

## **Contemporary Literature**

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Good morning. So, as I mentioned in my last class, today we are going to do the certain selected poems, which are not your traditional typical poems. They are like historical documents because they were recited at the event of US presidential inauguration. So, broadly we will term these poems as US presidential inaugural poems. So, that is the key concept for today's class and how these poems are representative of a particular moment in the US history. So, that is the importance of these poems.

Key poets for related to this category are Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams and Elizabeth Alexander. So, I will just begin the class with familiarizing you with Robert Frost's poem, which he recited during the inauguration of president Kennedy. That was in 1961 and the poem that he read was called the gift outright. One unique feature about the gift outright is that Frost was not supposed to recite this particular poem.

He had prepared something else called a dedication for president Kennedy, but it so happened that while he began to read out the poem, he was 87 at that time and somehow he could not clearly see the words printed in front of him. So, then he put the paper away and recited another poem, the gift outright, which a poem which he knew by heart and he was not depended on any paper to read that. So, I will read you the gift outright. This is just to establish the tradition of eminent poets reading at the event of inauguration of the US presidents. So, president Kennedy began this trend by inviting Robert Frost, who was already an extremely eminent poet by that time.

I am sure most of us here have heard of stopping by a woods on a snowy evening and the road not taken and you know several other the buried child. So, these are some very famous poems, Birches after apple picking. So, Robert Frost had already established a name for himself and at this particular moment in history, he was invited by the president to recite a poem during the inaugural function. So, here it goes, the gift outright, the land was ours before we were the lands. She was our land more than a hundred years before we were her people.

She was ours in Massachusetts, in Virginia, but we were England's still colonial's possessing what we still were unpossessed by, possessed by what we now no more possessed. Something we were withholding made us weak until we found out that it was ourselves we were withholding from our land of living and forthwith found salvation in surrender such as we were, we gave ourselves outright the deed of gift was many deeds of war to the land vaguely realizing westward, but still unstoried, artless, unenhanced such as she was, such as she would become. Now, this is a poem dedicated to the land, to the American land and Robert Frost clearly mentions that earlier America was British colony, the land was not ours, we did not possess it, but then gradually a change occurred, a monumental change and today at the inauguration, I am talking about the time when Frost would have read it. So, at that point in history, again this is a historical moment. It is a very important moment in the US history.

That is what Robert Frost suggest through his poem because can you remember symbolized change, he symbolized youth and breaking away from tradition. So, he was considered extremely modern very liberal and inclusive in his outlook and therefore, a poem like this for him. However, Frost still was traditional and from here, let us look at what Maya Angelou has got to say about president Clinton, but before we move on to that, let me just give you a very brief introduction to Maya Angelou and some of her earlier major works. So, Maya Angelou was born in 1928 and she is considered a founding member of the black literary consciousness in the US literary movement. Her most important, her seminal work is I know why the caged bird sings which was published in 1969 and it is a volume, it is a six volume memoir, a kind of autobiography.

It also includes many works of poetry. So, what does she talk about? So, she was born in Arkansas region of America and she talks about her growing up days in Arkansas where they were dirt poor and one tragic event that marked her life was that she was raped at age 7 by her mother's boyfriend and later when the incident was this crime was revealed that man was lynched by the enraged relatives of Maya Angelou. Now, as a consequence of these two incidents, one her own rape and second the killing of that man, they impacted or they affected Maya Angelou in such a way that she became mute for several subsequent years and she said she felt that and I am quoting her, I thought my voice had killed him because she dared to complain against him and therefore, as a result of that complaint that man was killed and at certain level she felt responsible for his death and she remained quiet for several years. In the later volumes of I know why the caged bird sings, she also talks about her days as a cabaret artist. She was a performing artist and she talks about that and then later her involvement in the civil rights movement in America.

Then, there was also a period in her life when she chose to visit and stay for a long period in Ghana and it was according to her an attempt to get in touch with her spiritual motherland, life in Ghana that is in Africa. So, the narrative in *I know why the caged bird sings* is expressive and extremely personal and they struck a chord with people particularly the Afro Americans and they felt that in Maya Angelou they have finally found a voice for themselves and remember it was a time we are talking about 1969. So, the 70s and the early 80s were the time when the African American community they were struggling with several issues gender, race, political and issues of nationality and in Maya Angelou they found a very stable, very influential kind of a person who could make an impact. So, a voice of hope and a very sane and rational voice that is what Maya Angelou is noted for. So, the great one of the great hallmarks or one of the great triumphs as I would say of *I know why the caged bird sings* is that it broke out of the ghettoized category of Afro American writing and Angelou became a writer who could be considered mainstream finally.

