

# When Great Trees Fall



## SUMMARY

The speaker describes what happens when huge trees collapse: the impact shakes rocks on the top of faraway hills, makes lions crouch low in the field, and even prompts elephants to trundle along in search of shelter.

When these huge trees collapse in the woods, little creatures curl up in silence, too shocked to even be scared.

The deaths of exceptional people have a similar impact on humanity. In their absence, the air itself feels flimsy, scarce, and devoid of life. We gasp and see things with a sudden burst of sharp, painful clarity. This loss makes our memories more precise and we keep thinking about the nice things we wish we'd said while this person was still alive and on the walks we said they'd take together but never did.

The deaths of exceptional people upend the world as we know it because the world was inextricably tied up with their existence. We relied on their tender care and guidance, so now our own souls shrivel up. We lose our grip on our minds, which their brilliance had shaped and enlightened. We don't go crazy, exactly; it's more that our minds are diminished, returned to the unspeakable crudeness of the stone ages.

We do eventually begin to feel a sense of peace, though this comes in fits and starts rather than all at once. The emptiness created by the loss of these people begins to fill up with a charged, comforting hum. The numbness fades and we're able to perceive the world again, though we'll never experience things as we did before this loss. We begin to take comfort in the mere fact that this person lived at all. We can go on living—and live more meaningful lives—because this person lived.

to improve the world. Though the poem was written specifically for Baldwin, it speaks more generally to the experience of losing someone important and the ways in which even the most poignant grief eventually gives way to acceptance.

The speaker uses the image of a giant "tree fall[ing]" to explain just how far and wide this particular death is felt. The speaker says that when this "tree[] fall[s], / rocks on distant hills shudder" and "lions hunker down / in tall grasses." In other words, this death shakes those as immovable as "rocks" and as fearless as "lions." Indeed, "even elephants / lumber after safety," suggesting that even the mightiest people feel powerless after a loss of this magnitude.

And at first, the speaker continues, the pain of such a loss seems to erase all the good the dead once brought into the world. When "great souls die," those who were "dependent upon their / nurture" seem to wither away. "Minds" that were "formed / and informed" by the person's "radiance" seem to return to "ignorance." The world itself can suddenly feel "sterile" and hostile.

Still, the speaker offers hope for the bereaved, assuring them that after some time has passed, they'll take comfort in knowing that the person they've lost made the world a better place. Though it happens "slowly and always / irregularly," the speaker says that eventually "peace blooms" and "a kind of / soothing electric vibration" replaces the emptiness of loss. Though the bereaved will "never / be the same," they will take heart in the fact that their loved ones once "existed." The poem suggests, then, that although grief may feel all-consuming at first, survivors can eventually find acceptance and peace by remembering the contributions of the "great souls" they lost.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11
- Lines 12-24
- Lines 39-47



## THEMES



### LOSS, GRIEF, AND ACCEPTANCE

Maya Angelou wrote "When Great Trees Fall" in response to the death of her friend, the renowned writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin. The poem's speaker compares the loss of "great souls" such as Baldwin to the fall of "great trees," the impact of which can be felt in every direction. After a death like this, the poem implies, it can be hard for people to carry on; they may feel they have lost not only an important person, but everything this person stood for as well. Yet the "spaces" such people leave behind won't stay empty forever, and the poem suggests that the living ultimately find comfort in remembering how these "great souls" managed



### INDIVIDUAL GREATNESS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

"When Great Trees Fall" explores the way a single person can create massive cultural change. The poem implies that "great souls"—the most impressive or talented people in a given community—have an outsized impact on the world around them. Both in life and death, they reshape their entire culture, just as the flourishing or toppling of a huge tree can nurture or shake up an entire landscape.

The poem depicts the individual deaths of "great" people as having a profound collective impact. Just as other plants and

animals may be "dependent" on the "nurtur[ing]" presence of a giant tree, communities thrive under the leadership of "great" individuals. So when such an individual dies, the whole ecosystem that grew up around them seems to collapse; even the "reality" they helped define seems to disappear. The speaker says that the death of someone great can cause people's very "senses" to be "eroded" (worn away) "by fear." It isn't just that this person is gone, the poem implies; it's as if their vision for the world has gone with them, leaving the world "dark" and "cold."

