



## METAPHOR AND REALITY OF DEATH IN MAYA ANGELOU'S "WHEN GREAT TREES FALL" AND "HIS DAY IS DONE"

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Africa and its diaspora, when great people, heroes, brave warriors pass away, it creates both physical and psychological gaps yet to be filled. Though a painful and inevitable experience, death forces human beings, as they are reflecting on the short passage of the deceased among them, to honor him or her. Maya Angelou wrote her poems "When Great Trees Fall" and "His Day Is Done" upon hearing the death of James Baldwin (1987) and Nelson Mandela (2013). Applying ecocriticism, Afrocentricity and Ubuntu as a triangular theoretical framework, this study aims at analyzing how the poet has artistically used language to represent the concept of death and its depressive impacts on the livings and scrutinize how the latter mourn and honor the departure of great souls.

**Keywords:** Departure, mourning, honor, great souls, ancestors.

### **RESUME**

En Afrique et dans sa diaspora, le décès de grands personnages, de héros, ou de braves guerriers crée un vide à la fois physique et psychologique à combler. Bien qu'étant une expérience douloureuse et inévitable, la mort oblige les êtres humains, alors qu'ils réfléchissent sur le court passage du défunt parmi eux, à l'honorer. Maya Angelou a écrit les poèmes « When Great Trees Fall » et « His Day Is Done » en apprenant la mort de James Baldwin (1987) et Nelson Mandela (2013). En appliquant l'éco-criticisme, l'Afrocentricité et l'Ubuntu comme cadre théorique triangulaire, cette étude vise à analyser comment le poète a artistiquement utilisé le langage pour représenter le concept de mort et ses impacts dépressifs sur les vivants et examiner comment ces derniers pleurent et honorent le départ des grandes âmes.

**Mots-clés :** Départ, deuil, honneur, grandes âmes, ancêtres.

### **INTRODUCTION**

When Maya Angelou passed away on May 28, 2014, at the age of 86, about six months after Nelson Mandela's death, she left behind her a polyvalent legacy as a poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. Mary Jane Lupton (2014, p. 88) states, "To my knowledge her final notable public poem was a tribute to South African leader Nelson Mandela, whom she compared to the Hebrew King David for having defeated the mighty Goliath." Being an African American civil rights activist who

worked together with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Maya Angelou was highly impacted by their murders. Strangely though, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on Maya Angelou's birthday (April 4) in 1968, and his death deeply affected her. In fact, she stopped celebrating her own birthday for many years ("Famous Death Poems," n.d.).

In 1987 upon hearing the death of James Baldwin, another social activist who had self-exiled himself in Paris after the death of Dr. King, Maya Angelou wrote the poem "When Great Trees Fall" that she recited at Baldwin's funeral. She "uses symbolism and strong imagery in this poem to show a person's response to loss. It doesn't matter how strong or tough you are; when an influential person in your life passes away, you feel the effects" ("Famous Death Poems," n.d.). Ali Furqan Syed et al (2021, p. 64), quoting Kim Fahner, also observe that "... this poem is a source of comfort for you after losing someone who is very near to you."

Maya Angelou also wrote a tribute poem to Nelson Mandela, "His Day Is Done." Mandela was involved in the same struggle for justice and civil and economic rights for Blacks in South Africa. The poem commemorates Nelson Mandela's legacy. Angelou always tried to be frank in her art. She makes it very clear: "What I have tried to do in all of my work over the past 30 years is to tell the truth and to tell it eloquently" (McCluskey, 2001, p. 3).

The present study aims at analyzing how Maya Angelou has artistically used language to represent the concept of death and its depressive impacts on the livings and scrutinize how the latter mourn and honor the departure of great souls in the context of "When Great Trees Fall," and "His Day Is Done" from an African perspective. This paper relies on ecocriticism, Afrocentricity, and Ubuntu as theoretical framework, and partially on stylistics to analyze the two poems.

