

# ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

## The Right to Life, Liberty, and Poetry

Steven Hsieh

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, 1961, millions of Americans watched as young John F. Kennedy, only 43 years old, took the oath of office. On that same day 32 years later, the equally charismatic Bill Clinton was sworn in as the President of the United States of America. Throughout the years, this simple passing-of-the-torch ceremony has been adorned with fancy dinners, parades, and poetry. The latter has accentuated the symbolic nature of the inauguration. Some of Americas most well-renowned poets have been called upon for this tradition. For Kennedy, Robert Frost wrote *Dedication*, but on a cold, sunny afternoon in Washington, a blinding glare prompted him to recite another poem, *The Gift Outright*, by memory. This poem, while not as obvious in its purpose, was still fitting for the occasion, highlighting American ideals through an allusion to the countrys Revolution. For Clinton, Maya Angelou recited *On the Pulse of Morning*, which emphasized reaching out to a diverse America through three natural symbols: a rock, a river, and a tree. Though their deliveries were set 32 years apart, both poems capture the hopeful spirit of the inauguration, referencing examples of American ideals throughout the countrys rich history. However, while Frost glorifies the will of the 18<sup>th</sup> century colonists, Angelou condemns their use of violence, representing the oppressed from Americas past.

In both poems, one of the first and most prominent American ideals discussed is the meaning of destiny. Both explore this theme, yet while Frost offers an absolutist view, Angelous view is up to interpretation. The first line of *The Gift Outright* reads *The land was ours before we were the lands*. Here, Frost presents the idea of manifest destiny the belief that the American land was ordained by God for the American people. He suggests that fate inevitably endowed the land with its outright citizens. Thus, while England may have ruled the colonists, their governance was a mere roadblock to our destined land of living. In the end, it was the colonists apprehension that was withholding themselves from their land (10). In *The Pulse of Morning*, Angelou offers a different opinion. Rather than being an absolute end, she suggests that destiny is determined by action. The rock in *On the Pulse* invites all to stand on its back to face their distant destiny (12). In contrast to a divine gift, Angelous definition refers more to an uncertain future. Her emphasis isnt so much on the end result as it is on the process. If one crouch[es] in/*The bruising darkness* or lays *Face down in ignorance* (16-19), it becomes impossible to look forward. On the contrary, righteous living and hard work allows for growth to ones fullest potential, which is *Only a little lower than/The angels* (15-16).

Angelou and Frosts dissenting beliefs on destiny are directly correlated to their clashing views on another theme discussed in both poems war. Because *The Gift* endorses fate, Frost justifies all necessary means towards acquiring our predestined land. No matter how violent or unethical, any deeds of war were necessary

steps to a greater cause: the giving of ourselves outright (12). In Angelous view, no deed of war should or could ever be justified. Likewise, acts of violence are not only unnecessary, but counter-productive to reaching ones own destiny. The river in *On the Pulse* condemns past armed struggles for profit because they did nothing more than leave collars of waste upon [its] shore (29-30). This waste is a stain on Americas history. In stark contrast to *The Gifts* nationalist praise, Angelou describes history to be of wrenching pain (22). She believes that, rather than glorifying, we should be learning from Americas past mistakes.

This reference to Americas violent history is further interpreted in the context of another theme sacrifice. Both poems refer to sacrifices made for Americas advancement, yet they differ in points-of-view, from the sacrificer to the sacrificed. Frost capitalizes on colonial Americas inhibiting inner conflict. He suggests that the colonists were withholding from their own land of living (10) due to the salvation in surrender (11). More specifically, Frost alludes to the 100 or so years where the American colonists unhappily, yet tacitly, faced scrutiny and indentured servitude in their own land. As Frost explains in a clever contradiction, the colonists were Possessed by what we now no more possessed (7). However, when provoked by unfair taxes, the colonists stepped out of their comfort levels and revolted for justice, possessing their land once and for all. Essentially, the poem is a commemoration of this revolution, and the bravery that was crucial towards its commencement. Given *The Gifts* nationalist nature, Frost pays tribute to the colonists, but ignores other groups who have suffered throughout Americas history.

All who Frost excludes, however, Angelou memorializes. In what could be read as a direct response to the absences in *The Gift*, she attempts to give all of the oppressed their due in a comprehensive list (42-47). She recognizes the adversity many of these groups faced through the tribulations of American history. Though Angelou does not mention the colonists internal struggle, she pays reverence to the Cherokee Nation who were forced on bloody feet (58-59) in their relocation to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears; to the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru who were bought, sold, stolen (63) in the Atlantic slave trade. Angelous careful inclusiveness stresses the diversity of the American experience, while again offering American history as a lesson for the future.

At the conclusion of both poems, the poets ponder the future of America. Of all themes, this is perhaps the only one both poets can agree upon. Both examine the future with uncertainty, but also with hope. In *The Gift* *Outright*, the last three lines describe America as ever-growing. Frost compares our countrys present potential to that of when she was on the brink of westward expansion. The country was unstoried, artless, [and] unenhanced before it doubled its size, explored its new territory, and progressed to become a thriving nation. Furthermore, the nation can be described the same way now because its potential is limitless. For all intents and purposes, America is always writing its story. Angelou, likewise, is ultimately optimistic about the future. She writes *Each new hour holds new chances/For new beginnings* (85-86) as an underscore of the ample opportunities offered in this country. As long as people seize their days and live virtuously, the nation as a whole should flourish. This hopefulness is exhibited in the core of the title, *Pulse of Morning*. Describing each morning with a pulse reveals the livelihood of the American experience, present and future.

With Americas rich tradition in poetry, it is no surprise that its recitation, in the last three inaugurations, has become a staple of the occasion. For John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton, two of Americas essential poets were chosen to capture the spirit of American ideals in prose. But what are American ideals? Robert Frost and Maya Angelou prove that while the nations traditions and idyllic code have become standard, interpretations can greatly vary. In the end, however, a hopeful outlook is imperative to the countrys well being.

## Reference List

Angelou, Maya. On The Pulse Of Morning.

Gifts of Speech: Womens Speeches From Around the World. Ed. Liz Kent. 1993. Sweet Briar College. 3 March 2009 <<http://gos.sbc.edu/a/angelou.html>>.

Frost, Robert. The Gift Outright.

JFKLibrary.org. Presidential Library & Museum. 2009. Boston. 3 March 2009 <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historica+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/The+Gift+Outright.htm>>.

---

**Part of *Issue 3***, published in August 2009

---

## About Artifacts

*Artifacts* is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

*Artifacts* is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

---

Published by the Campus Writing Program.

Copyright © 2014 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and [other copyright information](#). An [equal opportunity / affirmative action](#) institution.