INTRODUCTION

For many Americans, one of the more memorable moments during the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, on 20 January 1993, came when Maya Angelou recited the poem she had written for the occasion, ‘On the Pulse of Morning’. Not since 1961, when Robert Frost read his work at the ceremony for President John F. Kennedy, had a poet taken part in a presidential inauguration. Angelou's writings, which attest to her gift for survival in the face of hardship and injustice, demonstrate her inexhaustible capacity for renewed hope, determination, and love -- a capacity that was reflected in ‘On the Pulse of Morning’. In words that seemed to address her listeners both as individuals and as members of one nation, Angelou placed special emphasis on the need for renewal: ‘Lift up your eyes upon / This day breaking for you. / Give birth again / To the dream.’

Angelou's call for rejuvenation carried special force because it came from a woman who had grown up in poverty in President Clinton's home state of Arkansas and had since gone on to an extraordinarily productive career. In addition to her celebrated work as a poet and autobiographer, she has written plays, screenplays, and television scripts; recorded calypso songs and poetry; thrived in the theatre as a singer, dancer, actress, producer and director; taught and lectured at universities; and organised civil rights activists. In her writings, Angelou has often aimed to speak for all African-Americans by concentrating on her own experiences and feelings. 'What I would really like said about me is that I dared to love', she told an interviewer for USA Today. 'By love I mean that condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage and build bridges and then to trust those bridges and cross the bridges in attempts to reach other human beings.' On other occasions, she has professed her desire to speak to and for people of all races and nationalities. 'In all my work, what I try to say is that as human beings we are more alike than we are unalike', she told Catherine S. Manegold of the New York Times (20 January 1993). 'It may be that Mr. Clinton asked me to write the inaugural poem because he understood that I am the kind of person who really does bring people together.'

BACKGROUND

Born Marguerite Annie Johnson on 4 April 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, Angelou, who was called Rita in public, was given the nickname Maya by her older brother, Bailey Jr., who had been calling her 'My' or 'Mine'. Her father, Bailey Johnson, was a doorman and naval dietician, and her mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson, worked variously as a card dealer, boarding house proprietor and registered nurse. Shortly after their daughter's birth, the Johnsons moved with their two children to Long Beach, California. Three years later, in the wake of the dissolution of their parents' marriage, Maya and Bailey Jr. were sent to live with their paternal grandmother,
Annie Henderson, who owned and managed a general store in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas.

In the mid-1930s, when Maya was seven, she and her brother left Stamps to live in St. Louis with their mother, who had returned there not long after her divorce. A few months after their arrival, Maya was raped by her mother's boyfriend. The crime was soon discovered, and when the offender was brought to trial, Maya was forced to testify. Several days later her assailant was found beaten to death in an alley, the victim, apparently, of the wrath of some of Maya's uncles. Shocked by the seeming connection between her words at the trial and the death of a man, Maya resolved to stop talking in public. 'I thought he was killed because I spoke his name', she told Catherine Manegold. 'That was the only logic I was able to employ. So I thought if I spoke, anybody might die.' (In another source, Angelou said that she had stopped speaking because of the guilt she felt after lying in her testimony about a previous sexual assault by the same man, who had threatened to kill her brother if she revealed the molestation.) Several months after the trial, she and her brother were sent back to Annie Henderson, in Stamps.

For the next five years, Angelou maintained her silence while immersing herself in books and imbibing the power of language as it is written, spoken and sung. A local woman, Bertha Flowers, whom Angelou later described as 'the aristocrat of black Stamps', took a special interest in the girl's literary preoccupations and encouraged her to read. Along with an early fondness for the Bible and for the works of such black poets as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, Angelou developed a great affection for the writings of William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Matthew Arnold and Charles Dickens. By the time she graduated from the eighth grade, in 1940, she had begun to speak again and had become known throughout the black community as a precocious and eloquent child. She later attributed to her self-imposed muteness her extraordinary ability to listen intently, remembering every inflection and every nuance of the words she heard.

Angelou and her brother moved to San Francisco in 1940 to be with their mother, who had remarried and was running a boarding house. While she was attending George Washington High School in San Francisco, Angelou obtained a two-year scholarship to study dance and drama at the California Labor School. In addition to going to school day and night, she earned her own spending money. At the age of sixteen, she became the first black -- and the first female -- streetcar conductor in San Francisco. She graduated from high school in August 1945, just a few months before giving birth to her son, Clyde ('Guy') Johnson. Over the next five years, she held a succession of jobs, including that of a cook in a Creole restaurant in San Francisco and a nightclub waitress in San Diego. During the time she lived in San Diego, she also worked as a madam, managing two prostitutes, until her guilty conscience compelled her to quit and move back to Stamps. Unable to tolerate the overt racism there, she soon returned to San Francisco. Hoping to obtain vocational training, she tried to enlist in the United States Army, but she was turned down after a security check of her background revealed that the California Labor School was listed as a subversive breeding ground by the House Un-American Activities Committee.