

Questions & Answers

When Great Trees Fall

_ Maya Angelou



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

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

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.

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.

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.

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".

Question and answer

Q. 1: Read the extract and answer the questions:

When great trees fall in forests,
Small things recoil into silence,
Their senses eroded beyond fear.
When great souls die,
The air around us becomes
Light, rare, sterile.

(a) What does the falling of a Tree symbolize?

Ans: When a great soul departs, it affects the hundreds or thousands of hearts he or she has touched during the time they lived. The air around becomes difficult to live in. People begin feeling lost, miserable and unproductive.

(b) What happens when great souls die?

Ans: The falling of a great tree symbolizes the loss of a great person.

(c) How does the falling of great trees affect small things?

Ans: Small things symbolize the physically small, children, etc. who also 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, too, feel the effects of the loss just as the great minds of their day feel it.

(d) Find a word from the paragraph which means the same as 'flinch'.

Ans: Recoil

Q. 2: Read the extract and answer the questions:

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 same, whisper to us.

(a) What theme does the poet highlight in the above lines?

Ans: The poet discusses or highlights the theme of hope.

(b) How do the empty spaces get filled?

Ans: The empty spaces get filled with a kind of soothing electric vibration.

(c) How does the loss of a great soul affect people?

Ans: The loss of a great soul alters people's senses such that they cannot be restored again.

(d) Find a word from the paragraph which is the opposite of 'Upheaval'

Ans: Peace

Q. 3: What does the poet mean by 'their senses eroded beyond fear'?

Ans: In the phrase 'their senses erode beyond fear' the poet emphasizes that the ones at loss are not even sure what they feel for their senses (are) eroded beyond fear. This refers to the numbness of heart and soul that often immediately follows the loss of someone great.

Q. 4: What feeling does the poet explore in the line 'Our memory, suddenly sharpened, examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid? Why?

Ans: In this line the poet explores the feeling of anger and regret as she highlights the baggage of having unexpressed feeling in the heart, that a person experience. This loss has left her desperately longing for more time to express the love she felt

in her heart for the person who was taken too soon.

Q. 5: What insight does the poet give to the mental and emotional effect of losing someone?

Ans: The poet explains that loss can truly change a person's reality. When one's reality is bound up in the life of another, the loss of that person changes everything. She 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. This has immense strain on a person's mental and emotional being.

Q. 6: Describe the brief moments of 'Hurtful clarity' mentioned in the poem.

Ans: 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. These moments serve as a reminder of the loss of the person.

Q. 7: How does the poet strike a comparison between nature and humans?

Ans: The poet opens the poem with the metaphor of the falling of great trees. In the literal sense it means when great trees fall the effect is felt for miles. Inanimate objects like rocks shudder. Animals big or small hunker and run for safety. Metaphorically, the poet draws a striking comparison between the falling of great trees to the loss of a person making it very symbolic. When a great soul departs, the effects are felt deep and far. Just like the need to hide away to safety. 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.

Q. 8: What theme has been discussed in the line 'They existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For they existed?'

Ans: In these lines, the poet explores the theme that life goes on. These lines give a new meaning and purpose to her life. She claims that because this great one existed, she can be better. It even offers great hope to all who have experienced loss. The speaker continues to identify with others who have lost loved ones which creates a sense in the readers that they are not alone. Readers can know that others have felt such grievous pain, and yet have not only healed but been made better by the loss. 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.