

## Comprehension Passages

### Stanza 1

A free bird leaps on the back  
Of the wind and floats downstream  
Till the current ends and dips his wing  
In the orange suns rays  
And dares to claim the sky.

Read the above lines and answer the questions that follow.

#### Question 1.

Explain with reference to the context.

#### Answer:

These lines are taken from the poem, 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' written by Mary Angelou. The theme of the poem is the suffering of African- Americans and the contrast of slavery versus freedom. Maya Angelou's 1983 poem "Caged Bird" compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Many readers have interpreted Angelou's poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

In these lines the poet refers to nature. She describes the way "a free bird leaps on the back of the wind". She describes the bird's flight against the orange sky. The free bird has the right "to claim the sky". The way she describes the "orange sun rays" gives the reader an appreciation for the natural beauty of the sky, and her description of the way the bird "dips his wing" helps the reader to appreciate the bird in his natural habitat, enjoying his freedom.

#### Question 2.

What does the caged bird's singing reveal about him?

#### Answer:

It reveals that he is unhappy and wants to be free.

#### Question 3.

Which birds are used to describe the state of the free bird?

#### Answer:

The words used are leaps, floats, dares and claims.

### Stanza 2

But a BIRD that stalks down his narrow cage  
Can seldom see through his bars of rage  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing.

Read the above lines and answer the questions that follow.

#### Question 1.

Explain with reference to the context.

#### Answer:

These lines are taken from the poem, 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' written by Mary Angelou. The theme of the poem is the suffering of African- Americans and the contrast of slavery versus freedom. Maya Angelou's 1983 poem "Caged Bird" compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Many readers have interpreted Angelou's poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

This stanza is in stark contrast with the first. By using the word "but" to begin this stanza, the speaker prepares the reader for this contrast. Then she describes the "bird that stalks his narrow cage". The tone is immediately and drastically changed from peaceful, satisfied, and joyful to one that is dark, unnerving, and even frustrating. She describes that this caged first "can seldom see through his bars of rage". While the free bird gets to enjoy the full sky, the caged bird rarely even gets a glimpse of the sky. She claims that "his wings are clipped and his feet are tied". Text from her autobiography reveals that Angelou often felt this way in life. She felt restricted from enjoying the freedom that should have been her right as a human being. The speaker then reveals that these are the very reasons that the bird "opens his throat to sing". The author felt this way in her own life. She wrote and sang and danced because it was her way of expressing her longing for freedom.

### Question 2.

What does the word "clipped" mean in this poem?

#### Answer:

Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" is full of avian metaphors and imagery. The poem itself is a metaphor for the limitations one experiences in a life of oppression. "Caged Bird" draws from Angelou's own experiences as a Black woman in the racially-segregated United States following the Civil War and even beyond the Civil Rights Movement. To this day, many Black Americans face limitations based on a systemic cycle of racial oppression which prevents class mobility. In talking of birds, "clipping" involves trimming a bird's wing feathers so that they cannot fly. Some bird owners or caretakers trim just one wing or enough feathers on each side, so as to render the bird unstable in flight but leaving them able to glide for a short distance. In Angelou's poem the bird longs for freedom but is restricted as not only is it caged but its wings are also clipped.

### Question 3.

Why does the caged bird sing?

#### Answer:

The caged bird sings because it is the only way it knows to express itself.

### Stanza 3

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.

Read the above lines and answer the questions that follow.

### Question 1.

Explain with reference to the context.

#### Answer:

These lines are taken from the poem, 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' written by Mary Angelou. The theme of the poem is the suffering of African- Americans and the contrast of slavery versus freedom. Maya Angelou's 1983 poem "Caged Bird" compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Many readers have interpreted Angelou's poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

The third stanza reverts back to the free bird, further cementing the difference between the free bird and the caged bird in the minds of the readers. She writes that a “free bird thinks of another breeze” that he can enjoy the “sighing trees” and be free to find his own food. The tone with which she writes the first and third stanzas sharply contrasts with the second stanza. The first and third stanzas give the reader a sense of ecstasy and thrill, which serve to make the second stanza seem all the more oppressive.

