

= Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diiie =

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diiie ( 1971 ) is the first collection of poems by African @-@ American writer and poet , Maya Angelou . Many of the poems in Diiie were originally song lyrics , written during Angelou 's career as a night club performer , and recorded on two albums before the publication of Angelou 's first autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings ( 1969 ) . Angelou considers herself a poet and a playwright , but is best known for her seven autobiographies . She began , early in her writing career , of alternating the publication of an autobiography and a volume of poetry . Although her poetry collections have been best @-@ sellers , they have not received serious critical attention and are more interesting when read aloud .

Diiie is made up of two sections of 38 poems . The 20 poems in the first section , " Where Love is a Scream of Anguish " , center on love . Many of the poems in this section and the next are structured like blues and jazz music , and have universal themes of love and loss . The eighteen poems in the second section , " Just Before the World Ends " , focus on the experience of the survival of African Americans despite living in a society dominated by whites .

Angelou uses the vernacular of African Americans , irony , understatement , and humor to make her statements about race and racism in America . She acts as a spokesperson for her race in these poems , in which her use of irony and humor allows her to speak for the collective and to assume a distance in order to make comments about her themes , topics , and subjects . Critic Kathy M. Essick have called the poems in Diiie " protest poems " . The metaphors in her poetry serve as " coding " , or litotes , for meanings understood by other Blacks , although her themes and topics are universal for most readers to understand .

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diiie has received mixed reviews from critics , but was a best @-@ seller and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize . Many critics expected that the volume would be popular despite their negative reviews , but others considered it well @-@ written , lyrical , and a moving expression of social observation .

= = Background = =

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diiie is Maya Angelou 's first volume of poetry . She studied and began writing poetry at a young age . After her rape at the age of eight , as recounted in her first autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings , she dealt with her trauma by memorizing and reciting great works of literature , including poetry , which helped bring her out her self @-@ imposed muteness .

Angelou recorded two albums of poetry and songs she wrote during her career 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 her first autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings ( 1969 ) . They were later incorporated into her volumes of poetry , including Diiie , which was published the year after Caged Bird became a best @-@ seller . Diiie also became a best @-@ seller , and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize . Despite thinking of herself a playwright and poet when her editor Robert Loomis challenged her to write Caged Bird , she has been best known for her autobiographies . Many of Angelou 's readers identify her as a poet first and an autobiographer second , yet like Lynn Z. Bloom , many critics consider her autobiographies more important than her poetry . Critic William Sylvester agrees , and states that although her books have been best @-@ sellers , her poetry has not been perceived as seriously her prose . Bloom also believes that Angelou 's poetry is more interesting when she recites them . Bloom 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 " .

Angelou 's began , early in her writing career , of alternating the publication of an autobiography and a volume of poetry . Her publisher , Random House , placed the poems in Diiie , along with her next four volumes , in her first collection of poetry , The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou ( 1994 ) , perhaps to capitalize on her popularity following her reading of her poem " On the

Pulse of Morning " at President Bill Clinton 's inauguration in 1993 . A year later , in 1995 , Angelou 's publisher placed four more poems in a smaller volume , entitled Phenomenal Woman .

= = = Title = = =

Angelou chose " Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie " as the volume 's title because of her interest in unconscious innocence , which she says is " even lovelier than trying to remain innocent . " The title is a reference to her belief that " we as individuals ... are still so innocent that we think if we asked our murderer just before he puts the final wrench upon the throat , ' Would you please give me a cool drink of water ? ' and he would do so ' " . Angelou has said that if she " didn 't believe that , [ she ] wouldn 't get up in the morning " .

= = Themes = =

Angelou uses rhyme and repetition throughout all her works , yet rhyme is only found in seven of the poems in Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie ; critic Lyman B. Hagen calls her use of rhythm " rather ordinary and unimaginative " . Death is an important theme throughout many of Angelou 's works , especially in Caged Bird , which opens with it and , according to scholar Liliane K. Arensberg , is resolved at the book 's end , when her son is born . Death is directly mentioned in 19 of the 38 poems in Diie . According to scholar Yasmin Y. DeGout , many of the poems in Diie , along with those in Angelou 's second volume Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well , " lack the overt empowerment themes of her later , better known works " , especially And Still I Rise ( 1978 ) and I Shall Not Be Moved ( 1990 ) .

