

## = Poetry of Maya Angelou =

Maya Angelou , an African @-@ American writer who is best known for her seven autobiographies , was also a prolific and successful poet . She has been called " the black woman 's poet laureate " , and her poems have been called the anthems of African Americans . Angelou studied and began writing poetry at a young age , and used poetry and other great literature to cope with trauma , as she described in her first and most well @-@ known autobiography , *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . She became a poet after a series of occupations as a young adult , including as a cast member of a European tour of *Porgy and Bess* , and a performer of calypso music in nightclubs in the 1950s . Many of the songs she wrote during that period later found their way to her later poetry collections . She eventually gave up performing for a writing career .

Despite considering herself a poet and playwright , she wrote *Caged Bird* in 1969 , which brought her international recognition and acclaim . Many of her readers consider her a poet first and an autobiographer second , but she is better known for her prose works . She has published several volumes of poetry , and has experienced similar success as a poet . Early in her writing career , she began alternating a volume of poetry with an autobiography . Her first volume of poetry , *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie* ( 1971 ) , was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize . In 1993 , she recited one of her best @-@ known poems , " *On the Pulse of Morning* " , at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton .

Angelou explores many of the same themes throughout all her writings , in both her autobiographies and poetry . These themes include love , painful loss , music , discrimination and racism , and struggle . Her poetry cannot easily be placed in categories of themes or techniques . It has been compared with music and musical forms , especially the blues , and like the blues singer , Angelou uses laughter or ridicule instead of tears to cope with minor irritations , sadness , and great suffering . Many of her poems are about love , relationships , or overcoming hardships , as expressed in poems of hers such as " *Still I Rise* " , *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* , and *Million Man March Poem* . The metaphors in her poetry serve as " coding " , or litotes , for meanings understood by other Blacks , but her themes and topics apply universally to all races . Angelou uses everyday language , the Black vernacular , Black music and forms , and rhetorical techniques such as shocking language , the occasional use of profanity , and traditionally unacceptable subjects . As she does throughout her autobiographies , Angelou speaks not only for herself , but for her entire gender and race . Her poems continue the themes of mild protest and survival also found in her autobiographies , and inject hope through humor . Tied with Angelou 's theme of racism is her treatment of the struggle and hardships experienced by her race .

Many critics consider Angelou 's autobiographies more important than her poetry . Although her books have been best @-@ sellers , her poetry has been studied less . Angelou 's lack of critical acclaim has been attributed to her popular success and to critics ' preferences for poetry as a written form rather than a spoken , performed one .

## = = Background = =

Maya Angelou studied and began writing poetry at a young age , having " fallen in love with poetry in Stamps , Arkansas " , where she grew up and the setting of her first autobiography , *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ( 1969 ) . At the age of eight , she was raped , as recounted in *Caged Bird* . She dealt with her trauma by memorizing and reciting great works of literature , including poetry , which helped bring her out of her self @-@ imposed muteness . According to scholar Yasmin Y. DeGout , literature also affects Angelou 's sensibilities as the poet and writer she becomes , especially the " liberating discourse that would evolve in her own poetic canon " .

As a young adult , Angelou , who preferred to be called Maya because her brother had called her that when she was a child , had a series of jobs and occupations , achieving modest success as a singer , dancer , and performer . She was a cast member of a European tour of *Porgy and Bess* in 1954 and 1955 and was a cabaret singer in nightclubs in the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas throughout the 1950s . While performing at the Purple Onion in San Francisco , due to the strong

suggestion of her managers and supporters , she changed her name from Rita Johnson to Maya Angelou , a " distinctive name " that set her apart and captured the feel of her calypso dance performances . In 1957 , Angelou recorded her first album , Miss Calypso , which captured her focus on calypso music , popular at the time , and her years as a nightclub performer . As she described in her fourth autobiography , The Heart of a Woman ( 1981 ) , Angelou eventually gave up performing for a writing career , although music remained an important aspect of her poetry . In the late 1980s , she returned to music . In 1988 , she co - wrote a song with Roberta Flack , " And So It Goes " , which appeared on Flack 's album Oasis . Angelou collaborated with R & B artists Ashford & Simpson on seven of the eleven tracks of their 1996 album Been Found . The album was responsible for three of Angelou 's only Billboard chart appearances . In 2007 , she and jazz musician Wynton Marsalis wrote " Music , Deep Rivers in My Soul " , which traces the history of African - American music . Angelou was also a fan of country music , and had written several songs .