### Question 2.

According to the poem, how can the free bird be best described ?

#### Answer:

The free bird is free to do what he pleases and so he is happy and content.

### Question 3.

What is meant by “free bird thinks of another breeze”?

#### Answer:

The poet wants to show the freedom which the free bird has. It can soar in the skies to various places , wherever it wants to go to find its food and enjoy the breeze.

### Stanza 4

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  
So he opens his throat to sing.

Read the above lines and answer the questions that follow.

### Question 1.

Explain with reference to the context.

#### Answer:

These lines are taken from the poem, ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ written by Mary Angelou. The theme of the poem is the suffering of African- Americans and the contrast of slavery versus freedom. Maya Angelou’s 1983 poem “Caged Bird” compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Many readers have interpreted Angelou’s poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

The fourth stanza continues the parallel between the free bird and the caged bird. The first line serves to starkly contrast the last line in the third stanza. It is dark and daunting. The reality of the life of the caged bird is revealed in this line. That bird, “stands on the grave of dreams”. This reveals the author’s feelings about her own dreams. She has so many dreams that have died because she was never given the freedom to achieve all that her white counterparts were able to achieve. Discrimination and Racism made up her cage, and although she sang, she felt her voice was not heard in the wide world, but only by those nearest her cage. The second line of this stanza is not only dark, but even frightening. The speaker describes the bird’s cries as “shouts on a nightmare scream”. At this point, the caged bird is so despondent in his life of captivity that his screams are like that of someone having a nightmare.

The author then repeats these lines:

**His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing.**

Maya Angelou’s 1983 poem “Caged Bird” compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird.- Many readers have interpreted Angelou’s poem as an extended metaphor with the caged

bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

Reaffirming the idea that the bird opens his mouth to sing because his desire for freedom and his desire to express himself cannot be contained.

### Question 2.

What does the line “and his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream” mean?

#### Answer:

The line describes the caged bird who “stands on the grave of dreams/ his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream.” The grave of dreams can refer to a person who has given up on his dreams. The shadow, rather than the bird itself, shouts, revealing a sense of powerlessness, for who would hear the shout of a shadow? This contrasts with the free bird described in the previous stanza who boldly “names the sky his own.”

The caged bird’s “nightmare scream” gives an otherworldly sense that, again, the cry will not be heard. The words “shadow” and “nightmare” evoke a dark outlook, where only the bird’s shadow or nightmares may escape the confines of the cage. The speaker, describes the bird’s cries as “shouts on a nightmare scream”. At this point, the caged bird is so despondent in his life of captivity that his screams are like that of someone having a nightmare.

### Question 3.

What is the main conflict in this poem?

#### Answer:

The main conflict is that the caged bird wants the life of the free bird. The caged bird also wants the freedom to do whatever he wants.

### Stanza 5

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.

Read the above lines and answer the questions that follow.

### Question 1.

Explain with reference to the context.

#### Answer:

These lines are taken from the poem, ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ written by Mary Angelou. The theme of the poem is the suffering of African- Americans and the contrast of slavery versus freedom. Maya Angelou’s 1983 poem “Caged Bird” compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Many readers have interpreted Angelou’s poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

This last stanza focuses on the caged bird yet again. The author implies that even though the caged bird may have never experienced true freedom, deep down that bird still knows that it was created to be free. Although freedom, to the caged bird, is “fearful” because it is “unknown”, he still sings “a fearful trill” because he still longs for freedom. Here, the speaker reveals that his cry for freedom is “heard on the distant hill”. The last line states, “For the caged bird sings of freedom”. With this, the speaker implies that although the caged bird may never have experienced freedom, he still sings of it because he was created for freedom. This is paralleled to the African American struggle in Maya Angelou’s time. She feels that black Americans wrote and sang and danced and cried out for the freedom they deserved, but they were only heard as a distant voice. Yet, this

would not stop them from crying out for freedom and equality because they knew they were made for freedom, and they would not relent until they were given their rights as human beings to enjoy the freedom they were created to enjoy.