More generally, the poem suggests that heroic individuals can drive broad cultural change and that certain rare individuals can even define whole "period[s]." After a time, it becomes clear that the contributions of "great souls" *don't* just disappear: after someone like that dies, their ideas live on and make the world a "better" place. In other words, even in death, "great" individuals have the power to change the world.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 25-49



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-6

*When great trees ...  
... lumber after safety.*

When giant trees come crashing down, the poem begins, the impact is felt far and wide. "[R]ocks on distant hills" feel the vibrations and "shudder," a word that suggests the landscape itself trembles with fear. Likewise, "lions hunker down" and "even elephants" trudge off in search of "safety."

Note how all these things—rocks, lions, elephants—are linked with steadfastness and strength. Large rocks are heavy and immobile; lions are fearsome predators, the kings of the jungle; and elephants are enormous, slow-moving creatures. Yet all these figures react to the falling tree with fear. The falling of "great trees," the poem conveys, shakes up *everything* around them.

These opening lines establish the poem's form: "When Great Trees Fall" is written in [free verse](#), meaning that it doesn't follow any set [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#). This allows the poem to feel natural and conversational rather than overly formal or rigid. The language is simple and clear and the lines are generally short. The result is a vivid, highly accessible poem.

Soon enough, it will become clear that these "great trees" are [symbolic](#): they represent great people, whose loss, the speaker argues, likewise reverberates throughout the world.

### LINES 7-11

*When great trees ...  
... eroded beyond fear.*

In the first stanza, the speaker described the landscape and large animals seeming to tremble in fear after "great trees fall." Now the speaker turns to smaller creatures, who are so shaken and shocked by such an event that they can't feel *anything* at all. "When great trees fall," the poem implies, it affects *everything* and *everyone*.

The second stanza begins with [anaphora](#), as the speaker repeats the line that began the first stanza:

**When great trees fall**  
in forests,

This anaphora helps to elevate the poem's language, making it feel more epic and powerful. The /f/ [alliteration](#) of "fall" and "forests" adds to the effect, while the [sibilance](#) in the next two lines evokes the hush of "small things" quietly hiding:

small things recoil into silence,  
their senses

The poem continues to use a mixture of [enjambéd](#) and [end-stopped](#) lines, alternately speeding the poem up and then slowing it down again. Note, too, how the lines themselves vary greatly in length. This keeps the poem's pacing dynamic, mimicking the way that people naturally speak.

### LINES 12-14

*When great souls ...  
... light, rare, sterile.*

The third stanza reveals that the speaker hasn't just been talking about literal trees. This whole, time the "great trees" represent great human beings; what happens when those trees fall, in turn, represents what happens when those great people die.

"When great souls die," the speaker says that the air itself grows "light, rare, sterile." In other words, it's like all the air has been sucked out of a room; it becomes hard to breathe.

Notice the use of [asyndeton](#) in line 14, which lacks any coordinating conjunction between "rare" and "sterile." This suggests that this list is far from being exhaustive: the speaker is simply reaching for possible explanations as to why it has suddenly become so hard to breathe. These adjectives suggest that the air lacks heft or weight, that's suddenly scarce (i.e., there's suddenly not enough of it) or strange, and that it holds no *potential*. There seems to be no point in breathing or speaking once a "great soul[]" has gone from this world.

The speaker also introduces the plural pronoun "us" here. This reflects the fact these "great souls" touched many people, and

that their loss is thus felt widely. The use of such pronouns throughout the poem also implies that the loss of "great souls" affects *all* of humanity—the reader included.

### LINES 15-18

*We breathe, briefly. ...  
... a hurtful clarity.*

The speaker says that, because the "air" seems so "light, rare, [and] sterile" after a particularly extraordinary person dies, the bereaved "breathe" only "briefly." In other words, they take small, shallow breaths; they aren't really living so much as *surviving*.

Like the "small things recoil[ing]" in the "forest" after a tree falls, the bereaved find that their "senses" have been overwhelmed by this loss. They see only "briefly," these short bursts of sight tinged by "a hurtful clarity." Most of the time, the poem suggests, the bereaved seem to see nothing at all; when they do see, it's too painfully clear that the world has been changed forever, that things will never be the same without the "great soul[]" they are grieving.

