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Research Article



Death and Loss in Maya Angelou's Poems 'When Great Tress Fall' and 'The Lesson'

Sadaf

Research Scholar

Department of English

Patna University

Patna, Bihar, India

Email: sadafmallickhasan@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8990-0428>

Dr. Sahar Rahman

Associate Professor

Department of English,

Patna Women's College,

Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India

Email: saharrah@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4096-5168>

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Abstract

Death has remained a prominent and universal theme in English poetry. From the anonymous poems composed during the Old English Period, to the works of pre-Romantics, War poets and Modern poets, mortality has served as a unifying theme in English poetry. Elegy has remained an important form within the genre, lamenting the loss of an individual. Poets have dealt with the theme of death differently with some finding consolation in religious belief of afterlife to others seeing it as an indispensable aspect of

life. Maya Angelou, an African American poet, has dealt with the theme of loss in few of her notable poems. The present paper aims to discuss death as an important theme in Angelou's "When Great Trees Fall" and "The Lesson". The paper will further investigate Angelou's use of language in the poems to express the emotion of loss and grief. It will also try to give insight into Angelou's philosophy of life and death, and how she overcomes loss in her life.

Keywords: Death, Grief, Loss, Resilience, Emotional healing, Nature imagery, Memory, Symbolism, Identity

Some of the most common themes found in English poetry are love, identity, death, memory, vagaries of time, and loss. If poets like Robert Frost and Wordsworth wrote poems to celebrate life as it is, there are others like Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Robert Browning who dealt with themes of death and loss. Mortality has remained a prominent theme in the earliest poems composed during old English period. Notable among them are "The Wanderer", "The Husband's Message", "The Wife's Lament", "Doer", "The Battle of Maldon" etc. The graveyard poets, also called the "Churchyard poets", writing during the pre-Romantic period, wrote gloomy meditations on mortality. This includes a list of poets like Thomas Gray ("The Elegy Written in a Country churchyard"), Thomas Parnell ("Night-Piece on Death"), Robert Blair ("The Grave"), Edward Young ("Night Thoughts") among others. Death has remained an important theme during the two World Wars where several poets wrote about the miseries caused by the World Wars. War poets like Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon wrote about the ills of the war with death being a recurring motif. Many acclaimed modern writers like Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, Philip Larkin, W H Auden have also written remarkable pieces to talk about this universal theme of death. One of the oft quoted lines from Dickinson "Because I could not stop for death, He kindly stopped for me; The carriage held but just ourselves and immortality," beautifully personifies death as a gentleman. She has written various poems that discuss death and afterlife. From Shakespearean sonnets, Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" to the great elegies by Milton, Shelley, Tennyson, death and mourning have remained an important theme in English poetry. Death is one of the deadliest fears of humans. It is accompanied with loss, fear of unknown, grief and pain. Poets have dreaded, retaliated, resisted and espoused it.

Maya Angelou a renowned writer, memoirist, dancer, singer, Civil Rights activist and poet has written several poems on the theme of death and loss. For Maya, death of a loved one is an extreme loss. Also, death to her is not an occurrence that will happen only once in life. She experiences it very differently from others. Though death brings a lot of grief and loss yet its fear cannot stop great souls to move ahead in life. This paper will try to discuss the theme of death and loss in Maya Angelou's two poems, "When Great Trees Fall", written after the death of her dear friend James Baldwin and "The Lesson".

"When Great Trees Fall" was written in the year 1987 by Angelou after the death of her loved friend and Civil Rights activist, James Baldwin. It encompasses in it great grief and loss that Angelou suffers. To make readers understand the importance of the deceased, Maya Angelou draws a comparison of death of great people to the falling of a tree in forest. She writes,

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety. (Angelou "When Great Trees Fall")

Angelou was grief stricken after the death of James Baldwin. She has gone through the similar pain after the death of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and her grandmother Mrs. Henderson. In the present poem, Maya describes death as a tragic but inevitable part of human existence. Death creates an open wound in the heart which is created by despair and misery. The paper aims to discuss the theme of death from Maya Angelou's perspective and how she has used language to describe the emotion. It will also discuss what impact it brings on others. The paper will also scrutinize how people mourn the death of great people in context of 'When Great Trees Fall'.