According to Cheryl Glotfelty (1996, p. xviii), "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Glotfelty is the cofounder of the ecocritical studies in the U.S., which is the intersection of many domains such as the environment, biology, literature, and ecology. This theory helps to examine the natural elements that are in "When Great Trees Fall." As for Afrocentricity, Molefi Kete Asante (Turner & Asante, 2002, p. 718) its theoretician, defines it as "... a paradigm which infuses all phenomena from the standpoint of African people as subjects in human history rather than as on the fringes of someone else's culture." In short, Afrocentricity is a conscious understanding of the role that African people play now and have played in history. Since Maya Angelou is an African descendent, these two poems may be viewed as Afrocentric heritage.

In addition to these two theories, Ubuntu will be used. "Ubuntu can best be described as an African philosophy that places emphasis on 'being self through others'" (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013, p. 82). It is "a worldview that tries to capture the essence of what it means to be human" (John Hailey, 2008, p. 3). The relevance of this theory is that it helps to consider the deceased as ancestors who are intrinsically part of the African community.

Since the texts under consideration are poems, it is important to have a stylistic view at them. Ali Furqan Syed et al (2021, p. 63) note that "Stylistic analysis helps the reader to reveal the true meaning garbed in figurative language used by the poet." Through the stylistic analysis, the figures of speech, diction and sounds pattern as well as the poetic forms will be assessed.

### **1. Maya Angelou's Life Experience**

When Charles H. Rowell (1997, p. 181) asked Gloria Naylor how she felt about literary works, she replied, "With a poem you step into a moment. With a short story you'll step into a day in the life of, or the year in the life of. But with a novel you've got whole universes swirling." The briefness of the moment of the poem the reader steps into is what makes poetry very challenging. Though the biographical information is no more the rule, it may be interesting to have some background information on the poet and the context in which poems are written.

Maya Angelou belongs to a tradition of multitalented African American artists who embrace many fields of activities altogether. She was a civil right movements activist who focused not only on African Americans' rights but also those of Africans. Cheryl A. Wall. (2014, p. 3) notes that Angelou "worked with Dr. King as the northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and was preparing to join the staff of the Organization of Afro-American Unity led by Malcolm X when he was assassinated." Prior to this, in "the 1960s she demonstrated at the United Nations to protest the murder of Patrice Lumumba" (Wall, 2014, p. 3).

This position made her a Pan-African activist. The assassination of these three African and African American great souls strongly impacted Maya Angelou. Joanne V. Gabbin (2005, p. 5) states that "Her poetry also has a debt to the oratorical giants of the 20th century – Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, and Louis Farrakhan, who voiced whole movements through the power of their rhetoric."

As a Pan-African activist, Maya Angelou visited many African countries and even spent three years in Ghana. Maya Angelou said: "I think that a person would have to

read some of my work to see why I went and how I lived for a while in Egypt and then for a few years in Ghana. I returned realizing that I was an African and an African American" (McCluskey, 2001, p. 3). When she was asked if it was necessary for her to go to Africa to realize that she responded: "Some people can go away for the weekend and get that. But it seemed that I had to go and live in Africa, learn a few languages, and really be present there to understand more" (McCluskey, 2001, p. 3).

Maya Angelou learned a lot in Africa. She learned the philosophy and the world view of her ancestors. She observed, "Many traditional West African religions claim that the elements of nature are part of a spiritual life in which skulls, trees, masks, and drums are capable of speech and cognition" (Lupton, 2014, p. 86). In the same line, Angelou asserted that "All things are inhabited by spirits which must be appeased and to which one can appeal. So, for example, when a master drummer prepares to carve a new drum, he approaches the selected tree and speaks to the spirit residing there" (Lupton, 2014, p. 86). This way of viewing elements of nature is presented in her poem "When Great Trees Fall."