Angelou recorded two albums of poetry and songs written during her time as a night club performer ; the first in 1957 for Liberty Records and the second , " The Poetry of Maya Angelou " , for GWP Records the year before the publication of Caged Bird . They were later incorporated into her volumes of poetry . Despite considering herself a playwright and poet when her editor Robert Loomis challenged her to write Caged Bird ? which brought her international recognition and acclaim ? she has been best known for her seven autobiographies . Through the writing of her autobiography , Angelou became one of the first African American women who was able to publicly discuss her personal life and was recognized and highly respected as a spokesperson for blacks and women . It made her " without a doubt , ... America 's most visible black woman autobiographer " , and " a major autobiographical voice of the time " .

Beginning with Caged Bird , Angelou used the same " writing ritual " for many years . She woke early in the morning and checked into a hotel room , where the staff was instructed to remove any pictures from the walls . She wrote on legal pads while lying on the bed , with only a bottle of sherry , a deck of cards to play solitaire , Roget 's Thesaurus , and the Bible , and left by the early afternoon . She averaged ten to twelve pages of written material a day , which she edited down to three or four pages in the evening . She composed all her works this way , both prose and poetry .

= = Poetry = =

Angelou has been a prolific poet , and has published several volumes of poetry , many of which have been best - sellers . She has experienced similar success as a poet as she did as an autobiographer . She began , early in her writing career , of alternating the publication of an autobiography and a volume of poetry . Her first volume of poetry , Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diiie , published in 1971 shortly after Caged Bird , became a best - seller and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize . Many of the poems in Diiie were songs that Angelou had previously performed and recorded . In 1994 , her publisher , Random House , placed this volume and her following four volumes of poetry in The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou . Random House has also published several more volumes of Angelou 's poetry , as well as stand - alone publications of single poems .

Angelou recited her most famous poem , " On the Pulse of Morning " , at President Bill Clinton 's inauguration in 1993 . In 1995 , she delivered what Richard Long called her " second ' public ' poem " , entitled " A Brave and Startling Truth " , which commemorated the 50th anniversary of the United Nations . Also in 1995 , she was chosen to recite one of her poems at the Million Man March . Angelou was the first African - American woman and living poet selected by Sterling Publishing , who placed 25 of her poems in a volume of their Poetry for Young People series in 2004 . In 2009 , Angelou wrote " We Had Him " , a poem about Michael Jackson , which was read by Queen Latifah at his funeral . She wrote " His Day is Done " , a poem honoring Nelson Mandela after his death in 2013 . The poem was released in book form , along with a video of Angelou reciting it , by the U.S. State Department .

== Collections ==

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie ( 1971 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 394 @-@ 47142 @-@ 6  
Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well ( 1975 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 679 @-@ 45707 @-@ 0  
And Still I Rise ( 1978 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 394 @-@ 50252 @-@ 6  
Shaker , Why Don 't You Sing ? ( 1983 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 394 @-@ 52144 @-@ 7  
Poems ( 1986 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 553 @-@ 25576 @-@ 2  
Now Sheba Sings the Song ( 1987 ) . New York : Plume Books . ISBN 0 @-@ 452 @-@ 27143 @-@ 6  
I Shall Not Be Moved ( 1990 ) . New York : Bantam Books . ISBN 0 @-@ 553 @-@ 35458 @-@ 2  
The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou ( 1994 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 679 @-@ 42895 @-@ X  
Phenomenal Woman : Four Poems Celebrating Women ( 1995 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 679 @-@ 43924 @-@ 2  
Poetry for Young People ( 2007 ) . Berkshire , U.K. : Sterling Books . ISBN 1 @-@ 4027 @-@ 2023 @-@ 8

