

= On the Pulse of Morning =

" On the Pulse of Morning " is a poem by African @-@ American writer and poet Maya Angelou that she read at the first inauguration of President Bill Clinton on January 20 , 1993 . With her public recitation , Angelou became the second poet in history to read a poem at a presidential inauguration , and the first African American and woman . (Robert Frost was the first inaugural poet , at the 1961 inauguration of John F. Kennedy .) Angelou 's audio recording of the poem won the 1994 Grammy Award in the " Best Spoken Word " category , resulting in more fame and recognition for her previous works , and broadening her appeal .

The poem 's themes are change , inclusion , responsibility , and role of both the President and the citizenry in establishing economic security . Its symbols , references to contemporary issues , and personification of nature has inspired critics to compare " On the Pulse of Morning " with Frost 's inaugural poem and with Clinton 's inaugural address . It has been called Angelou 's " autobiographical poem " , and has received mixed reviews . The popular press praised Clinton 's choice of Angelou as inaugural poet , and her " representiveness " of the American people and its President . Critic Mary Jane Lupton said that " Angelou 's ultimate greatness will be attributed " to the poem , and that Angelou 's " theatrical " performance of it , using skills she learned as an actor and speaker , marked a return to the African @-@ American oral tradition of speakers such as Frederick Douglass , Martin Luther King , Jr. and Malcolm X. Poetry critics , despite praising Angelou 's recitation and performance , gave mostly negative reviews of the poem .

= = Background = =

When Angelou wrote and recited " On the Pulse of Morning " , she was already well known as a writer and poet . She had written five of the seven of her series of autobiographies , including the first and most highly acclaimed , I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) . Although she was best known for her autobiographies , she was primarily known as a poet rather than an autobiographer . Early in her writing career she began 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 Diie , published in 1971 shortly after Caged Bird , became a best @-@ seller and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize . As scholar Marcia Ann Gillespie writes , Angelou had " fallen in love with poetry " during her early childhood in Stamps , Arkansas . After her rape at the age of eight , which she depicted in Caged Bird , Angelou memorized and studied great works of literature , including poetry . According to Caged Bird , her friend Mrs. Flowers encouraged her to recite them , which helped bring her out her self @-@ imposed period of muteness caused by her trauma .

Angelou was the first poet to read an inaugural poem since Robert Frost read his poem " The Gift Outright " at President John F. Kennedy 's inauguration in 1961 , and the first Black and woman . When it was announced that Angelou would read one of her poems at Clinton 's inauguration , many in the popular press compared her role as inaugural poet with that of Frost 's , especially what critic Zofia Burr called their " representativeness " , or their ability to speak for and to the American people . The press also pointed to the nation 's social progress that a Black woman would " stand in the place of a white man " at his inauguration , and praised Angelou 's involvement as the Clinton administration 's " gesture of inclusion " .

Angelou told her friend Oprah Winfrey that the call requesting her to write and recite the poem came from television producer Harry Thomason , who organized the inauguration , shortly after Clinton 's election . Even though she suspected that Clinton made the request because " he understood that I am the kind of person who really does bring people together " , Angelou admitted feeling overwhelmed , and even requested that the audiences attending her speaking engagements pray for her .

She followed her same " writing ritual " that she had followed for years and used in writing all of her books and poetry : she rented a hotel room , closeted herself there from the early morning to the afternoon , and wrote on legal pads . After deciding upon the theme " America " , she wrote down everything she could think of about the country , which she then " pushed and squeezed into a

poetic form " . Angelou recited the poem on January 20 , 1993 .

= = Themes = =

" On the Pulse of Morning " shared many of the themes in President Clinton 's inaugural address , which he gave immediately before Angelou read her poem , including change , responsibility , and the President 's and the citizenry 's role in establishing economic security . The symbols in Angelou 's poem (the tree , the river , and the morning , for example) paralleled many of the same symbols Clinton used in his speech , and helped to enhance and expand Clinton 's images . Clinton 's address and the poem , according to Hagen , both emphasized unity despite the diversity of American culture . " On the Pulse of Morning " attempted to convey many of the goals of Clinton 's new administration .