Maya Angelou also realized that "In Africa it is a great honor to serve, to be allowed to serve somebody is a great honor. You can insult a person by not accepting something from him" (Angelou, 1977, p. 47). This honor and service attitude derive from the African philosophy of Ubuntu. Ramose (1999) reveals: "African philosophy has long been established in and through ubuntu ... there is a family atmosphere, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa" (Ramose, 1999, as cited in Hailey, 2008, p. 4).

In the same vein, Ramose notes that "the philosophy is not merely restricted to Bantu speakers but is found throughout sub-Saharan Africa including West Africa. For example, in Senegal the concept of "Teranga" reflects a similar spirit of collective hospitality and responsibility" (Ramose, 1999, as cited in Hailey, 2008, p. 4). All this understanding of Africa and African great souls influences her writing art, especially "When Great Trees Fall" and "His Day Is Done."

Maya Angelou had also learned that "African worldviews, unlike Western worldviews, see both ancestors and descendants as present beings, not merely memories and hopes. They are actual persons, who are immanently present, though not usually visible" (Van Breda, 2019, p. 447).

Being a Pan-African activist, Maya Angelou was also against Apartheid in South Africa. She met Nelson Mandela, another African great soul, in Egypt in 1962. When

the latter passed away in December 2013, Angelou wrote a tribute poem to him on behalf of the American people. "Composed on behalf of the American people, the poem eloquently speaks to Mandela's importance to both South Africans and the rest of the world, referring to him as "David, armed with a mere stone, facing down the mighty Goliath"" (Zodml, 2013, para. 1).

Sylvia Obell (2020, para. 1) notes, "In December 2013, the U.S. Department of State posted a YouTube video of Dr. Maya Angelou delivering a poem entitled His Day is Done – A Tribute Poem for Nelson Mandela on behalf of the American people." Not surprising though, "Angelou was amongst the writers whose works kept Mandela going through his 27 year prison sentence on Robben Island, and he recited her poem "Still I Rise" at his presidential inauguration" (Zodml, 2013, para. 2).

## 2. Maya Angelou's Death Poem

Maya Angelou devoted part of her poetry to honor great African souls during her life. It is very important to make it clear that Angelou herself is a "great tree". Cheryl A. Wall (2014, p. 1)notes:

Presidents and former presidents, writers and musicians, activists and actors, talk-show hosts and ordinary people around the world paid homage to her memory. Large public services were held in Wake Forest, North Carolina, New York City, and San Francisco. Visual images of Angelou circulated in mass media, and her voice, instantly recognizable and resonant, echoed across the airwaves.

In one way or the other, "When Great Trees Fall" can be viewed as a tribute Angelou paid to herself. Moreover, her writing has reached beyond the frontiers of her African and African American communities as it embraces human values and experiences. Joanne V. Gabbin (2005, p. 4) observes, "Angelou's sensitive understanding of love, disappointment, despair, anger, and joy has equipped her with wisdom and insight and has endeared her to countless Americans who cross racial, class, and gender lines."

The rising spirit of Maya Angelou's famous "Still I Rise" eloquently entextualizes the poetics of bereavement and affliction in the two poems under consideration. A. Corfman (2017, para. 6) remarks that "'When Great Trees Fall' by Maya Angelou is a five-stanza poem that's separated into uneven sets of lines. The stanzas range in length from five lines up to fourteen." The poem "is without any specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern" (Syed et al., 2021, p. 64).

In "His Day Is Done", Nelson Mandela's "time has come, as it must to all of us" [Eileen Raymond, (n.d.), para. 2]. Both poems, revolving around death and its immediate impacts on the livings have vivid figurative language in form of metaphor, enjambment, and repetition.

### **3. Loss and Depression in Maya Angelou's Poems**

#### **3.1. *The Metaphor of Loss***

##### **3.1.1. *The Poetic Form***

Maya Angelou's "When Great Trees Fall" and "His Day Is Done" are free verse poems with no particular rhyme scheme. This may be explained by the extreme seriousness of the central issue of death. Yet, the repetition of the title throughout the two poems gives the reader a sense of constant reminder of the central issue.

