

English Poem Stanza Wise Explanation

- Maya Angelou

Summary of the Poem:

'When Great Trees Fall' by Maya Angelou is a moving poem that discusses the impact lost loved ones have on the living.

In the first lines, the speaker begins by using an extended metaphor to describe a natural scene. She speaks about the reaction of animals when 'great trees fall'. They hide, hunker down and 'lumber after safety'. The metaphor compares the death of loved ones to the monumental shifts that occur when large and powerful trees fall in the forest. As the poem progresses, she moves on to directly speak about 'great souls' and how human beings react to loss.

The third stanza discusses one's inability to breathe and the sharpening one's memory undergoes. The poem concludes with a message of hope and renewal, suggesting that after a loved one's death that "We can be...better. For they existed".

Maya Angelou was an American author, actress, screenwriter, dancer, poet and civil rights activist best known for her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which made literary history as the first nonfiction bestseller by an African American woman. Angelou received several honours throughout her career, including two NAACP Image Awards in the outstanding literary work (nonfiction) category, in 2005 and 2009.



**Maya Angelou
(1928–2014)**

Stanza 1

**When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.**



This poem opens with the metaphor of the tree that falls. It, of course, symbolises the loss of a great person. When a great tree falls, it is felt for miles around. In the same way, when a great soul departs, the effects are felt deep and far. The image of the ‘rocks on distant hills shudder[ing]’ symbolises the ways in which death causes people, even distant people, to feel despair and shudder.



The lions which 'hunker down' reflect the way some people will react to the loss. The loss causes a certain amount of fear and the pressing need to hide away and escape to safety. Only, there is no escape from the feeling of despair that comes from losing someone great. The speaker's use of nature and animals to create the image of the effects of death allows the reader to connect with the feeling through the visual imagery presented.

Stanza 2

**When great trees
Fall in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.**



The speaker, having already revealed the way in which great things are affected by the death of a someone great, now turns her attention to the ‘small things’. This suggests that the loss of someone great is felt among the great and among the small. This could mean that the physically small, children, feel the effects of the loss as much as their older counterparts. It could also mean that those who are unknown, without fame or political significance, feel the effects of the loss just as the great minds of their day feel it.



The great tree that falls in the forest causes even the small things in the forest to ‘recoil into silence’. This symbolises the way people fall into silence in the midst of despair. There are no words of comfort. They are not even sure what they feel for their ‘senses [are] eroded beyond fear’. This refers to the numbness of the heart and soul that often immediately follows the loss of someone great.

Stanza 3

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly,
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks never taken.



In the third stanza, the speaker shifts from her use of metaphor to speaking directly about death. Just as the great tree that falls causes ripples for miles, so the great soul departed move affects the hundreds or thousands of hearts he or she has touched during the time they lived. The speaker describes the way in which the air, even, seems to become ‘light’ and ‘sterile.’ It is hard to breathe when one has lost an important loved one. The speaker describes the way in which those affected by loss have a brief moment of ‘hurtful clarity’ in which they are able to see and understand just what a valuable soul has been lost.



When the loss hits, often a person's memory is 'suddenly sharpened' and they are able to remember the moments spent with the one who has been lost. These memories, though precious, also feel like a dagger to the soul. The speaker then explains the feelings of regret that can often plague a person who has lost someone dear. When one loses a loved one, he or she will sometimes regret 'kind words unsaid'.



The speaker has clearly experienced the kind of loss which left her desperately longing for more time to express the love she felt in her heart for the person who was taken too soon. She thinks about the walks she promised to take with that loved one. Having never fulfilled those promises leaves her with a gnawing pain of despair and regret.

Stanza 4

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.

Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance,
fall away.

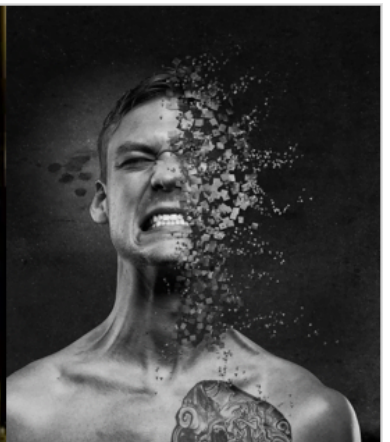
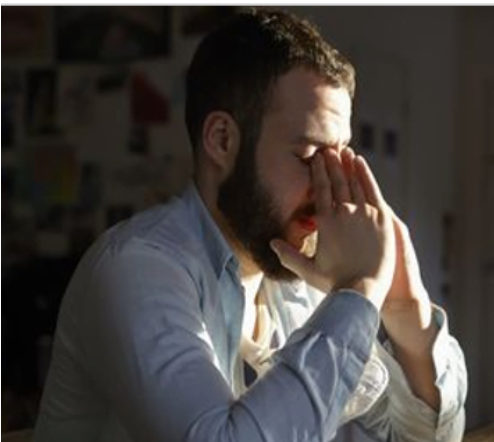
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance
of dark, cold
caves.



In this stanza, the speaker gives an insight into the mental and emotional effects of losing someone close. In this stanza, the loss of a 'great soul' means the loss of a soul that had a great impact on one's everyday life. She explains the way that loss can truly change a person's reality. The speaker explains the way that 'our souls' can depend on the nurture of another, and when that person dies, it leaves us feeling small, like our very souls have shrunk.



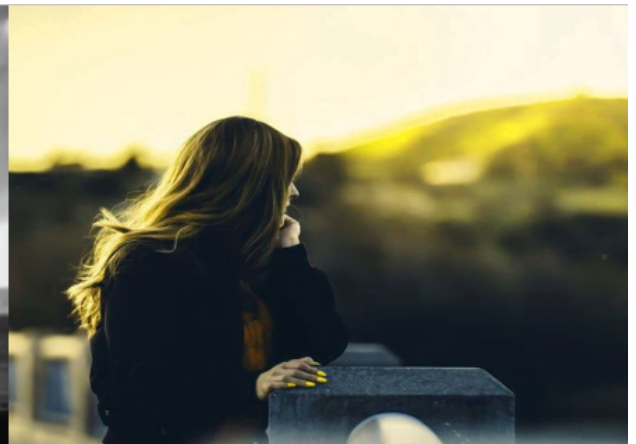
• She describes the way in which one's mind can be 'informed by their [Great One's] radiance' and the way those suffering loss can feel as though their minds 'fall away'. The speaker identifies with others who have felt this loss when she uses the second-person point of view and claims, "We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves".



• This reveals that the speaker, in the face of loss, is not necessarily angry, though anger can be a part of the feelings that come from this loss. She feels a sense of despair more than anger, however. This despair is described as a "cold dark cave". The feelings are so strong that they are 'unutterable'. The speaker identifies with all who have felt this deep despair as a result of losing someone great.

Stanza 5

**And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.**



This reveals that she still had moments of despair and anguish even as she was slowly beginning to heal and feel peace. She described the feelings in between the healing as something “with a kind of soothing electric vibration”. In a sense, the pain still buzzed in the background of her very being, and yet the memory of the lost one was soothing and comforting. She explains that eventually her senses were ‘restored’ even if they were ‘never to be the same’.



- **In the back of her mind and in the background of all that she does, she hears the presence of the one lost. She hears the whisper, ‘they existed. They existed’. This gives her new meaning and purpose in her life. She claims that because this great one existed, she can ‘be better’. The ending of this poem offers great hope to all who have experienced loss. The speaker continues to identify with others who have lost loved ones. This also creates a sense in the readers that they are not alone. Even if they will never be the same again, and even if there will always be pain and sadness, there is hope for healing and joy in the midst of great loss.**
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