

Maya Angelou was a poet, author, and civil rights activist. Click for a short bio and famous poem she wrote in 1969.

Maya Angelou, born Marguerite Annie Johnson, is well known for her activism for civil rights, poetry, and memoirs, particularly her seven volume autobiography, "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, published in 1969. The series chronicles her youth, overcoming racism and trauma. She worked as coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and fought for black rights alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. She was a mentor to Oprah Winfrey, gaining popular recognition through that association. She spoke at dozens of commencement ceremonies and rallies, was prominent on the lecture circuit, and also read her poetry at President Clinton's Inauguration. The poem that follows is excerpt from the first in her seven book memoir. Angelou passed away in 2014.

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings

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
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
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
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.