

TEACHER: Kashama SharmaTENDER HEART HIGH SCHOOL, SEC. 33B, CHD.CLASS: XSUBJECT: ENGLISH LITERATUREPOEM:

When Great Trees Fall

By: Maya Angelou

The great trees symbolize souls or larger than life individuals who nurture the world around them and whose death affects everything and everyone. The fall of a big tree is a metaphor. When a great tree falls, the effects are felt far and wide. There are huge damages and disruption in nature. Similarly, when an important person dies, there are upheavals in our lives too.

Time teaches us to go back to rhythm, but it is never the same. Although some balance returns yet the vacuum is never filled up completely. Losing a loved one is extremely painful. The great souls die physically, but remain in public mind forever. That way they are called immortal souls. They continue to inspire us through their words and deeds.

The fall of a big tree in the forest is felt miles around. The hills tremble, both the big and small trees or animals seek refuge. When a great man leaves the earth, people despair. They mourn the loss as though they have lost a dear one. They remember the past association and feel extremely hurt. With the loss of a loved one, all ^{the} past memories come rushing

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and fill one with regret. More loving words could have been said; more company could have been shared; more walks could have been taken together.

However, there is some consolation. Time heals everything, at least, to a certain degree. The anguish remains. The memory lingers on. But the hurt becomes somewhat resilient in the thought that the great soul had lived for us and set an example. We can follow their footsteps.

Explanation in Detail:

Stanza - 1.

When big trees in the forest fall their impact is felt far and wide. The rocks on the distant hills feel the vibrations and 'shudder'. It suggests that landscape itself trembles with fear.

Similarly, 'lions crouch low' and even elephants move slowly in search of safety. The strong, powerful, fearless lions try to find shelter among the tall grass. Even the elephants' gait becomes awkward when they try to find refuge in a safe place.

All the three things mentioned above, i.e., rocks, lions, elephants - are associated with steadfastness and strength. Large rocks on the hill tops are heavy and immobile;

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lions are supposed to be fearsome predators, the kings of jungle; whereas elephants are enormous, slow-moving creatures. Yet all these figures feel the impact of the falling trees with fear. Thus, the falling of 'great trees' the poem conveys, shakes up everything around them.

Stanza - 2.

In this stanza the speaker says that not only huge animals but also smaller creatures, are impacted by the fall of the big trees in the woods. They recoil into total silence and are so shaken and shocked that they cannot feel anything at all, let alone fear. In other words we can say that they (Creatures) are too shaken to make noise. Silence overpowers them. They cannot even squeak out of fear. Senses desert them, and thus, they cannot express their hopelessness.

Stanza - 3.

This stanza reveals the speaker's shift from the use of metaphor of trees to human life. Here he talks about the death of great people or 'great souls'.

When great people die, it leaves a vacuum in the lives of the bereaved, i.e., it appears as

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if all the air has been sucked out of a room and it becomes hard to breathe. In other words, they (the bereaved) take small, shallow breaths; they feel they are not really living but only surviving.

The speaker has used the plural pronoun 'us' here. This suggests the fact these 'great souls' touched the lives of many people, and so their loss is felt widely. The use of such pronouns throughout the poem also implies that the loss of 'great souls' affects entire humanity. The speaker suggests that the bereaved find their 'senses' overwhelmed by the loss of their loved ones. Their eyes see 'briefly' only

These short bursts of sight are tinged by 'a hurtful clarity'.

The speaker means to say that the bereaved seem to see nothing at all; and when they do see, it becomes too painfully clear to them that the world has changed forever, the things will never be the same without the 'great soul' they are grieving.

The speaker then goes on to say that mourning seems to intensify 'memory' by making recollections 'suddenly sharper'.

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The bereaved remember the moments spent with their loved one, whom they have lost. In fact, their memory 'gnaws' on missed opportunities, suggesting that people find themselves unable to stop from thinking about all the things they should have said to and the time they should have spent with the recently deceased.