== Single publications ==

" On the Pulse of Morning " ( 1993 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 679 @-@ 74838 @-@ 5  
" A Brave and Startling Truth " ( 1995 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 0 @-@ 679 @-@ 44904 @-@ 3  
" From a Black Woman to a Black Man " ( 1995 ) .  
" Amazing Peace " ( 2005 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 1 @-@ 4000 @-@ 6558 @-@ 5  
" Mother : A Cradle to Hold Me " ( 2006 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 1 @-@ 4000 @-@ 6601 @-@ 8  
" Celebrations , Rituals of Peace and Prayer " ( 2006 ) . New York : Random House . ISBN 978 @-@ 0 @-@ 307 @-@ 77792 @-@ 8  
" We Had Him " ( 2009 ) .  
" His Day is Done " ( 2013 )

== Themes ==

== General themes ==

Angelou explores many of the same themes throughout all her writings , in both her autobiographies and poetry . These themes include love , painful loss , music , discrimination and racism , and struggle . According to DeGout , Angelou 's poetry cannot easily be placed in categories of themes or techniques .

Angelou sometimes pairs poems together in her collections to strengthen her themes , something she does , for example , throughout her second volume Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well ( 1975 ) . Many of her poems , especially those in Oh Pray , contain universal identifications with ordinary objects . She uses familiar and feminine metaphors , many of the same themes also found in blues songs , and the dialect of African Americans to express universal themes applicable to all races . Angelou uses rhyme and repetition , which critic Lyman B. Hagen calls " rather ordinary and unimaginative " throughout all her works , both prose and poetry , yet rhyme is found in only seven of the thirty @-@ eight poems in her first volume , Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie .

Librarian John Alfred Avant states that many of Angelou 's poems could be set to music like that of jazz singer and musician Nina Simone . For example , " They Went Home " in *Diie* was originally written as song lyrics .

Angelou 's poems have been compared to music and musical forms . The poems in her fourth volume , *Shaker , Why Don 't You Sing ?* ( 1983 ) , have been compared to the music of French singer Édith Piaf . In her review of *Shaker* , Janet Blundell finds the best poems in the volume to be the ones that are structured like blues music . Critic Harold Bloom compares " Times @-@ Square @-@ Shoeshine @-@ Composition " in *Diie* to Langston Hughes ' blues / protest poetry . He suggests that the best way to analyze the subjects , style , themes , and use of vernacular in this and most of Angelou 's poems is to use " a blues @-@ based model " , since like the blues singer , Angelou uses laughter or ridicule instead of tears to cope with minor irritations , sadness , and great suffering . Blundell , in her review of Angelou 's third volume *And Still I Rise* ( 1978 ) in *Library Journal* , finds Angelou 's poems which mimic speech patterns and songs the most effective . However , she finds Angelou 's other poems " mired in hackneyed metaphor and forced rhyme " .

Many of Angelou 's poems are about love and relationships . For example , all the poems in the first section of *Diie* focus on love . In *Southern Women Writers* , Carol A. Neubauer states that they " describe the whole gamut of love , from the first moment of passionate discovery to the first suspicion of painful loss " . Over half the poems in *Shaker* focus on love ( specifically its inevitable loss ) and doomed relationships .

