

Unite: a response to Kennedy's, Clinton's, and Obama's Inaugural Poems

Through the past five decades our society has endured change in all aspects of life. We witnessed the fall of the fifties' white picket fences, and the rise of dope smoking hippies. We watched Clinton instill a "don't ask, don't tell policy" for the army and we watched California ban gay marriage. In my two decades I have seen a time of peace, and a time of war. Society has greatly changed from the era of Kennedy to the era of Obama. Each president leads a different America than the one before, because American society continuously changes. When we read the poems by Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, and, Elizabeth Alexander for the inaugurations of Kennedy, Clinton and Obama we witness societies' change from uniting people with land, people with people, and lastly people with the future.

President John F. Kennedy was elected in 1961. Kennedy chose "the Gift Outright" by Robert Frost as his inaugural poem. Whether by default or by direct choice it is appropriate for his era. This poem reflects America's finally having country. Although it had been over 200 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Kennedy's choice of poetry was symbolic of being freed from the oppression that long lingered over the new America. In "the Gift Outright" Frost writes, "Possessing what we still were unpossessed by, /Possessed by what we now no more possessed."(Frost line 6,7). Reading this poem you can tell that American society no longer felt the shadow of Great Britain. The Americans had little to worry about, the two world wars were over and the United States was peaceful and prosperous. After another war and six presidents, Clinton was sworn into office. A much different America is reflected through his choice of poetry.

Clinton chose Maya Angelou's, "On The Pulse of Morning" a very different poem than Robert Frost's. This poem shows a society that isn't as carefree as the society Kennedy's inauguration. Angelou writes "...today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully, /Come, you may stand upon my Back" (Angelous line 10, 11, 12) Americans have become one with their land. Rather than fighting to keep it, as expressed in Frost's poem Angelou's poem shows the new fight Americans have taken on she writes about, "armed struggles for profit" (Angelou line 32). She continues and explains that although we have lived these "wars" they do not need to be lived again. We can see that society has aged and acquired experience and is not quite as new, reflecting on past wars and pleas for peace, however the main challenge is the uniting the people.

Angelou's poem focuses on the different races, ethnicities, sexual preferences and backgrounds that American society is filled with. She lists:

"So say the Asian, the

"Hispanic, the Jew

The African, the Native American, the Sioux,

The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek

The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,

The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,

The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.

They hear. They all hear

The speaking of the Tree."

America's focus is now on bringing people from all different walks of life together.

Society changed from bringing the people to their land to bringing people of the land

together. More recently, through Obama's choice of poetry we can see this trend continued and a new change in society.

Today, President Obama was inaugurated into office. He chose Elizabeth's Alexander's "Praise Song For a New Day." This poem shows a much more mature American Society. Similar to Clinton's choice of poetry, Alexander thanks those who brought us to this point, she says, "Sing the names of the dead who brought us here." The new American culture positively recognizes the progress of those prior as opposed to Maya Angelou's poem which was less uplifting, "History, despite its wrenching pain/ Cannot be unlived, but if faced/ With courage, need not be lived again" (Angelou line 35, 36). The biggest change is that now we are a society that is preparing for the future. We watched America unite with land, unite with people and now America unite with our future. It is a gradual change that is reflected in the three poems.

Elizabeth Alexander's poem reflects our culture moving towards a change and hope that anything truly is possible. "In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, anything can be made, any sentence begun." It is a very different poem than the previous two. Touching on all different walks of life from farmer, teacher to mechanic showing that we are all at a starting point, a new beginning. A beginning which American society will be "walking forward in that light" (Alexander line 47). That light is our future.