The word 'gnaws' here is suggestive of the fact that with loss comes a terrible emptiness and grieving allows the bereaved to keep this emptiness at bay 'gnawing' on what could have been. The speaker is referring to the feelings of regret that often plague a person who has lost someone dear. This regret may be due to the 'kind words unsaid' or the 'promised walks never taken'.

Stanza-4:

This stanza begins with the words — 'Great souls die', suggesting that death is an arguable fact of life. The loss of these souls truly alters a person's reality. This is because their 'reality' was 'bound' to these souls. When such souls are gone, the world appears unrecognisable, turned upside down. Thus, their death affects us terribly. We become emotionally drained.

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Our minds which have been developed by their glorious teachings fall apart. The sense of insecurity makes us lose our sanity. Despair, frustrations and hopelessness fill us completely as we have fallen into dark, cold waves of utter loss. A shroud of negativity covers us altogether. We are not aware of our surroundings and so, our issues become unspeakable words of grief.

The speaker then makes a comparison between 'great trees' and 'great souls' by saying that like 'great trees' in the forest provide shelter and sustenance for many creatures, great people support and ~~nurish~~ ^{nurish} those around them. When such people leave the world, those left behind are robbed of this nourishment that they (the great souls) provided. They feel their souls are starving and have shrunk to become shrivelled up. Similarly, they lose their 'minds', which were formed/and informed' by the 'radiance' of those they have lost.

Here the terms 'formed' and 'informed' emphasise the immense influence these great souls had; they did not simply inform the people but shaped their way of thinking, 'forming' their very minds.

Here, it is worth remembering that Maya

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Angelou wrote this poem in response to the death of James Baldwin, whose writing and ideas certainly shaped the way many, including her, saw the world.

The speaker says that despite the loss due to the death of a loved one, the bereaved 'are not so much maddened' to have been reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark cold caves.

In other words, the despair felt by the bereaved person is described as a 'cold dark cave'.

The feeling of despair is so strong that it seems unutterable. Another connotation of 'dark, cold/caves' is the loneliness and incomprehension that accompany such a loss.

Stanza 5:

The last stanza like all the stanzas before it, begins with anaphora - this time with an 'And' placed in front of the repeated phrase:

'And when great souls die,'

This 'And' conveys that the speaker is finally winding up things. Here, the speaker, instead of talking about the immense grief at the loss of 'great souls' talk about what eventually fills in the empty spaces left behind the great souls.

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The speaker seems to suggest that time allows healing to occur and 'a period of peace blooms eventually'. The use of the word 'blooms' suggests that healing follows grief just as spring flowers inevitably follow the emptiness of winter. So 'peace' comes 'slowly and always irregularly'.

The speaker then goes on to say,
'Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration,'

suggesting that there exists a comforting feeling, a new spark of something coming to life.

When the loved one departs from this world, there appear to be gaping holes in the world. However these holes do not last forever. The speaker says grief, peace and despair do not last forever and eventually, 'our senses' are restored. This allows people to think, feel, and perceive the world again, although the perception will 'never be the same' as it was earlier.

But they feel their 'senses' whisper to them to remind them that those 'great souls' who died existed. Although they are gone now, nothing can change the fact that those souls once were here and that they inspired those who knew them.

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The living, the speaker says, can continue to 'Be' and 'be' better, knowing that the great souls were with them at one point of time.

The repetition of 'They existed' emphasises that death does not change the fact that these people lived and shed their 'radiance' all around them. And their existence will continue to inspire the bereaved to keep on living and try to make the world a better place in spite of the pain they suffered after losing the 'great souls'.

Glossary

1. Shudder - to shake suddenly
2. hunker down - crouch down (often used metaphorically when talking about trying to avoid a natural disaster)
3. lumber : move slowly, heavily and awkwardly
4. recoil :- draw back, as in fear
5. eroded : worn down
6. rare : scarce
7. sterile : barren, lifeless
8. wizened : shrivelled or wrinkled with age
9. maddened : made angry or a crazy
10. unutterable : unspeakable
11. blooms : appears or occurs
12. spaces : here, void created by the death of loved one.

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