So, she was not just one of those writers who was relegated to the ghetto to certain pockets and read and celebrated only by the particular race, but she was her writings were informed by the universal concerns by the greater and larger concerns and that were prevalent in the then contemporary America and therefore, her importance therefore, her significance. And of course, her narrative of triumph over several personal tragedies is spoke not just to black readers, but also to women all kinds of women Asian women, white women, black women and as well as gay men and women and all these people who were questioning their identities and their rights from the 60s onwards. So, the poem that we are going to discuss today is called *On the Pulse of Morning* which was recited at the presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton and of course, as we just saw that she became the second poet after Robert Frost to be given this honor. And the basic themes of *On the Pulse of Morning* is one is that she cries out in this poem to mankind who has ignored or neglected the sanctity of human life and as well as nature in all its forms and through the timeless voice and wisdom of rock she uses three elemental symbols the rock, the river and the tree and she says that the rock, the river and the tree they all symbolize how mankind is one with the earth and therefore, the poem is a plea to recognize the sanctity of nature as well as human life. So, her message among several other you know one of the prime message is it is a plea not just to be inclusive of all kinds of people, but also to be sensitive to the nature and the environment all around us and to which we are so blatantly neglectful of.

So, this is the poem *On the Pulse of Morning* by Maya Angelou and here she begins a rock, a river, a tree host to species long since departed mark the mastodon. So, the poem famously begins with a rock, a river, a tree because elements of nature which never change they are always constant human means may come and go, but these elements will

remain these forces of nature will always remain and a host to species long since departed mark the mastodon. Mastodon is again one of the extinct species like dinosaur. So, several species have come and gone, but the rock, the tree, the river they are never changing. The dinosaur who left dry tokens of their sojourn here on our planet floor any broad alarm of their hastening doom is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

If the dinosaurs were about to get extincted we would never know if there was a flurry of events trying to save these species we would never know because everything has been lost. What remains the rock, the tree, the river and dinosaurs today they are just a subject of scientific study and research. They have all that we know about dinosaurs or species called dinosaurs is a handful of bones that are left behind their skeletons which people research, scientist research and try to come to some conclusion about the manner and the reason for their extinction, but we would never know. So, again this poem becomes a plea to nurture the nature to take it to be more responsible for the environment around us. So, remember this poem was recited in 1993 when president Clinton was taking his oath and it was a time when all these civil right movements.

Of course, we had the first cycle also earlier, but this was also a very watershed period in the US history. So, civil human right movements and concerns about the environment, concerns about people with deviant forms of sexuality, the lesbians, the gays and also concerns for various races not just the afro-American people, but also the Chinese, the Arabs and all. So, Maya Angelou is encyclopedic in her knowledge and she covers a range of areas. She covers an array, a broad array of topics or issues that need to be discussed and she chose an extremely appropriate moment to give voice to her concerns, but today the rock cries out to us clearly, forcefully come you may stand upon my back and face your distant destiny, but seek no haven in my shadow. So, the nature they may give protection to you, they may give, it may give support to you, but do not, do not expect forever protection from it.

One has to fight for one's rights. You cannot expect someone else to fight for you. So, that is the idea, but seek no haven in my shadow. I will give you no more hiding place down here. You created only a little lower than the angels.

Now, this is a reference to mankind, human beings. You are just a notch lower, notch below the angels. You are almost heavenly, almost god like, but and therefore, it is all the more important that you take responsibility for your actions, have crouched too long in the bruising darkness, have lain too long, face down in ignorance. So, again we are talking about darkness and darkness of ignorance. Human beings have spent much too long time, you know, wallowing in self-pity and wallowing in ignorance.

So, it is about time to face realities. Your mouths spilling words armed for slaughter, the rock cries out today, you may stand on me, but do not hide your face. So, this is a warning of creatures who have long been extinct. You can depend on nature, but you cannot hide behind it. You can no longer escape by making excuses.

So, it is time to face the consequences of your actions. Across the wall of the world, a river sings a beautiful song, come rest here by my side. So, almost like the rock, the river too is ready to give a sort of shelter, but not refuse shelter. You can enjoy nature, you can derive benefits from the nature, but you cannot be a parasite, but do not hide your face. So, across the wall of the world, a river sings a beautiful song, come rest here by my side.

Each of you a bordered country, delicate and strangely made proud, yet thrusting perpetually under siege. Each person has an identity of his or her, delicate and strangely made proud, yet thrusting perpetually under siege. All of us deserve certain degree of integrity. All of us deserve respect, but what happens is that we feel perennially threatened and perennially seeking refuge or finding excuses for seeking refuge and this would not be allowed anymore. Your armed struggles for profit have left collars of waste upon my shore, currents of debris upon my breast.