### Question 2.

What parallel can be drawn to the poet's feelings and that of the caged bird?

#### Answer:

The line "For the caged bird sings of freedom" parallels to the author and her cry for freedom in the form of equality. She feels that her cries are heard, but only as a soft background noise. She still feels that she is caged and that although she sings, her cries are heard only as a distant noise. And because of being discriminated she is restricted and cannot realise many of her dreams.

### Question 3.

Explain, 'stands on the grave of dreams / his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream'.

#### Answer:

The grave of dreams can refer to a person who has given up on his dreams. The shadow, rather than the bird itself, shouts, revealing a sense of powerlessness, for who would hear the shout of a shadow? This contrasts with the free bird described in the previous stanza who boldly "names the sky his own." The caged bird's "nightmare scream" gives an otherworldly sense that, again, the cry will not be heard. The words "shadow" and "nightmare" evoke a dark outlook, where only the bird's shadow or nightmares may escape the confines of the cage.

## Project

### Question 1.

Is there repetition used in the poem? Why?

#### Answer:

Repetition is a technique used to draw a person's attention to a certain idea. Think about school. If a teacher wants to get her point across, is she going to say it once? No. She is going to repeat it multiple times so it begins to sink in. The same works with poetry. While the use of repetition doesn't necessarily mean a poem is wonderful, it does help it to stand out. Sometimes a little repetition goes a long way. But too much repetition can make the poem boring to read, so it's a delicate balance. This technique can be used in a variety of ways:

- A word is repeated throughout the poem.
- A phrase is repeated.
- An entire line is repeated.

### Question 2.

What does the word "clipped" mean in this poem?

#### Answer:

Maya Angelou's poem is replete with avian metaphors and imagery. The poem itself is a metaphor for the limitations one experiences in a life of oppression. Angelou has drawn from her own own experiences as a Black woman in the racially-segregated United States following the Civil War. In talking of birds, "clipping" involves trimming a bird's wing feathers so that they cannot fly. Some bird owners or caretakers trim just one wing or enough feathers on each side, so as to render the bird unstable in flight but leaving them to be able to glide for a short distance. In Angelou's poem, she uses the word "clipped" as a metaphor for the systemic forms of oppression. Being "clipped" in society on the basis of race (or other identities) prevents an individual from ever testing their capability for success. Historically, Black Americans have been denied access to schooling and certain kinds of work, and even today it is not uncommon for Black Americans to be turned down for jobs on the basis of their appearance. To be "clipped," as Angelou implies, is to never be given a chance for success in life.

### Question 3.

What does the line “and his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream” mean?

#### Answer:

Maya Angelou’s poem compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Angelou’s poem can be interpreted as an extended metaphor with reference to the caged bird.

### Question 4.

Who and what does the free bird symbolize?

#### Answer:

In Maya Angelou’s poem a juxtaposition is provided of a free bird’s life with that of a caged bird. The free bird symbolizes people who live in this world unencumbered by prejudice of any type whether it be racial, socioeconomic, or psychological.

The free bird has the opportunity to move through life soaking in its abundance. The people who are afforded this freedom, forge through life making their own decisions and choices. “The sky is the limit” for those who are free; those who do not face oppression. Without worrying about restrictions, the free bird is able to experience life as an enjoyable adventure. The people represented by the free bird are able to think of the mundane things in life, instead of battling for survival.

### Question 5.

What is the message of Maya Angelou’s poem?

#### Answer:

Angelou’s poem uses metaphor and juxtaposition to express the idea that freedom is a natural state and knowledge of this fact cannot be undone by any amount of oppression, „ imprisonment or limitation of opportunity. Oppressed people suffer psychologically and emotionally, the poem suggests, but never loses sight of the inverse of that suffering. In the poem, the free bird has power and “names the sky his own” while acting on inborn impulses to fly and float on the sky. The language and imagery surrounding the free bird is soft and also indicative of authority, innate rights and self-ownership.