Notice the use of [epistrophe](#) in lines 15-16:

We breathe, briefly.  
Our eyes, briefly,

The [repetition](#) of "briefly" at the ends of lines, like the [anaphora](#) of the phrase "When great," makes the poem's language sound more emphatic. The sounds of the words themselves here add yet more intensity. Listen to the [alliteration](#) of "breathe" and "briefly"; the long /ee/ [assonance](#) of "see," "breathe," "briefly," and "clarity"; and the smooth /l/ [consonance](#) of "briefly" and "hurtful clarity." The poem is very musical, and this music makes it more memorable.

### LINES 19-24

*Our memory, suddenly ...  
... never taken.*

The speaker explains that mourning seems to intensify "memory," making recollections "suddenly sharp[er]." The living can't help but re-examine the past. Their memory "gnaws" on missed opportunities, phrasing that suggests people are unable to stop thinking about all the things they should have said to and all the time they should have spent with this great person.

The word "gnaws" further suggests that with loss comes a terrible emptiness; the grieving attempt to keep this emptiness at bay by "gnaw[ing]" on what could have been.

The speaker once again turns to [asyndeton](#) in these lines. As a result, the lines flow quickly and smoothly; the missed words and moments just keep coming at the bereaved. Asyndeton also suggests that these aren't the *only* instances the bereaved are remembering; there are undoubtedly countless "unsaid" words

and unkept "promise[s]" bearing down on them.

### LINES 25-34

*Great souls die ...  
... radiance, fall away.*

Stanza 4 begins with a variation on the [anaphora](#) that has appeared at the top of every stanza so far:

Great souls die and

By cutting the "when," the speaker adds a sense of firmness and inevitability to this phrase. "Great souls die," the speaker says, presenting this as an inarguable fact of life.

The loss of these souls alters "reality" itself. That's because "reality" was "bound to" these souls. In other words, the world was tied up with such souls' very *existence*; great people, the poem implies, shape the very "reality" everyone lives in. In these people's absence, the world becomes unrecognizable, turned upside down.

The speaker also says that the "souls" of the living were "dependent upon their [the great souls'] / nurture." Like "great trees" in the forest that provide shelter and sustenance for many creatures, great people support and nourish those around them. When those people leave the world, those left behind are robbed of this nourishment. Their *own* "souls" are suddenly starving; they "shrink" and become "wizened," or shriveled up. They likewise lose their "minds," which were "formed / and informed" by the "radiance" of those they've lost. [Polypoton](#) ("formed" and "informed") emphasizes the immense influence of these great souls, who don't simply grant access to information (inform people) but shape the very way people think, "forming" their very minds. (It's worth remembering here that Angelou wrote this poem in response to the death of James Baldwin, whose writing and ideas certainly shaped the way many saw the world!)

### LINES 35-38

*We are not ...  
... caves.*

After a great person's death, the speaker says, the bereaved "are not so much maddened" (or driven crazy) as they are

[...] reduced to the unutterable ignorance of  
dark, cold  
caves.

In other words, it feels as though the world itself has been thrust back into the stone ages, to a time when people lived in "dark, cold / caves." The world no longer seems bright, warm, and filled with potential. Note the /k/ [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) in "dark, cold / caves," which evokes a lump in the

throat, making the speaker's grief feel more visceral.

Again, it's worth keeping in mind that Angelou wrote this poem about her good friend James Baldwin, a Black, gay writer and civil rights activist who spent his life fighting against inequality. The poem suggests that when someone like Baldwin dies, it can feel, at least momentarily, as if everything they stood for and accomplished has died with them.

The image of these "dark, cold / caves" also connotes the loneliness and incomprehension that accompany such a loss. This goes beyond ordinary, personal grief, the poem implies; people must reckon with how the *culture* will change in this person's absence.

### LINES 39-44

*And when great ...  
... soothing electric vibration.*

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 wrapping things up. Indeed, this final stanza represents a turning point in the poem, where the speaker moves from talking about the immense grief at the loss of "great souls" to what eventually fills in the empty spaces those souls leave behind.