Yet today I call you to my reverse side, if you will study war no more, come clad in peace and I will sing the songs. Now, this is these lines, they suggest extreme concern for environmental issues. Now, what she is saying is that what actually the river is calling out is that you have to struggle for profit. Human beings have a tendency to make profit by everything, by exploiting resources all around us, whether it is the earth or air or water. So, wherever one can, one finds opportunity to make profit, that resource is exploited, but no more, no longer.

If you want your species, your race to survive, you cannot get away with this kind of behavior. So, your armed struggles for profit have left collars of waste upon my shore, currents of debris upon my breast. Yet today I call you to my reverse side, if you will study war no more. So, war, an actual war and also waging a war against nature and natural resources. If you promise to stop this kind of behavior, which is not acceptable any more, you are welcome to come and stand beside me and enjoy me.

So, what she is talking about is basically, there is a still hope for mankind, but mankind has to look at what they are actually doing. So, it is, there is a strong need to look for self introspection, to see which way we are going and then decide what we want for ourselves and for next generation, for generations to come. So, come clad in peace and I will sing the songs. The creator gave to me when I and the tree and the stone were

broken. Before cynicism was a bloody seer across your brow and when you yet knew, you still knew nothing.

The river sings and sings on. There is a true yearning to respond to the singing river and the wise rock. Now, the river, like the rock, the river too has complaints, but before human being became, human beings became too wise, you know, too wise and too clever for their own good. Before they became too cynical, before they became too materialistic, the river was able to sing for them, but the river is once human beings stopped caring for nature, nature started, nature stopped caring for them. So, once that process of caring for each other stopped, the river stopped singing, this is symbolical, this is extremely suggestive that nature would not care, if you do not care for nature. So, there is a strong yearning to respond to the singing river and the wise rock.

Now, comes another section of the poetry. So, say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew, the African and Native Americans, the Sues, the Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek, the Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh, the Gay, the Straight, the Preacher, the Privileged, the Homeless, the Teacher, the Here, the All Here, the Speaking of the Tree, speaking of the tree symbolizes, speaking of the wise or the, you know, symbolizes the same voice, the voice of wisdom. The, the tree speaks to everyone, nature speaks to everyone, nature does not discriminate between people, between races, between communities, the human beings discriminate. We have created boundaries, but for nature, all are alike, all are same. The Asian, the Hispanic, the Jews, the Africans, the Native Americans, the Sues, the Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek, the Irish.

So, remember, America prides itself on being a melting pot of several cultures and diverse people. So, America and its people, they pride themselves on being a crucible of different races and people and culturally and historically, how they have been open and all inclusive of various kinds of people. But Maya Angelou raises the question, if it is really true, because if it is really true, then there should not be any practicing of any kind of discrimination between people. Nature does not differentiate, but human beings do. And also, it is not just the races, but it is also the types of people, the gay, the straight, people who are not considered straight.

So, she also speaks for the rights of gays and lesbians. So, there should not be any form or any kind of discrimination against people on the basis of their races, their languages, their nationalities and their sexual leanings. So, the preacher, the teacher, the privilege, the homeless, all are alike in the eyes of nature. They hear, they all hear the speaking of the tree. Today, the first and last of every tree speaks to human kind, come to me here beside the river, plant yourself beside me here beside the river.

So, again, notice the repetition. Now, she is trying to emphasize how important it is to be close to the nature, to come, sit beside me, come beside the river. So, this, this is important. So, this is not suggestive of any kind of monotony, but this repetition actually emphasizes the need of the hour and that is to inculcate a sense of environmental awareness and also to, you know, to be sensitive to the rights of people who we not consider as our own, who may be very different from us. That is what we need. Plant yourself beside me here beside the river.

Each of you descendant of some past on traveler had been paid for. You who gave me my first name, you, that is Maya. So, you remember Maya Angelou. So, she acknowledges the tribe Mayans and therefore, you who gave me my first name, you Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you Sharoki nation who rested with me, then forced on my bloody feet left me to the employment of other seekers desperate for gain, starving for gold. So, historically we are told that the black people were sold by, you know, a kind of people, the mercenaries in exchange for gold, in exchange for money and she is telling us that she belongs to one of those tribes.

So, her people were sold, her ancestors were sold in America for a few pieces, in exchange for a few pieces of gold. You the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scott, you the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the crew bought, sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare, praying for a dream and what dream is this? The American dream. So, all kinds of races have sold and have been sold in America and when people come to America, of course, they are in search of that elusive American dream which, which literally comes true for everyone who is determined and who is willing to work hard, but again it may not always be like that. So, the dream may begin and die and begin and end with the person, but everyone comes in search of some dream.

Here, root yourselves beside me. I am the tree planted by the river which will not be moved. I the rock, I the river, I the tree, I am yours. Your passages have been paid. Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need. For this bright morning dawning for you, history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived and if faced with courage, need not be lived again.

