20 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

—*Paul Laurence Dunbar*

¹ *opes* — opens

² *chalice* — a cup or goblet

³ *fain* — gladly

⁴ *bough* — branch