Critic William Sylvester states that the metaphors in Angelou 's poetry serve as " coding " , or litotes , for meanings understood by other Blacks . In her poem " Sepia Fashion Show " in *Diie* , for example , the last lines ( " I 'd remind them please , look at those knees / you got a Miss Ann 's scrubbing " ) is a reference to slavery , when Black women had to show their knees to prove how hard they had cleaned . Sylvester states that Angelou uses this technique often in her poetry , and that it elicits a change in the reader 's emotions ; in this poem , from humor to anger . Sylvester says that Angelou uses the same technique in " Letter to an Aspiring Junkie " , also in *Diie* , in which the understatement contained in the repeated phrase " nothing happens " is a litotes for the prevalence of violence in society . Hagen calls Angelou 's coding " signifying " and states , " A knowledge of black linguistic regionalisms and folklore enhances the appreciation of Angelou 's poems " . Hagen believes that despite the signifying that occurs in many of Angelou 's poems , the themes and topics are universal enough that all readers would understand and appreciate them . DeGout states that Angelou conveys meaning through literary imagery , denser vocabulary , and poetic techniques such as catachresis , ambiguity , and anthropomorphism . Angelou 's use of language frees her readers from their traditional perceptions and beliefs about human experience . She uses everyday language , the Black vernacular , Black music and forms , and rhetorical techniques such as shocking language , the occasional use of profanity , and traditionally unacceptable subjects . DeGout says that although this use of language is not the main technique she uses in her poetry , it appears in her more popular poems .

= = = Racism / liberation = = =

As she does throughout her autobiographies , Angelou speaks not only for herself , but for her entire gender and race . Her poems continue the themes of mild protest and survival also found in her autobiographies , and inject hope through humor . Many of Angelou 's poems are personal in nature , especially those in *Diie* and *Oh Pray* , but the theme of racism and connected to it , liberation , is present in her poems and autobiographies . According to DeGout , " a particular gift of the Angelou muse is the translation of personal experience into political discourse " . Scholar Kathy M. Essick calls most of the poems in *Diie* Angelou 's " protest poems " . The poems in the second section of *Diie* , for example , are militant in tone ; according to Hagen , the poems in this section have " more bite " than the ones in the first section and express the experience of being Black in a white @-@ dominated world . DeGout states , however , that Angelou 's poems have levels of meaning , and that poems in the volume 's first section present the themes of racism , women 's power , and liberation more subtly . DeGout views " A Zorro Man " as an example of Angelou 's

ability to translate her personal experience into political discourse and the textured liberation she places in all her poetry . Many of Angelou 's poems , especially those in *Diie* , focus on women 's sexual and romantic experiences , but challenge the gender codes of poetry written in previous eras . She also challenges the male @-@ centered and militaristic themes and messages found in the poetry of the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s , leading up to the publication of *Diie* . DeGout cites " The Couple " , which appears in *Oh Pray* , as another example of Angelou 's strategy of combining liberation ideology and poetic techniques .

According to Bloom , the themes in Angelou 's poetry are common in the lives of many American Blacks . Angelou 's poems commend the survivors who have prevailed despite racism , difficulty , and challenges . Neubauer states that Angelou focuses on the lives of African Americans from the time of slavery to the 1960s , and that her themes " deal broadly with the painful anguish suffered by blacks forced into submission , with guilt over accepting too much , and with protest and basic survival " .

Critic Robert B. Stepto states that the poem " One More Round " , in *And Still I Rise* is heavily influenced by the work and protest songs of the past . The even @-@ number stanzas in the eight @-@ stanza poem create a refrain like those found in many work songs and are variations of many protest poems . Stepto is impressed with Angelou 's creation of a new art form out of work and protest forms , but does not feel that she develops it enough . He places Angelou 's work in the tradition of other Black poets , and compares the poems in *And Still I Rise* to the works of Langston Hughes , Gwendolyn Brooks , and Sterling Brown . Stepto also praises Angelou for borrowing " various folk rhythms and forms and thereby buttresses her poems by evoking aspects of a culture 's written and unwritten heritage " . Despite Angelou 's strong criticism of racism , she also asserted in all her writings what Hagen calls a recurring theme , that " we are more alike than unlike " .