= = = Part One : Where Love is a Scream of Anguish = = =

The themes in the first section of Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie focus on love . In Southern Women Writers , Carol Neubauer states that the first twenty poems in the volume " describe the whole gamut of love , from the first moment of passionate discovery to the first suspicion of painful loss " . Kirkus Review finds more truth in the poems in this section , which describe love from the perspective of a Black woman , compared to those in the second section . Hagen feels that Angelou 's best love poem in Diie is " The Mothering Blackness " , which uses repetition and biblical allusions to state that the Black mother loves and forgives her children unconditionally .

In " To a Husband " , Angelou praises the Black slaves who helped in the development and growth of America . She idealizes Black men , especially in " A Zorro Man " and " To a Man " ; she dedicates Diie to the subjects of both poems . 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 . The use of concrete imagery and abstract symbolism to describe emotional and sexual experience , but also has another meaning , that of liberation from painful and poignant memories . According to DeGout , " A Zorro Man " lacks the clear themes of liberation that Angelou 's later poems such as " Phenomenal Woman " have , but its subtle use of themes and techniques infer the liberation theme and compliment her poems that are more overtly liberating . The poem and others in Diie , with its focus on women 's sexual and romantic experiences , challenges 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 . Angelou 's use of sexual imagery , from a woman 's point of view , provides new interpretations " and excavates it from derogatory assessments " . Although the poem 's speaker feels trapped , women 's sexuality is depicted as powerful and controls her partner , which moves away from " the patriarchal assumption of male control over the sexual act " . Angelou 's depiction allows her readers , mostly women , to identify , celebrate , and universalize their sexuality to all races . DeGout states that " A Zorro Man " " enact [ s ] empowerment by liberating the reader from stigmas placed on women 's sexuality from gender

assumptions of male ( sexual ) power , and from racialized notions of women 's experience " .

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 , especially the first poem in this section , " They Went Home " , " which he says " fits into the torchy unrequited love bag " . Hagen considers Angelou 's best poems to be the ones meant to be song lyrics , such as " They Went Home " . In his analysis of " They Went Home " , Hagen calls Angelou a realist because she recognizes that the married man who dates other women usually returns to his wife . He states , " While the sentiment is psychologically sound , the lines are prosaic , reflecting the pitiful state of the abandoned " . Essick , when analyzing " When I Think About Myself " , states that the poem central theme is " one 's self @-@ exultation and self @-@ pride that prevent one from losing her will in spite of experiences involving pain and degradation " .

According to Hagen , in his analysis of " No Loser , No Weeper " , the speaker expresses the common experience of loss , beginning with childish and minor ones such as losing a dime , a doll , and a watch , and ending with the loss of the speaker 's boyfriend . Kirkus Review considers this poem , along with " They Went Home " , both slight and carrying " the weight of experience " .

= = = Part Two : Just Before the World Ends = = =

The poems in the second section of Diie are more militant in tone ; according to critic Lyman B. Hagen , the poems in this section have " more bite " and express the experience of being Black in a white @-@ dominated world . He states that Angelou acts as a spokesperson , especially in " To a Freedom Fighter " , when she acknowledges a debt owed to those involved in the civil rights movement . According to Bloom , the themes in Angelou 's poetry , which tend to be made up of short lyrics with strong , jazz @-@ like rhythms , are common in the lives of many American Blacks . Angelou 's poems commend the survivors who have prevailed despite racism and a great deal of difficulty and challenges . Neubauer states that Angelou focuses on the lives of American Black people 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 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 " , 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 this is true in much of Angelou 's 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 " , in which understatement contained in the repeated phrase " nothing happens " is a litotes for the prevalence of violence in society . Hagen connects this poem with the final scene in her second autobiography , *Gather Together in My Name* , which describes her encounter with her friend , a drug addict who shows her the effects of his drug habit . According to Hagen , the poem is full of disturbing images , such as drugs being a slave master and the junkie being tied to his habit like a monkey attached to the street vendor 's strap .

Hagen calls Angelou 's coding " signifying " and states , " A knowledge of black linguistic regionalisms and folklore enhances the appreciation of Angelou 's poems " . Line six in " Harlem Hopscotch " , for example ( " If you 're white , all right / If you 're brown , hang around / If you 're black stand back " ) , is a popular jingle used by African Americans that people of other cultures might not recognize . 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 .