In the present poem, she describes what changes the surrounding nature goes through when a great tree dies. Mountains, animals, birds all feel the void and are shaken by the death of a large tree which was with them for a long period of time. Maya uses metaphor to compare the death of a giant tree to great souls leaving behind their mortal beings. In the poem, rocks shudder and animals flee when a great tree falls. It is similar to the passing of great souls which breaks the heart of people who love them. They cannot flee from this pain.

Angelou artfully articulates all-encompassing pain and loss. The poet also talks about loss that brings disorientation of people whose souls wither because they lose a dear one. The last stanza of the poem brings the optimism that Maya holds in her heart in spite of the pain she is in. She knows that her dear friends will never return but these great souls once existed and that has left an immortal effect. This will bring the mourners some respite. They can always honour these souls and can cherish them in their memories as they continue to live their life. She notes:

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. (Angelou "When Great Trees Fall")

Overall in the poem "When Great Trees Fall", Angelou presents grief, nostalgia, and regret after the death of a great activist and a friend, who was no less than a brother. Like a giant tree that provides shelter, food and is home for many in a forest, James Baldwin was a friend, family and protector for many. Maya has used imagery and metaphors to present an intimate loss that has created a void. The poem beautifully connects memories, life and death. It also shows how the cycle of nature is ever going.

Maya Angelou has also portrayed death in different shades. For her death does not always mean the physical death. It may also symbolize the sufferings and trials of life that can be sometime even more afflicting than death itself. These trials sometime make humans stronger than before and they resurrect from ashes like phoenix.

The poem 'The Lesson' talks about death like pain and sufferings but it also talks about facing it and moving on. It was published in the year 1978 in the 'And Still I Rise' which is a collection of Maya Angelou's poems. 'The Lesson' educates us about how to win over destruction, grief, loss and shine even brighter than before. The opening line of the poem is "I keep on Dying again," that suggests that Maya has used death as a symbol of all the agony and sufferings of life. These keep befalling on her again and again. For Maya death does not come to any human only once. It is something that can be experienced again and again as she has felt it many a times in her life. This pain can be felt by the betrayal of friends or lovers or the trials and hardships or the death and departure of people without whom we cannot imagine ourselves but life surprises us with it. Maya tells the readers that these pains have made her weak. Now her veins are lifeless like fists of sleeping babies. Maya remembers the death of dear ones and compares these people with old tombs. These people have now vanished from the face of earth forever. Only their profound

memories remain with her. Her heart aches when she recalls their memories. It is the death of these people that make her feel the pain of death herself again and again. Maya fears how the flesh of these people her loved ones must be consumed now by worms and this scary pain she associates with death. She writes, "Not convince me against/ The challenge" (Angelou "The Lesson") These lines from the poem 'The Lesson' shows that in spite of all the sufferings and pain similar to death, the poet is never going to give up. She has immortal spirit to stand against any kind of calamities which no death can kill. Maya Angelou firmly believed in surviving against all odds. This same spirit echoes in Angelou's poem "The Lesson". She is ever ready to face any challenge and pain and will continue to move ahead in her life. She herself was aware that now she has reached old age and that ravaging death will even consume her. She was still determined not to give up. She had died many deaths before thus nothing could stop her. The lines on her face are not only the reminder of her old age but also of the trials she has faced. She carries them as badges of victory against sufferings, loss, fear and pain like that of death. She even shows hope against death. Her eyes have now become dead but her determination to move ahead in life is stronger than before. Nothing neither old age nor the fear of death stops her because she loves to live her life to the fullest. The poet concludes the poem thus, "I keep on dying, / Because I love to live" (Angelou "The Lesson") which can be seen as the solution to the problem of death. The poet is ready to face the pain of death because she loves to live her life. Her love for life is way stronger than the pain of death. The poetess gives the reader the lesson that may be there are several complexities of life but life is all about embracing them. The readers should keep in mind that the poem is written by Maya Angelou who was abandoned by her parents at the age of three. She was raped at a very young age, faced racism and violence that nobody should see. She lost her dear friends Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Junior and James Baldwin whom she considered her brothers and lost her grandmother and mother yet she chose hope over sufferings and loss. She gives us a lesson to keep moving through her poem "The Lesson".

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