Though it takes some time, eventually "a period of peace blooms." The use of the word "blooms" suggests that healing follows grief just as spring flowers inevitably follow the emptiness of winter. This "peace" comes "slowly and always / irregularly," however. In other words, after someone like this dies, people *do* eventually heal—just not right away or all at once.

The speaker continues, "Spaces fill / with a kind of / soothing electric vibration." There's a comforting hum brewing, a new spark of *something* coming to life.

Notice all the /s/ [alliteration](#) and more general [sibilance](#) in these lines: "souls," "peace," "slowly," "Spaces," "soothing." These smooth /s/ sounds evoke the "soothing [peace]" that eventually fills up the gaps left by incredible souls. Though they seem to leave gaping holes in the world when they leave, these holes don't stay empty forever.

### LINES 45-49

*Our senses, restored, ...  
... For they existed.*

Earlier, the speaker presented the loss of "great souls" as something reality-shattering, mind-numbing, and sense-eroding. Such shock, fear, and despair, the speaker says now, don't last forever. Eventually, "Our senses" return. People are

able to think, feel, and perceive the world again—though this perception will "never [] be the same" as it was.

No longer numbed to the point of "silence" and "ignorance" by their loss, people's senses "whisper" to them, reminding them that those "great souls" who died "existed." While they're gone now, nothing can change the fact that those souls once were *here* and that they inspired those who knew them. The living, the speaker says, can continue to "be" and "be / better."

Notice all the [repetition](#) in lines 47-49:

They existed. They existed.  
We can be. Be and be  
better. For they existed.

[Epizeuxis](#) (the repetition of "They existed") emphasizes that death doesn't change the fact that these people lived and shed their "radiance" all around them. And [diacope](#) (the repetition of "be") implies that their existence will continue to inspire the bereaved to keep on living and trying to make the world a better place in spite of the pain of loss. Even beyond death, the poem implies, these "great souls" will continue to improve the world—and everyone in it.



## SYMBOLS



### GREAT TREES

The "great trees" the speaker describes [symbolize](#) "great souls"—larger-than-life individuals who nurture the world around them and whose deaths affect everything in their orbit.

When these giant trees collapse in the forest, the impact is felt far and wide. Creatures large and small are startled or even cower in fear. The mention of lions, elephants, and rocks in the first stanza speaks to just how powerful such losses can be; falling trees make even the strongest, sturdiest, and most fearsome elements of the natural world tremble or crouch down in shock. Likewise, the poem suggests that the loss of great individuals feels utterly earth-shaking.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-11:** "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."



## POETIC DEVICES

## ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) is a major part of "When Great Trees Fall." Each stanza starts with a variation on the same phrase (which also grants the poem its title):

When great trees fall,  
When great trees fall,  
When great souls die,  
Great souls die and  
And when great souls die,

This anaphora clues readers into the fact that those "great trees" really [symbolize](#) "great souls"—those exceptional people who help re-shape the entire world. It also makes the poem simply *sound* more powerful. Angelou's poems are known for their musicality; this one, like many others, was written to be read aloud. The anaphora, along with some other forms of repetition, makes it more exciting to listen to, lending the poem a steady, building rhythm for listeners to get swept up in.

The variation on this anaphora is important, too. The speaker cuts the "when" from the start of stanza, beginning instead with the matter-of-fact "Great souls die." This leaves no room for argument; these amazing people must always one day leave the world. The "And" at the start of the final stanza, meanwhile, creates a sense of conclusion, of the speaker wrapping things up (indeed, the poem turns toward how people can heal in the wake of the loss of great souls here).

There are additional examples of anaphora and broader [parallelism](#) in the poem as well, as the speaker begins multiple lines with "Our": "Our eyes," "Our memory," "Our souls," "Our minds," "Our senses." This repetition adds to the poem's propulsive rhythm while also relaying the various ways that the dead shaped the living. These great souls affected every part of those left behind, from their souls to their minds to their senses.

## Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When great trees fall,"
- **Line 7:** "When great trees fall"
- **Line 12:** "When great souls die,"
- **Line 16:** "Our eyes"
- **Line 19:** "Our memory"
- **Line 25:** "Great souls die and"
- **Line 28:** "Our souls"
- **Line 32:** "Our minds"
- **Line 39:** "And when great souls die,"
- **Line 45:** "Our senses"

## REPETITION

"When Great Trees Fall" uses a few other kinds of [repetition](#) in addition to its extensive [anaphora](#). For example, there's [epistrophe](#), the *opposite* of anaphora, in lines 15-16:

We breathe, **briefly**.  
Our eyes, **briefly**,

The repetition of the word "briefly" calls readers' attention to how much the bereaved are struggling. So pained are they that they can take only short breaths and see in short bursts.