Burr compared Angelou 's poem with Frost 's , something she claimed the poetry critics who gave " On the Pulse of Morning " negative reviews did not do . Angelou " rewrote " Frost 's poem , from the perspective of personified nature that appeared in both poems . Frost praised American colonization , but Angelou attacked it . The cost of the creation of America was abstract and ambiguous in Frost 's poem , but the personified Tree in Angelou 's poem signified the cultures in America that paid a significant cost to create it . Both Frost and Angelou called for a " break with the past " , but Frost wanted to relive it and Angelou wanted to confront its mistakes . Burr also compared Angelou 's poem with Audre Lorde 's poem " For Each of You " , which has similar themes of looking towards the future , as well as with Walt Whitman 's " Song of Myself " and Langston Hughes ' " The Negro Speaks of Rivers " . According to Hagen , the poem contains a recurring theme in many of Angelou 's other poems and autobiographies , that " we are more alike than unlike " .

" On the Pulse of Morning " was full of contemporary references , including toxic waste and pollution . Angelou 's poem was influenced by the African @-@ American oral tradition of spirituals , by poets such as James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes , and by modern African poets and folk artists such as Kwesi Brew and Efua Sutherland , which also influenced her autobiographies .

= = Critical response and impact = =

According to Lupton , " On the Pulse of Morning " is Angelou 's most famous poem . Lupton has argued that " Angelou 's ultimate greatness will be attributed " to the poem , and that Angelou 's " theatrical " performance of it , using skills she learned as an actor and speaker , marked a return to the African @-@ American oral tradition of speakers such as Frederick Douglass , Martin Luther King , Jr. and Malcolm X. British reporter Kate Kellaway compared Angelou 's appearance as she read the poem at Clinton 's inauguration with the eight @-@ year @-@ old child in Caged Bird , noting that the coats she wore in both occasions were similar : " She looked magnificent , sternly theatrical with an unsmiling bow mouth . She wore a coat with brass buttons , a strange reminder of the eight @-@ year @-@ old Maya Angelou who stood in a courtroom , terrified at the sight of the man who had raped her " . Gillespie stated regarding Kellaway 's observations : " But standing tall on the steps of the Capitol , she was light @-@ years removed from that terrible time , and America was no longer an ' unfriendly place . ' Her poem ' On the Pulse of Morning ' was a soaring call for peace , justice , and harmony . Capturing the hope embodied in the human spirit , it was a solemn and joyful reminder that all things are possible . She wished us ' Good morning ' in her poem , and one felt as if a new day was truly dawning . "

Angelou recognized that although " On the Pulse of Morning " was a better " public poem " than a great poem , her goal of conveying the message of unity was accomplished . Poet David Lehman agreed , stating that although it fulfilled its theatrical and political objectives , the poem was " not very memorable " . Poet Sterling D. Plumpp found Angelou 's performance " brilliant " , but was " not as enthusiastic about it as a text " . Burr stated that the negative reviews of Angelou 's poem , like the majority of the reviews about her other poetry , was due to their elitism and narrow views of poetry , which were limited to written forms rather than spoken ones like " On the Pulse of Morning " , which was written to recite aloud and perform . Burr compared the response of literary critics to

Angelou 's poem with critics of Frost 's poem : " Frost 's powerful reading served to supplement the poem in the sense of enhancing it , while Angelou 's powerful reading of her poem supplemented it in the sense of making evident its inadequacy and lack . "

Angelou 's recitation of " On the Pulse of Morning " resulted in more fame and recognition for her previous works , and broadened her appeal " across racial , economic , and educational boundaries " . The week after Angelou 's recitation , sales of the paperback version of her books and poetry rose by 300 ? 600 percent . Bantam Books had to reprint 400 @, @ 000 copies of all her books to keep up with the demand . Random House , which published Angelou 's hardcover books and published the poem later that year , reported that they sold more of her books in January 1993 than they did in all of 1992 , accounting for a 1200 percent increase . The sixteen @-@ page publication of the poem became a best @-@ seller , and the recording of the poem was awarded a Grammy Award .