Contrasted to the free bird, the caged bird is associated with darkness, pain, and fear. Reduced to an unnatural and lesser version of itself than the free bird, the caged bird cannot fly yet retains the desire to be free and to find self-expression (and, also, to claim self-ownership).

**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  
so he opens his throat to sing.**

The message of the poem then is largely related to the emotional and psychological effects of being oppressed and removed from the possibility of self-determination. The means of oppression and delimitation are only given metaphorical explanation in the poem and are not connected to social or political realities outside of the poem. But the deeply felt difference between being powerfully free or being oppressed and caged is expressed in varied ways

Angelou deals with a sense of limitation, separation and marginalization through the metaphor of the bird in a cage. Importantly, her poem suggests that the desire to be free will always be expressed, despite circumstances that might quell the spirit. There is an innate understanding of what it means to be alive that translates into a demand or an unquenchable impulse to see oneself in an open sky of one’s own.

### Question 6.

Explain what is imagery in a poem. How has Angelou used it in the poem?

### Answer:

When an poet creates imagery, he or she uses words that create a mental picture in the reader's mind. Only sensory words can create mental images; therefore, imagery concerns any words or phrases that pertain to the five senses: touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell. Maya Angelou's poem is certainly full of imagery in every line and every stanza.

The very first image we see is that of a "free bird" leaping on the "back of the wind." Since we can literally see a bird in nature leaping, jumping, or flying against the wind, we can see how this counts as a sight image. Other images we see are that of the bird floating "downstream" and dipping its wing "in the orange sun rays." Since the poet is now speaking of a bird in relation to a stream, we get the sense she is speaking of a waterfowl, like a duck. Plus, since we can literally see things floating downstream we know that the phrase "floats downstream" counts as a sight image. In addition, though a bird will not literally dip its wings into the rays of the sun, we know that the sun's rays reflect on surfaces of water. Hence, based on the final couple of lines in the first stanza, we can picture the bird literally dipping its wings into the image of the sun reflected on the water and then flying off into the sky. Since we can literally see a bird doing such things in nature, we know that these count as sight images as well.

The sight images of the bird free in nature stand in great contrast to the sight images of a bird held captive in a cage in the next stanza. The juxtaposition of images of free and caged birds help to illustrate her themes concerning the effects of captivity, such as slavery.

### Question 7.

What are the fears of the caged bird? Answer with examples from Maya Angelou's poem.

### Answer:

The "caged bird" stands for none other than the oppressed blacks. Devoid of liberty and basic human rights, the blacks have led hellish lives, full of pains and sufferings, for centuries. Its song of freedom demonstrates the rage and optimism of the blacks that toughen them to endure. Although the caged bird "sings of freedom", she sings "with a fearful trill". The dream of liberty has been seen by the blacks for ages. The poet's uncountable ancestors have spent their whole lives hoping to see the light of freedom. This discomfoting sense of undergoing persecution for years is well evoked in the following lines:

**But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream**

The blacks' dream of liberty is very old. Despite their continued struggle, they have suffered defeat and frustrations repeatedly.

Thus, the caged bird's fear is about the uncertainty of achieving freedom in the future. Its fears reflect those of the blacks who no more wish to go through the pains of racism, discrimination and bestial treatment at the hands of the whites. The blacks are scared of the darkness hanging over the lives of their offspring.

The word "nightmare" is suggestive of the blacks' unspeakable suffering and "scream" reflects their expression of agony.

### Question 8.

Why does the caged bird stand on the "grave of dreams?"

### Answer:

Maya Angelou creates a vivid image with the line "But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams." This is a death image. The hopes and dreams of a whole race of people are dead. Angelou uses the images of a free bird and a caged bird to compare the lives of those who are free to create their own destiny, and those who are oppressed based on their race. Those who are oppressed have hopes and dreams but they are unattainable not because the people are incapable, but because they are born as people of color. She goes on to say that the bird, representing the oppressed people, lives with its feet "tied" and wings "clipped," which renders it

devoid of choices to better its situation. In spite of the dire circumstances, the bird chooses to sing. In other words, its spirit will not be broken.