There's also [polyptoton](#) in lines 32-33:

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

The repetition of the root word "formed" emphasizes just how influential these great individuals have been. They haven't simply "informed" people, but "formed," or shaped, their very minds, affecting the way others *think* about the world.

The last three lines of the poem also use [epizeuxis](#) ("They existed. They existed."), [anadiplosis](#) ("We can **be**. **Be** and [...]") and [diacope](#) ("Be and **be**"). This repetition makes for a more emphatic and memorable ending. The impact these "great souls" had on others doesn't just disappear the second they die. Their lives *continue* to have meaning after they are gone because their memory encourages those who survive them to "Be and be / better."

## Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "We breathe, briefly. / Our eyes, briefly,"
- **Lines 32-33:** "formed / and informed"
- **Lines 47-49:** "They existed. They existed. / We can be. Be and be / better. For they existed."

## ALLITERATION

"When Great Trees Fall" was written in order to be read aloud. As such, it's no wonder that the poem is filled with sonic devices like [alliteration](#) (as well as occasional [consonance](#) and [assonance](#)). The repetition of sounds makes the poem feel more musical. It elevates the poem's language, conveying the speaker's passion, and brings the poem's [imagery](#) to life.

Take the second stanza, where muffled /f/ and /s/ alliteration evokes the sudden hush after "When great trees fall / in forests" and little creatures curl up in shock:

When great trees fall  
in forests,  
small things recoil into silence,



their senses  
eroded beyond fear.

Note that there's and broader [sibilance](#) here too: "forests," "silence," "senses."

Other sonic devices work similarly, making the poem's language striking and heightened. In the opening stanza, for example, there's the short assonance of "shudder," "hunker," "lumber" and the consonance of "elephants / lumber after safety." The sharp /k/ sounds of "dark, cold / caves," meanwhile, conveys the harshness of this environment.

The final stanza is brimming with alliteration. Take a look at lines 45-47, where there is /s/ alliteration as well as more general sibilance, sharp /t/ and /r/ consonance, and short /i/ assonance:

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.

There's general consonance (mostly of /l/ sounds) and sibilance here too:

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.

All these soft, lilting sounds evoke the "peace" the speaker is describing. The lines are gentle and quiet, in turn reflecting the healing that eventually happens after "great souls die."

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "fall"
- **Line 8:** "forests"
- **Line 9:** "small," "silence"
- **Line 10:** "senses"
- **Line 11:** "fear"
- **Line 15:** "breathe," "briefly"
- **Line 16:** "briefly"
- **Line 21:** "words"
- **Line 23:** "walks"
- **Line 30:** "nurture"
- **Line 31:** "now"
- **Line 32:** "formed"

- **Line 34:** "fall"
- **Line 37:** "cold"
- **Line 38:** "caves"
- **Line 39:** "souls"
- **Line 40:** "period," "peace"
- **Line 41:** "slowly"
- **Line 42:** "Spaces"
- **Line 44:** "soothing"
- **Line 45:** "senses"
- **Line 46:** "same"
- **Line 48:** "be," "Be," "be"
- **Line 49:** "better"

#### ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) pops up a few times in "When Great Trees Fall." In lines 12-14, for example, the speaker says:

When great souls die,  
the air around us becomes  
light, rare, sterile.

There aren't any coordinating conjunctions between the adjectives in this list. This speeds up the list, conveying the overwhelming rush of emotions that can accompany the loss of "great souls." Asyndeton also suggests that this list of adjectives isn't meant to be *exhaustive*. That is, the air isn't *only* "light," "rare," and "sterile."

There's more asyndeton at the end of the stanza. The speaker says that the "memory" of the bereaved seems to "suddenly" improve, whereupon it

examines,  
gnaws on kind words  
unsaid,  
promised walks  
never taken.