"When Great Trees Fall" is a free verse poem of five stanzas of uneven length. These five stanzas can be divided into three sections. Stanzas 1 and 2 make up Section 1; section 2 gathers stanzas 3 and 4, and stanza 5 is section 3. Section 1 introduces the notion of death and loss in a metaphorical way as to alter a serious and depressive issue. Section 2 shifts from the metaphoric image to the crude reality of death, whereas section 3 reconnects the reader with the ever-rising spirit of hope and resilience found in Angelou's poem "Still I Rise."

"His Day Is Done" is a free verse eighteen-stanza poem which we divide into four sections of which the first goes from stanza 1 to stanza 4. Section 2 runs from stanza 5 to stanza 11. Section 3 is made of stanzas twelve, thirteen and fourteen, and the last section links together the last four stanzas. Section 1 deals with the confirmation of Nelson Mandela's death. Section 2 is about the hardship and the dangers he had to face in his fight for freedom and justice. While section 3 celebrates Mandela's ascendancy, section 4 reviews his legacy, people's gratitude and promises to honor him.

##### **3.1.2. *Language Pattern***

The title of Maya Angelou's poem "When Great Trees Fall" is a metaphorical euphemism that indicates the passing away of great people. "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" (Corfman, 2017, para. 4). In this open section (stanzas 1 and 2) the reader sees how connected elements of Nature are. When one

element falls it affects the others. The fallen trees make "rocks on distant hills shudder" (line 2), "lions hunker down in tall grasses" (lines 3 and 4), and "elephants lumber after safety" (lines 5 and 6). Through ecocriticism one can see the tree, rock, the lion, the elephant, and small things as parts of an interconnected and interdependent ecosystem.

Section 1 represents the mineral reign (rocks, line 2), the vegetable reign (trees line 1, grasses line 4, forests line 8), and the animal reign (lions line 3, elephants line 5, small things line 9). These reigns are interconnected and interdependent though the mineral and vegetable reign do not move like animals and insects do. These three reigns are united by the earth from which some erupt, on which many grow up, and on which others move, eat and sleep. So, when a great tree, which provides shade and food for animals, and shelter for birds, falls, its absence affects all the beneficiaries.

When viewed through an Afrocentric lens, section 1 reflects the African way of dealing with the inevitable reality of death. Because Africans live close to Nature, their use of language is biomimetic (imitating Nature). Trees, rocks, lions, elephants are elements of Nature that the poet uses. It is too hard and difficult to talk about death in a plain manner in the first poem. So, euphemism and metaphor are crafted to deal with the same issue but in a figurative way. Having spent some years in Africa, Maya Angelou is certainly exposed to such ways of proceeding.

Besides the use of the extended metaphor, anaphora has been employed. The phrase "When Great Trees Fall" is used three times from the title to the second stanza. "The title, 'When Great Trees Fall' is in part utilized as a refrain throughout the poem. For example, at the start of stanzas one and two, it is used word for word" (Corfman, 2017, para. 10). Anaphora serves as mnemonic device that keeps reminding the reader about the seriousness of central issue.

### **3.1.3. Symbols**

Section 1 in 'When Great Trees Fall' explores the impact the fallen great trees have on rocks, lions, elephants, as well as on small things. Though the natural elements show the vivid image death may have on the living, each of them stands as a symbol on its own. Rocks, for instance, may symbolize longevity, solidity, stability. Houses for both the living and the dead are often made of rocks, stones, or bricks. In reality, the rocks are the metaphor or symbol of men and women of stamina, perseverance, determination and resilience. A man or woman on whom one can rely in hard times. "The image of the "rocks on distant hills shudder[ing]" symbolizes the ways in

which the death causes people, even distant people, to feel despair and shudder" (Corfman, 2017, para. 11).

As for the symbol of lion, it may stand for majesty, strength, courage, and power. A lion can be taken for a person who has means, power and influence. Elephants too symbolize wisdom, strength, and power that can remove obstacles.