### Question 9.

How is the theme of self-awareness shown in the poem “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou?

#### Answer:

The theme of self-awareness is shown in the poem when the poet highlights how this bird has a rage within itself. This rage is because this caged bird senses it is missing out on a freedom that other birds and living creatures know. This bird “.stalks down his narrow cage.” This “stalking” alludes to the fact that the bird is prowling for release from his restricted way of life. This bird is self-aware that it is living in an unnatural environment. To this caged bird the bars of the cage are “bars of rage.” In addition, self-awareness is conveyed by the fact that this bird makes a bold effort to sing. Because its wings and feet are restricted (due to clipping and tying), its only recourse to let anyone know of its desire to be free is to sing. The bird sings to let anyone who will listen that it is straining for freedom. Self-awareness here (the bird understanding its plight) is shown by the fact that the bird longs for something that is unknown. It desires this unknown that is out there because it senses that the unknown is better than being caged and, in essence, a slave to its man-made environment, where it cannot spread its wings and soar.

This feeling of being ‘caged in’ can be extended to the human condition as well. Many people feel trapped in their respective life situations. They long to be free of poverty, sickness, addictions, dead-end jobs, bad relationships, destructive behavior and more. Every day, many people are crying out, through their words and actions, for some kind of release from their burdensome stations in life, where they feel caged and unable to realize their dreams. They are self-aware, as this bird is, that there is a better way of life that must be fought for, even though this better way of living can be elusive.

### Question 10.

What are the poetic devices used in Maya Angelou’s poem “Caged Bird”?

#### Answer:

Maya Angelou uses a myriad of poetic devices in the poem, including metaphor, rhyme, imagery, alliteration, personification, and repetition. In the poem, Angelou employs these poetic devices to contrast a free bird with a bird who is confined to a cage; the two different birds serve as metaphors for people free from oppression and people who are oppressed by society, respectively. Considering Angelou’s personal history and the themes of her autobiographies, the caged bird, more explicitly, is a metaphor for African-Americans who experienced racism and discrimination through slavery. Like the caged bird in the poem, African-Americans were physically confined or restricted due to slavery and segregation, but they still vocally demanded their freedom.

In addition to using metaphor, Angelou utilizes repetition to reinforce the idea that African Americans cried out for freedom from oppression even in the bleakest of times when their oppressors did not want to “hear” them. Angelou repeats the third and fifth (final) stanzas, with the caged bird singing for freedom:

**The caged bird sings/with fearful trill/of things unknown/and his tune is heard/on the distant hill/for the caged bird/sings of freedom.**

In the above quotation, the end rhyme in the second, fourth, and sixth lines with “trill,” “still,” and “hill.” We also find end rhyme as well as alliteration in the second stanza of the poem, when Angelou describes how the caged bird is physically confined. In the second stanza, the caged bird is in “his narrow cage” and “can seldom see through/his bars of rage” (“seldom see” forms the alliteration, while “cage” and “rage” form the end rhyme).

Finally, there is vivid imagery in the first stanza when the free bird “dips his wing/ in the orange sun rays” and personification and alliteration in the fourth stanza when the caged bird’s “shadow shouts



on a nightmare scream.” In this example from the fourth stanza, note the repetition of the consonant “s” and giving the caged bird’s shadow the human quality of shouting, which emphasizes the bird’s nightmarish existence living in confinement.

### **Question 11.**

What do you like about this poem?

#### **Answer:**

This question is asking for an opinion about Maya Angelou’s poem “Caged Bird.” This means you have to assess and analyze the poem to determine what you find appealing about it. Personally, I enjoy Angelou’s use of vivid imagery when describing the free bird and the caged bird. When I read her descriptions of the birds, I can feel the carefree freedom of the free bird as it soars through the air. On the other hand, I can feel the desperation of the caged bird as it paces with clipped wings in its cage. Because Maya Angelou is so masterful in her descriptions, I experience the breeze as the free bird “leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream.” When the caged bird sings, in spite of its circumstances, I identify with its song, “for the caged bird sings of freedom.” The imagery evokes emotions within me. Others might like the lyrical writing, or the message of the poem.