In " When I Think About Myself " , Angelou presents the perspective of an aging maid to make an ironic statement about Blacks surviving in a world dominated by whites , and in " Times @-@ Square @-@ Shoeshine @-@ Competition " , a Black shoeshine boy defends his prices to a white customer , his words punctuated by the " pow pow " of his shoeshine rag . Her poems , such as " Letter to an Aspiring Junkie " , in this and other volumes deal with universal social problems from a

Black perspective . African @-@ American literature professor Priscilla R. Ramsey , when analyzing the poem " When I Think About Myself , " states that the first @-@ person singular pronoun " I " , which Angelou uses often , is a symbol that refers to all her people . Ramsey calls this " a self @-@ defining function " , in which Angelou ironically views the world as an outsider , resulting in the loss of her direct and literal relationship to the world and providing her with the ability to " laugh at its characteristics no matter how politically and socially devastating " . Scholar Kathy M. Essick discusses the same poem , calling it and most of the poems in Diie , Angelou 's " protest poems " .

According to critic Harold Bloom , in his analysis of " Times @-@ Square " , the first line of the fourth stanza ( " I ain 't playing dozens mister " ) is an allusion to the Dozens , a game in which the participants insult each other . The game is mentioned in later poems , " The Thirteens ( Black ) " and " The Thirteens ( White ) . " According to critic Geneva Smitherman , Angelou uses the Thirteens , a twist on the Dozens , to compare the insults of blacks and whites , which allows her to compare the actions of the two races . Bloom compares " Times @-@ Square " 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 . Hagen compares the themes in " The Thirteens ( Black and White ) " with Angelou 's poems " Communication I " and " Communication II " , which appear in Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well , her second volume of poetry .

Neubauer analyzes two poems in Diie , " Times @-@ Squares " and " Harlem Hopscotch " , that support her assertion that for Angelou , " conditions must improve for the black race " She states , " Both [ poems ] ring with a lively , invincible beat that carries defeated figures into at least momentary triumph " . In " Times @-@ Squares " , the shoeshiner claims to be the best at his trade and retains his pride despite his humiliating circumstances . " Harlem Hopscotch " celebrates survival and the strength , resilience , and energy necessary to accomplish it . Its rhythm echoes the beat of the player , and compares life to a brutal match . By the end of the poem , however , the speaker wins , both the game and in life . Neubauer states , " These poems are the poet 's own defense against the incredible odds in the game of life " .

Essick also analyzes " Times @-@ Square " , stating that the language and rhythm used by the poem 's subject , especially the repetitive onomatopoeia ( " pow pow " ) that punctuates the end of each line , parallels the sound of his work . The shoeshiner relies on the rhythm and repetition of his song to maintain his pace and to relieve his boredom . It also provides a way to help him brag about his abilities and talents . The shoeshiner takes on the role of the trickster , a common character in Black folklore , and demonstrates his control of vernacular language , especially when he refers to the Dozens .

= = Critical response = =

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie was a best @-@ seller and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize . The poems in the volume have received mixed reviews . Critic John Alfred Avant recognized that the volume would be popular due to the success of Caged Bird , but he characterized it as " rather well done schlock poetry , not to be confused with poetry for people who read poetry " and stated , " This collection isn 't accomplished , not by any means ; but some readers are going to love it . " Martha Liddy , who reviewed the collection in the same issue of the Library Journal in 1971 , classified it , like Caged Bird , in the young adult category and called Diie a " volume of marvelously lyrical , rhythmical poems " . Kirkus Review also found the poems in the volume unsophisticated yet sensitive to the spoken aspects of poetry , such as rhythm and diction , and considered her prose more poetic and unrestrained than her poetry .

A reviewer from Choice called the poems in Diie " craftsmanlike and powerful though not great poetry " , and recommended it for libraries with a collection of African @-@ American literature . Critic William 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 this volume , 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 " .

= = Poems = =

Of the 38 poems in Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ' fore I Diie , twenty are in the first part , " Where Love is a Scream of Anguish , " and the remaining eighteen are in the second part , " Just Before the World Ends . " The volume is dedicated " to Amber Sam and the Zorro Man , " a reference to the poems " A Zorro Man " and " To a Man , " both of which are in the first part of the book . According to Liddy , " Part One contains poetry of love , and therefore of anguish , sharing , fear , affection and loneliness . Part Two features poetry of racial confrontation ? of protest , anger , and irony " . Most of the poems are short in length and are freeform .