= = = Struggle = = =

Tied with Angelou 's theme of racism is her treatment of the struggle and hardships experienced by her race . Neubauer analyzes two poems in *Diie* , " Times @-@ Square @-@ Shoeshine @-@ Composition " and " Harlem Hopscotch " , that support her assertion that for Angelou , " conditions must improve for the black race " . Neubauer states , " Both [ poems ] ring with a lively , invincible beat that carries defeated figures into at least momentary triumph " . In " Times @-@ Squares " , the narrator of the poem , a shoeshiner , takes on the role of the trickster , a common character in Black folklore . He retains his pride despite the humiliation he experiences in his occupation . " Harlem Hopscotch " celebrates survival and the strength , resilience , and energy necessary to accomplish it . Neubauer states , " These poems are the poet 's own defense against the incredible odds in the game of life " . According to DeGout , Angelou creates " a community of healing " for her readers , many of whom have experienced the same trauma and pain as the subjects of her poems . DeGout calls the technique " part of the blues mode in the Angelou canon " , and considers Angelou 's work as a precursor to the Black women writers of the 1970s , who used poetry to express liberation ideology and empowerment .

Neubauer asserts that the themes in the poems in *And Still I Rise* , as the title of the volume suggests , focus on a hopeful determination to rise above difficulty and discouragement . Neubauer states , " These poems are inspired and spoken by a confident voice of strength that recognizes its own power and will no longer be pushed into passivity " . In Angelou 's favorite poem , " Still I Rise " , which has been compared with spirituals that express hope , she refers to the indomitable spirit of Black people . Despite adversity and racism , Angelou expresses her faith that one will overcome and triumph .

Like her previous poetry collections , Angelou 's fourth volume , *Shaker , Why Don 't You Sing ?* , celebrates the ability to survive despite threatened freedom , lost love , and defeated dreams . Neubauer states that the poems in this volume are full of " the control and confidence that have become characteristic of Angelou 's work in general " . Their tone moves from themes of strength to humor and satire , and captures both the loneliness of lovers and the sacrifice that many slaves experienced without succumbing to defeat or despair . The poems in *Shaker* emphasize

determination despite the " unabiding anguish over the oppression of the black race " , and deal with the cruel treatment of slaves in the South .

= = Critical reception and response = =

Many critics consider Angelou 's autobiographies to be more important than her poetry , including William Sylvester , who states that although Angelou 's books have been best @-@ sellers , her poetry has not been perceived as seriously as her prose . Despite her popular and critical acclaim garnered by her autobiographies , her poetry has been understudied , even after her recitation of " On the Pulse of Morning " in 1993 . Like many reviewers of Angelou 's poetry , Ellen Lippmann in her review of *And Still I Rise* in *School Library Journal* finds Angelou 's prose stronger than her poetry , but found her strength more apparent in the poems in this volume than in *Caged Bird* . In his negative review of *And Still I Rise* , Stepto expresses disbelief that Angelou 's poems would be produced by a major publishing house while poetry written by other lesser @-@ known talents could not . He explains her popularity as a poet with her autobiographies , which he calls " marvelous " and the real reason for her success as a poet . He states that her poetry serves as explanatory texts for her prose works , which he calls " more adeptly rendered self @-@ portraits " .

Despite these reviews , many of Angelou 's readers identify her as a poet first and an autobiographer second . Reviewer Elsie B. Washington has called her " the black woman 's poet laureate " , and has called Angelou 's poetry the anthems of African Americans . African @-@ American literature scholar Lynn Z. Bloom believes that Angelou 's poetry is more interesting when she recites them . He considers her performances dynamic , and says that Angelou " moves exuberantly , vigorously to reinforce the rhythms of the lines , the tone of the words . Her singing and dancing and electrifying stage presence transcend the predictable words and phrases " .

Critic Mary Jane Lupton states that " Angelou 's ultimate greatness will be attributed " to her most well @-@ known poem , " On the Pulse of Morning " , and that Angelou 's " theatrical " performance of it , using skills she learned as an actor and speaker , marks a return to the African @-@ American oral tradition of speakers such as Frederick Douglass , Martin Luther King , Jr. and Malcolm X. Angelou was the first poet to read an inaugural poem since Robert Frost at the 1961 inauguration of President John F. Kennedy , and the first Black and woman . Her recitation resulted in more fame and recognition for her previous works , and broadened her appeal " across racial , economic , and educational boundaries " .