### **Question 12.**

What is the implied meaning of “his bars of rage” in the poem “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”?

#### **Answer:**

The poet is creating the image of a bird held in a barred cage which is in opposition to a bird flying free that she describes in the first stanza. The bird is “stalking” around in that cage which connotes anger and frustration. It is blinded by that “rage” and understands that there is no escape from its bars of incarceration. The bird cannot visualize what the free bird can because it is caged with pent up anger. The “bars of rage” are a metaphor for the feelings of people who are bound by slavery, ignorance, and prejudice. Ms. Angelou goes on to explain that the bird cannot obtain its freedom but it chooses to express itself joyously implying that although it maybe be angry and unable to break those bonds, it will not be silenced.

### **Question 13.**

In “Caged Bird,” what does the line “and his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream” mean?

#### **Answer:**

Maya Angelou’s 1983 poem “Caged Bird” compares the plight of a caged bird to the flight of a free bird. Many readers have interpreted Angelou’s poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans.

The line above is in the 5th stanza, which describes the caged bird who “stands on the grave of dreams/ his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream/ his wings are clipped and his feet are tied/ so he opens his throat to sing.” The grave of dreams can refer to a person who has given up on his dreams. The shadow, rather than the bird itself, shouts, revealing a sense of powerlessness, for who would hear the shout of a shadow? This contrasts with the free bird described in the previous stanza who boldly “names the sky his own.”

The caged bird’s “nightmare scream” gives an other worldly sense that, again, the cry will not be heard. The words “shadow” and “nightmare” evoke a dark outlook, where only the bird’s shadow or nightmares may escape the confines of the cage.

## **Extra Questions**

### **Question 1.**

How does the poet describe the world of nature?

#### **Answer:**

The poet uses various images to describe nature. She presents the image of a “free bird” leaping on the “back of the wind.” Since we can literally see a bird in nature leaping, jumping, or flying

against the wind. Then she she writes of the bird floating “downstream and dipping its wing “in the orange sun rays.” Since the poet is now speaking of a bird in relation to a stream, we get the sense she is speaking of a waterfowl, like a duck. Plus, we can literally see the bird floating downstream. In addition, though a bird will not literally dip its wings into the rays of the sun, we know that the sun’s rays reflect on surfaces of water. Hence, based on the final couple of lines in the first stanza, we can picture the bird literally dipping its wings into the image of the sun reflected on the water and then flying off into the sky. Thus, the poet gives us beautiful sight images of nature.

### Question 2.

What is the symbolic significance of the sun, sky and wind in the first stanza?

#### Answer:

The sun, sky and wind symbolically signify open spaces and skies or in other words freedom.

### Question 3.

What is the free bird metaphor for.

#### Answer:

In Maya Angelou’s poem “Caged Bird” she provides a juxtaposition a free bird’s life with that of a caged bird. The free bird symbolizes people who live in this world unencumbered by prejudice of any type whether it be racial, socioeconomic, or psychological.

The free bird has the opportunity to move through life soaking in its abundance. The people who are afforded this freedom, forge through life making their own decisions and choices. “The sky is the limit” for those who are free; those who do not face oppression. Without worrying about restrictions, the free bird is able to experience life as an enjoyable adventure. The people represented by the free bird are able to think of the mundane things in life, instead of battling for survival.

### Question 4.

What is the encaged bird fearful of ?

#### Answer:

The “caged bird” stands for none other than the oppressed blacks. Devoid of liberty and basic human rights, the blacks have led hellish lives, full of pains and sufferings, for centuries. Its song of freedom demonstrates the rage and optimism of the blacks that toughen them to endure. Although the caged bird “sings of freedom,” she sings “with a fearful trill.” The dream of liberty has been seen by the blacks for ages. The poet’s uncountable ancestors have spent their whole lives hoping to see the light of freedom. This discomfiting sense of undergoing persecution for years is well evoked in the following lines:

**But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream**

The blacks’ dream of liberty is very old. Despite their continued struggle, they have suffered defeat and frustrations repeatedly. Thus, the caged bird’s fear is about the uncertainty of achieving freedom in the future. Its fears reflect those of the blacks who no more wish to go through the pains of racism, discrimination and bestial treatment at the hands of the whites. The blacks are scared of the darkness hanging over the lives of their offspring. The word “nightmare” is suggestive of the blacks’ unspeakable suffering and “scream” reflects their expression of agony.