These three symbols (rock, lion, and elephant) convey the image of assurance, confidence, and protection. Yet, despite their strong energy, the devastating power of death can shake them from head to toe. Ali Furqan Syed (2021, p. 63) notes that "The process of running of the animals is symbolized with the people when they try to find a place of shelter in the form of support from someone to decrease their sorrow after the death of their dear ones." This quote explains how the fallen trees frighten the lions and elephants, causing them to run away.

As far as the "small things" are concerned, they symbolize nonentities in real life, people of low conditions. Small things in the forest can be ants, bees, worms, wasps, bugs, butterflies, cockroaches, rodents, and many others. Small things "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" (Corfman, 2017, para. 13).

The central natural element of this first section is the fallen tree. A tree has three main parts: the roots, the trunk, and the leafy crown, which in its turn may comprise leaves, flowers, and fruits. The roots, the most important and invisible part of the tree, collect the nutrients and water in the form of sap, and anchor the tree. The height of a tree simply depends on the depth and the solidity of its roots. The trunk connects the roots and the leaves. It serves as transporter or conveyor of water and nutrients from the roots to the leaves, which use the water and the nutrient to manufacture food through photosynthesis. The food thus made in the leaves moves down through the trunk to roots. The main function of the leaves is photosynthesis in which carbon is absorbed and oxygen is released. The tree in this first section stands for a great person. The invisible roots symbolize the ancestors and tradition, and the past. The trunk represents the present time and life of the person. And the leaves and fruit stand for their achievements, offspring, and the future. For a tree to fall, its roots may die first.

#### ***3.1.4. Mood and Tone***

Maya Angelou has used a measured tone to introduce her concern in the first section of the poem "When Great Trees Fall." Ali Furqan Syed et al. (2021, p. 64) argues: "In

between the lines of the poem, Maya Angelou used the tone that is well considered, gentle and calm in nature to explain her point of view about death." To convey this heavy feeling of loss, "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" (Corfman, 2017, para. 12).

### *3.1.5. The Transition*

Any reader of "When Great Trees Fall" can clearly see that there is a shift in strategy. "With the third stanza, the speaker shifts from her use of metaphor to speaking directly about death" (Corfman, 2017, para. 14). Corfman explains: "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" (para. 14). This shift introduces the second section of the poem. This second section also sets up and opens a gateway to the second poem under study, "His Day Is Done."

Stanza three breaks from the covered language to the crude reality of death. This is reinforced in the two stanzas that follow. A. Corfman (2017, para. 10) confirms: "At the beginning of stanzas three, four, and five the phrase is altered to clear up the metaphor. Rather than speaking of trees as a stand-in for human life, she addresses the "Great souls" directly." Ali Furqan Syed et al. (2021, p.64) also keenly observe: "With this example we clearly understand how beautifully May Angelou has applied the literary terms to make her work attractive for the readers." However, they expound: "With the progress of the theme, the poem directly shifts on the topics of "great souls" and the reaction of human beings on that loss" (p. 64).

In the same vein, Mary Jane Lupton (2014, p. 84) notes: "With the introduction of the soul theme in stanza three, the words become nebulous, vague, relegated to the mind and to memory. The tone becomes somber, elegiac. There are no rhymes." Since the issue is too serious and depressive "The famous verb "to rise" is replaced by the verb to fall" (p. 84).

### *3.2. The Reality of Physical Departure*

The phrases and words in section two of "When Great Trees Fall", (stanzas 3 and 4) such as "great souls die" (lines 12 and 25), "rare, sterile" (line 14), "takes leave of us" (line 27), "shrink, wizened" (line 31), "fall away" (line 34), "dark, cold" (line 37) and "caves" intentionally carry heavy emotional loads of depression and devastation that

death imposes on the living. "We are not so much maddened / as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of / dark, cold / caves" (lines 35-38) leaves the reader and the speaker powerless. And "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" (Corfman, 2017, para. 17).