Gillespie states that Angelou 's poems " reflect the richness and subtlety of Black speech and sensibilities " and were meant to be read aloud . Angelou has supported Gillespie , telling an interviewer in 1983 that she wrote poetry so that it would be read aloud . Critic Harold Bloom , although he calls Angelou 's poetry " popular poetry " and states that it " makes no formal or cognitive demands upon the reader " , compares her poems to musical forms such as country music and ballads . He characterizes her poems as having a social rather than aesthetic function , " particularly in an era totally dominated by visual media " . Sylvester , who says that Angelou " has an uncanny ability to capture the sound of a voice on a page " , places her poems , especially the ones in *Diie* , in the " background of black rhythms " . Chad Walsh , reviewing *Diie* in *Book World* , calls Angelou 's poems " a moving blend of lyricism and harsh social observation " . Jessica Letkemann , writing for *Billboard* , traced the musical qualities of Angelou 's poems to her experience as a singer and musician , and said that they were " full of rhythm , melody , cadence buoying her powerful words " .

Scholar Zofia Burr , who calls Angelou 's poetry " unabashedly public in its ambitions " , connects Angelou 's lack of critical acclaim to both the public nature of many of her poems and to Angelou 's popular success , and to critics ' preferences for poetry as a written form rather than a verbal , performed one . Bloom agrees , stating that Angelou 's acclaim has been public rather than critical . Critic James Finn Cotter , in his review of *Oh Pray* , calls it an " unfortunate example of the dangers of success " and states that Angelou 's fame has " muted the private and personal quality that it takes to be essential to poetry " . Critic John Alfred Avant , despite the fact that the volume was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize , states that *Diie* " isn 't accomplished , not by any means " . Even

critics who value poetry as an oral tradition devalue Angelou 's poetry ; critic Bryan D. Bourn , who praises her for using African oral tradition , states that she " slips into banality when she abandons " them and criticizes her for not catering to poetry critics . Scholar Joanne Braxton asserts that " Angelou 's audience , composed largely of women and blacks , isn 't really affected by what white and / or male critics of the dominant literary tradition have to say about her work . This audience does not read literary critics ; it does read Maya Angelou " . Burr condemns Angelou 's critics for their narrow view of poetry , which has resulted in their negative reviews of her poetry , and for not taking into account Angelou 's larger purposes in her writing : " to be representative rather than individual , authoritative rather than confessional " .

Angelou was an inspiration to the modern hip @-@ hop community . Artists such as Danny Brown , Lupe Fiasco , Jean Grae , and The Roots mention her in their songs . Tupac Shakur , who appeared in the film Poetic Justice , which featured Angelou 's poetry , named his album Still I Rise , released in 1999 after his death , for Angelou 's poem . Nicki Minaj wrote a song also called " Still I Rise " , for her 2009 mixtape Beam Me Up Scotty . Although Minaj 's song does not mention Angelou explicitly , its themes of overcoming hardship echo the themes in Angelou 's poem . Angelou inspired the work of Kanye West , who has referenced Angelou throughout his career , including in a remix of Talib Kweli 's " Get By " , which West produced in 2002 , and in his own song , " Hey Mama " from the album Late Registration , produced in 2005 . Common collaborated with Angelou in 2011 in his song , " The Dreamer " , which featured her reciting a poem at the end of the song . Angelou admitted later that his use of profanity in the song " surprised and disappointed " her . According to Time , Angelou believed that rap music was an avenue for young people to discover poetry , and that she was optimistic about the future of poetry , telling one of its reporters , " ? All I have to do is listen to hip @-@ hop or some of the rappers " .

= = = Explanatory notes = = =