Mrs. Burhenn

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Pre AP English

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Or Die Trying

Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, *Sympathy*, describes the plight of a cruelly imprisoned bird. Dunbar fills the first stanza with imagery that describes the wonders of a beautiful spring day when the “sun is bright” (2) and the “wind stirs soft through the springing grass” (3). He juxtaposes this imagery with the idea of a “caged bird,” (1) a creature meant to be outside but who is forced away from his natural home. Dunbar continues this juxtaposition through the painful imagery in the second stanza. The bird injures himself attempting to flee its bondage; his “pain still throbs” (12) in his previous wounds “with a keener sting,” (13) suggesting he has attempted, and failed, to escape before. This combination, along with phrases such as “alas” (1) and “ah me” (15) and the repeating “I know” (1) at the beginning and end of each stanza, create a forlorn and pained tone. Dunbar describes the bird’s songs as “a plea that upward toward Heaven he flings,” (20) further perpetuating the distraught tone. Dunbar himself was the son of former slaves, and given the historical context of this poem, one might infer that the bird represents Dunbar, or black Americans in the late 1800’s, and his cage is the oppression or racial prejudice he faced. His message, which sadly is still be applicable today, may be that oppression is a cage that can cause pain, or that freedom is worth the cost to attain it. While *Sympathy* may be a title, it may also be a request, a plea, to consider the plight of the oppressed.