According to African knowledge in Ancient Egypt, the human soul is made of nine distinct entities, which are Khet/Khat (the physical body that could decay after death), Sahu (the incorruptible spiritual body), Akhu (the immortal part), Ren (the hidden name or identity), Ba (the personality), Ka (the double self), Ib (the heart, the source of good or evil in a person, center of thoughts), Khaibit (the shadow of a man), Sekhem (the life force of a man). In the eyes of Caroline Seawright (n.d., para. 1) "To the Ancient Egyptians, their soul, their being, were made up of many different parts. Not only was there the physical form, but there were eight immortal or semi-divine parts that survived death, with the body making nine parts of a human. According to Molefi Kete Asante (2014, p. 43), "The idea of soul is central in the narrative of ancient Egyptians especially as it relates to the idea of eternal life, a familiar and constant concept in their discourse." It is this concept of eternal life or life after death which better helps grasp the Afrocentric scope of these two poems. In this vein, great souls, actually, never die. It is only the Khat that stops functioning, but the other eight entities are alive on other dimensions.

The repetition of "great souls die" and the arrangement of words highlight the devastating effect of death. The burden this issue creates is so heavy that sometimes single lines are unable to contain. This explains the enjambment observed on lines 13-14, and lines 35-38 to mention but a few. The sad emotion of this section leads to the first section of "His Day Is Done."

Though talking about the same issue of death, Maya Angelou in "His Day Is Done" spares the use of metaphor. Instead, the style is direct. The title "His Day Is Done" is metaphorical euphemism addressing death. Right from there, the reader is exposed to the central theme of the poem. While "When Great Trees Fall" may apply to many African/African American great souls like Marcus Garvey, Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others, "His Day Is Done" is about Nelson Mandela, who the reader sees on line four.

The phrase "is done" repeated four times in this first section followed by a period in each case, confirms a complete action, here the death of Mandela. "The news" also repeated on lines three and five combined with words and phrases like "reluctant, its

burden" (line 3), "unwelcome" (line 5), "somber (line 6), and "Our skies were leadened" (line 7) reinforce the imagery of death.

Not only has Maya Angelou introduced the falling of the "Great Tree" that is Nelson Mandela in this first section of the poem, but also, she presented her condolences to "Bantu, Zulu, Xhosa, Boer" (line 11). In stanza two, the speaker uses metaphor to confirm the inevitable departure of mankind reminding the reader of the evidence of death: "We see you, South African people standing speechless at the slamming of that final door through / which no traveler returns" (lines 10-11). As nobody can escape death, it becomes something normal though not accepted.

The speaker also uses allusion to refer to the deceased as "your son of Africa, your father, your one more wonder of the world" (line 12). He was also referred to in a biblical allusion as "your David armed with a mere stone, facing down the mighty Goliath" (lines 13-14), and as "Your man of strength, Gideon, emerging triumphant" (line 15). The purpose of using allusion as communicative strategy is to highlight how great Nelson Mandela was. He was indeed "a great soul."

#### **4. Greatness in the Poems**

"When Great Trees Fall" is poem for any great human as Maya has not named a specific person. "When Great Trees Fall" is about the passing away of great souls, but the speaker does not tell the reader what makes a soul to be considered "great". This lack of information is filled in "His Day Is Done," as Angelou elaborates on what makes Mandela a "great soul." Two elements are to be considered here: the obstacles the hero (Mandela) faced and the attitude he demonstrated.

##### **4.1. Mandela and the Mountain of Obstacles**

The "Although" (line 16) initiates a new phase or the second section of the poem "His Day Is Done." This section, which runs from stanza five to stanza eleven, shifts the speaker's energy from death to mountain of obstacle the "son of Africa" had encountered. Though the set of allusion ending the first section of "His Day Is Done" presents the mighty Goliath" (line 14), it is in this second section that the speaker expounds the nature of that "mighty Goliath."