So, these are important influential lines. For this bright morning dawning for you, history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived and if faced with courage, need not be lived again. You cannot erase the past. You cannot undo what has already been done, but then if we have courage, if we have the drive, historical injustices need not be repeated. So, we do not have to go through the injustices of history all over the world.

Lift up your eyes upon the day breaking for you. So, again as we were talking about

earlier, the poem is a call for hope. It is a call for equality and concern for environment and concern for human people and races, human beings and people of all races. So, lift up your eyes. You know, look at the world with pride, the day breaking for you.

So, birth of a new day, a new dawn calls upon you. Give birth again to the dream. Women, children, men, take it into the palms of your hand. Mold it into the shape of your most private need. Sculpt it into the image of your most public self. Perhaps, this is now a reference to the coming of the president of the United States, President Clinton.

Remember, President Clinton again like a President Kennedy. He too was a symbol of great hope for the American people. He came immediately after the first Gulf War and America was in a state of political and financial crisis and in Clinton like a Kennedy was youthful and considered extremely liberal and modern in his outlook and therefore, symbolized hope and peace for its people. So, his coming, you know, so sees the moment, sees this day when there is an arrival of some kind of hopes, a new dawn for us.

So, mold it into the shape of your most private need. Sculpt it into the image of your most public selves. This is the time when we can actually realize and actualize ourselves with a leader like President Clinton. This is a moment that needs to be cherished, molded and sculpted. Lift up your hearts.

Each new hour holds new chances for new beginnings. So, again extremely hopeful and optimistic in its tone. Do not be wedded forever to fear your eternally to brutishness. So, the fact that we have a president like this, it symbolizes it.

It gives us a kind of hope. So, throw away the mantle of fear. Just cut yourself off from all kinds of ignorance and brutishness because hope lies in front of you. So, remember as like all inaugural poems, this too is a very significant poem in the US history. It marks a particular political moment. It is a very important political document because there is a message here because like Kennedy, Clinton too symbolizes hope. How far those hopes and aspirations have been realized? Well, that is for history to decide, but these two men stood for something.

They symbolize something. So, therefore, the relevance and significance of poems like these. The horizon leans forward offering you space to place new steps of change. Here on the pulse of this fine day, you may have the courage to look up and out upon me the rock, the river, the tree, your country. So, the horizon leans forward offering you space to place new steps of change.

You will be given some space. It is a figure of speech. You will have opportunity to



kavanish for yourself. Here on the pulse of this fine day, this is the fine day, beginning of a very fine moment in the political history of America. You may have the courage to look up and out upon me the rock, the river, the tree, your country, a note of patriotism, no less to Midas than the mendicant, a very good example of alliteration. Midas, the king who of course, we all know the myth of the king Midas, whatever he touched, turned into gold. So, an extremely rich man as well as the mendicant, the country is the same for both.

The country offers equal opportunities for the very rich as well as for a beggar, no less to you now than the mestudan. The country and the environment is still the same and all the opportunities are still the same. They are not much of a difference and with a new president in the form of president Clinton, we are going to have better times. We can look forward to better times. Here on the pulse of this new day, you may have the grace to look up and out and into your sister's eyes, into your brother's face, your country and say simply, very simply with hope good morning.

So, here on the pulse of this new day, now this is the way the poem ends. Here on the pulse of this new day, you may have the grace to look up and out and into your sister's eyes, your fellow human being, into your brother's face. So, you should have the courage to look into everyone's eyes with a sense and feeling of hope, optimism, and equality. So, look up with pride, face the future with hope, optimism and pride. Your brother's face, your country and say simply, very simply with hope good morning.

Morning symbolizes hope, a new beginning. So, this is a new beginning for all of us. So, that is on the pulse of the morning by Maya Angelou, very important document symbolizing a kind of political change in the US political history and also relating to issues of diversity and change over time and equality in America. Also, notice the imagery, tone and the theme of the poem. So, lots of imagery from nature.

Tone is of optimism and the tone of the poem is of hope. Of course, and theme also, thematically it raises several issues, equality and dignity for all human beings. So, one influential poem that I wanted to do with you and now, coming to your assignment, what you should be doing based on this work. So, as we just talked about the key poets, four major poets who have been invited to recite poems at various inaugural functions, Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams. Miller Williams is another important poet who was invited to recite his poem at the second inauguration of a president Clinton.

He served two terms. So, during the first term, it was Maya Angelou. During the second term, at the inauguration of the second term, it was Miller Williams and then, for president Obama, very recently in 2009, a scholar and a professor of literature, Elizabeth

Alexander, she recited a poem. So, by way of your assignment, I would like you to look at these poems and write a comprehensive kind of an essay. How important are these poems in marking a particular moment in the US history? So, that is what I will send you a more elaborate form of this assignment soon. So, thank you very much. That is the end of the course here. Thank you. .