Once again, the lack of coordinating conjunction between "kind words / unsaid" and "promised walks / never taken" suggests that these aren't the *only* thoughts grieving minds are "gnaw[ing] on"—these are just the ones that came to mind for the speaker. There are undoubtedly countless other things the bereaved fixate on when someone important to them dies; the poem is just gesturing at the *kinds* of things grieving people might be regretting when they remember the dead.

#### Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-14:** "When great souls die, / the air around us becomes / light, rare, sterile."
- **Lines 19-24:** "Our memory, suddenly sharpened, /

examines, / gnaws on kind words / unsaid, / promised walks / never taken.”

## ENJAMBMENT

"When Great Trees Fall" uses frequent [enjambment](#). This has a few effects on the poem. For one thing, it keeps the poem's language feeling free and natural, its pace mimicking the cadence of natural speech.

By cutting up clauses, enjambment also adds momentum to the poem and keeps readers engaged. Finally, it stretches out of the poem and helps to keep the poem's lines relatively short on the page. Take lines 41-44:

slowly and always  
irregularly. Spaces fill  
with a kind of  
soothing electric vibration.

Thanks to enjambment like this, "When Great Trees Fall" is a long, narrow poem. Visually, it resembles the trunk of one of those "great trees" it celebrates.

### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "down / in"
- **Lines 5-6:** "elephants / lumber"
- **Lines 7-8:** "fall / in"
- **Lines 10-11:** "senses / eroded"
- **Lines 13-14:** "becomes / light"
- **Lines 17-18:** "with / a"
- **Lines 21-22:** "words / unsaid"
- **Lines 23-24:** "walks / never"
- **Lines 25-26:** "and / our"
- **Lines 26-27:** "to / them"
- **Lines 29-30:** "their / nurture"
- **Lines 32-33:** "formed / and"
- **Lines 33-34:** "their / radiance"
- **Lines 35-36:** "maddened / as"
- **Lines 36-37:** "of / dark"
- **Lines 37-38:** "cold / caves"
- **Lines 41-42:** "always / irregularly"
- **Lines 42-43:** "fill / with"
- **Lines 43-44:** "of / soothing"
- **Lines 45-46:** "never / to"
- **Lines 48-49:** "be / better"

disaster).

**Lumber** (Lines 5-6) - Move slowly, heavily, and awkwardly.

**Recoil** (Line 9) - Draw back, as in fear.

**Eroded** (Lines 10-11) - Worn down.

**Rare** (Lines 13-14) - Scarce or strange.

**Sterile** (Lines 13-14) - Barren, lifeless.

**Clarity** (Line 18) - Clearness or coherence.

**Wizened** (Line 31) - Withered, as from age.

**Maddened** (Line 35) - Made angry or crazy.

**Unutterable** (Line 36) - Unspeakable; not able to be put into words.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"When Great Trees Fall" contains 49 lines of [free verse](#), split into five stanzas of varying lengths. The poem moves freely and unpredictably, not bound by any rigid structure.

The poem's lines are also quite short in general, creating a long, narrow layout on the page that subtly resembles the trunk of a tall tree. The use of so many short lines also adds to the poem's thoughtful, deliberate pacing.

### METER

As a [free verse](#) poem, "When Great Trees Fall" doesn't follow a set [meter](#). The poem's rhythms are natural, conversational, and easy to follow. This helps the poem connect with audiences of all kinds, even those that do not typically read poetry.

### RHYME SCHEME

"When Great Trees Fall" is written in [free verse](#) and therefore does not use a regular [rhyme scheme](#). A regular rhyme scheme, like a steady [meter](#), would likely have made the poem feel formal and constrained rather than meditative and introspective. Rhyme might also have felt too musical, too sing-song, for a long poem written for a funeral.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem isn't specific. That is, the reader isn't given any identifying information about their background, age, gender, race, etc. In fact, the speaker never even refers to themselves in the singular! Instead, they act as a spokesperson for a collective "we"—giving voice to the difficulties faced by those who survive the loss of someone "great."

The speaker can also be interpreted as Angelou herself, seeing as she wrote this poem about her late friend and fellow writer and activist, James Baldwin. By making the speaker an



## VOCABULARY

**Hunker down** (Line 3) - Crouch down (often used metaphorically when talking about trying to avoid a natural

anonymous member of a grieving collective, however, Angelou acknowledges that Baldwin's death didn't just affect her alone, or even just those who knew Baldwin personally. Instead, the poem suggests that when people who are as culturally significant and beloved as Baldwin die, the loss isn't simply personal—it's a blow to society as a whole.



## SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting; it isn't constrained to a particular time or place. Instead, it describes the general impact of losing a "great" person regardless of when or where that loss takes place.

The first two stanzas of the poem do, however, use a [metaphorical](#) setting. That is, the speaker describes the loss of a "great" person as being similar to the loss of a "great tree" in the "forest." When such a tree falls, it affects *everything* in its orbit. Whether it's "rocks on distant hills," fearsome "lions," sturdy "elephants," or creatures too "small" to name, the tree's death utterly shakes up the environment it once "nurture[d]." This metaphorical setting suggests that human deaths can feel just as catastrophic—that the loss of someone truly special can be felt in every direction.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was one of the most beloved American writers of the 20th century. She first became famous for her memoir [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#), in which she describes her troubled childhood with an honesty and openness that many of her early critics found shocking and many of her early readers found inspiring.

Angelou [later revealed](#) that this book would never have come into being had it not been for her friend, fellow writer [James Baldwin](#). Angelou wrote "When Great Trees Fall" in 1987, upon hearing of Baldwin's death. She read the poem at his funeral and included it in her 1990 collection *I Shall Not Be Moved*.

As a Black American poet and memoirist, Angelou saw herself as a member of a literary tradition that included writers like [Langston Hughes](#) and [Paul Laurence Dunbar](#). Her close friendship with Baldwin was also deeply influential; the two were both members of the Harlem Writers Guild, a group that supports and honors writers of the African Diaspora.

Angelou's work was additionally influenced by the work of other civil rights activists, especially Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and also later by the loss of many of these figures to racial violence. For Angelou and her contemporaries, there often was little divide between literature and activism; art was one more way to reflect, represent, and advocate for Black people and to

protest the injustices of racism. In turn, Angelou's memoirs, poetry, and activism have had a profound and lasting effect on American society. In recognition of her life's work, President Barack Obama awarded Angelou the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Angelou wrote this poem in response to James Baldwin's death from stomach cancer in 1987. A renowned Black, gay novelist, poet, playwright, essayist, Baldwin's work explored themes related to race, masculinity, sexuality, and class. He was also a staunch political and social activist whose legacy continues to shape and inspire racial justice movements to this day. In short, Baldwin was one such "great soul" who "formed and informed" his readers' minds, and whose death reverberated far and wide.

Of course, Baldwin wasn't the first "great soul[]" whose death Angelou was forced to confront. As a civil rights activist, Angelou was also deeply affected by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.'s respective assassinations, which likely informed the complicated sense of hope, determination, and resilience that infuses much of Angelou's work.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Short Review of I Shall Not Be Moved](#) — A Publisher's Weekly write-up of Angelou's last single volume of poetry, *I Shall Not Be Moved*, in which "When Great Trees Fall" was published. (<https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780394586182>)
- [Listen to a Recital of the Poem](#) — Maryam Monsef recites "When Great Trees Fall." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCYT5VO5DGw>)
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — A biography of Maya Angelou from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou>)
- [PBS Interview with James Baldwin](#) — A 1975 conversation between Maya Angelou and James Baldwin in which the longtime friends discuss race, sexual identity, writing, and more. (<https://www.openculture.com/2021/10/witness-maya-angelou-james-baldwins-close-friendship-in-a-tv-interview-from-1975.html>)
- [A Biography of James Baldwin](#) — Read about Angelou's friend James Baldwin, the writer and activist whose death inspired the poem. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-baldwin>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- [Caged Bird](#)
- [Harlem Hopscotch](#)



- [Life Doesn't Frighten Me](#)
- [On Aging](#)
- [On the Pulse of Morning](#)
- [Phenomenal Woman](#)
- [Still I Rise](#)
- [Woman Work](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Mottram, Darla. "When Great Trees Fall." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 May 2022. Web. 28 Jun 2022.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "When Great Trees Fall." LitCharts LLC, May 25, 2022. Retrieved June 28, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/maya-angelou/when-great-trees-fall>.