### Question 5.

His tune is heard on the distant hill’. Explain

#### Answer:

The author implies that even though the caged bird may have never experienced true freedom, deep down that bird still knows that it was created to be free. Although freedom, to the caged bird, is “fearful” because it is “unknown”, he still sings “a fearful trill” because he still longs for freedom. Here, the speaker reveals that his cry for freedom is “heard on the distant hill”. The last line states,

“For the caged bird sings of freedom”. This is paralleled to the African American struggle in Maya Angelou’s time. She feels that black Americans wrote and sang and danced and cried out for the freedom they deserved, but they were only heard as a distant voice. Yet, this would not stop them from crying out for freedom and equality because they knew they were made for freedom, and they would not relent until they were given their rights as human beings to enjoy the freedom they were created to enjoy.

### **Question 6.**

How is the theme of self-awareness shown in the poem “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou?

#### **Answer:**

The theme of self-awareness is shown in the poem “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou in that the poet highlights how this bird has a rage within itself. This rage is because this caged bird senses it is missing out on a freedom that other birds and living creatures know. This bird “...stalks down his narrow cage.” This “stalking” alludes to the fact that the bird is prowling for release from his restricted way of life. This bird is self-aware that it is living in an unnatural environment. To this caged bird the bars of the cage are “bars of rage.” In addition, self-awareness is conveyed by the fact that this bird makes a bold effort to sing. Because its wings and feet are restricted (due to clipping and tying), its only recourse to let anyone know of its desire to be free is to sing. The bird sings to let anyone who will listen know that it is straining for freedom. Self-awareness here (the bird understanding its plight) is shown by the fact that the bird longs for something that is unknown. It desires this unknown that is out there because it senses that the unknown is better than being caged and, in essence, a slave to its man-made environment, where it cannot spread its wings and soar.

### **Question 7.**

What do ‘trade winds’ and ‘fat worms’ symbolise?

#### **Answer:**

Trade winds symbolise the freedom of movement, the free will of the free bird to go anywhere it pleases unlike the caged bird who is restricted behind the bars of its cage. Fat worms symbolise the freedom to choose what it wants to eat by going anywhere it wants which is denied to the caged bird. The caged bird is restricted and discriminated and cannot exercise free will even for the most ordinary things.

### **Question 8.**

How does the poet use the contrast between the two birds to reveal racism in America?

#### **Answer:**

Angelou celebrates her survival and that of all African Americans in oppression. In the poem “Caged Bird” are two traditional literary themes: reversal of fortune and survival of the unfittest. By presenting the free bird before depicting the caged bird, Angelou helps the reader visualize what the caged bird must have been like before its capture; the description of the two contrasting environments helps the reader feel the sense of loss of the captured bird because of its reversed fate. Even with its clipped wings, tied feet, narrow quarters, and bars of rage, however, the fragile, caged bird is still able to survive and to soar again through its song; this imprisoned bird truly epitomizes the survival of the unfittest, the major theme in the verse.

These contrasting environments—the freedom of the open world and the restrictive surroundings of the caged bird—create the setting for the poem. The reader can feel the breeze, see the sun, imagine the rich feast of fat worms, and hear the sighing trees of the world of the free creature; in contrast, the reader feels the fear and restricted movement, sees the bars, imagines the wants of the oppressed. Racism and discrimination bound the Africans and they were not free to realise their aspirations. Many readers have interpreted Angelou’s poem as an extended metaphor with the caged bird representing the historical struggles of African Americans. The poem expresses the emotional and psychological effects of being oppressed and removed from the possibility of self-determination due to racism in American society.