It is the second section of "His Day Is Done" that the speaker exposes the "mighty Goliath" known as Apartheid. The "mighty Goliath" speaks volume. The phrases "born into the brutal embrace of Apartheid", "scarred by the savage atmosphere of racism" (line 16), and "unjustly imprisoned in the bloody maws of South African

dungeons" (line 17) all carry lethal energies. This explains why rhetorical questions are used on the line that immediately follows the description of the monster Nelson Mandela had to face: "Would the man survive? Could the man survive?" (line 18). Apartheid is so baleful that its "brutal embrace" and "the bloody maws of its dungeons, instill a "savage atmosphere" in the land.

The personification or rather the "monsterification" of Apartheid displaying a beast-like (brutal, savage, and bloody maws) reinforces the dangerousness, and the terror it used to represent for its victims, one of whom was Mandela. Once in jail, Mandela would deploy an outcry of determination and resistance the "monster" ~~had~~ had never seen before. His reaction inspired many people around the world as line nineteen shows it, "His answer strengthened men and women around the world." His determination and resistance played a major role in his release after twenty-seven years in jail.

The speaker also says that "In the Alamo, in San Antonio, Texas," which is the South (central), "on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco," which is the West, "in Chicago's Loop," in the Midwest, "in New Orleans Mardi Gras," in the Southeast (line 21), and "in New York City's Times Square," in Northeast, "we watched as the hope of Africa sprang through the prison's doors" (lines 20-21). These locations, symbols of religious, cultural, historical, and economic powers, represent the geographical markers of orientation (East, West, North, and South) which people all over the world use. This gives the reader a sense of the whole planet is watching the triumphant release of Nelson Mandela. He came out with "His stupendous heart intact, his gargantuan will hale and hearty" (line 22), and "his passion for the rights of human beings" (line 24) remained undiminished.

In another sense, Mandela's sojourn in prison may be viewed as a symbolic death, and his coming out is a rebirth or even a resurrection. It is this idea of "the hope of Africa" (line 21) after the symbolic death that connects the reader back to the last section of Angelou's "When Great Trees Fall." The speaker willingly acknowledges that, "And when great souls die, / after a period peace blooms, / slowly and always / irregularly" (lines 39-42). This is the natural cycle of life. "The speaker is able to not only effectively identify with the feeling of deep loss and anguish but is also able to offer hope for healing through her powerful words" (Corfman, 2017, para. 2). Though peace comes back after the departure of "great souls", it moves in "slowly" and "irregularly" as "Our senses, restored, never / to be the same, whisper to us" (lines 45-46), "with a kind of / soothing electric vibration" (lines 43-44).

Though this last section mainly focuses on the restoration of the living, it is the understanding of the Afrocentric concept of the immortal nature of the departed soul that better explains the "peace that blossoms." Corfman (2017, para. 3) also noted that "The mood transforms from moments of despair and depression to ones of hope and peace. It is clear Angelou cared deeply about this topic, bringing a well-considered, gentle, and calm tone to her discussion of death." So, to say, life goes on for both the departed soul and the living.

#### *4.2. Mandela and Ascendancy*

Unwilling though, it is the monster of Apartheid itself that set the red carpet for Nelson Mandela on the way to his ascendancy. The third section of Maya Angelou's tribute to Nelson Mandela "His Day Is Done" moves from stanza twelve to stanza fourteen. It is **the** section that fully reveals the image of the greatness Nelson Mandela embodied. He sought not to take revenge or to imitate his oppressors. This is the Afrocentric foundation upon which humanity that was purely Black started. Molefi Kete Asante once said that "I do not seek to imitate my oppressor, and I will not allow it to be foisted upon me, and neither would I foist it upon another" (Smith, 2020, p. 212). This is Ubuntu. I am human through your being human. Oppression and its forebearers and offspring are anti-human behaviors that a "great soul" will never imitate.

In this mindset, Sylvia Obell (2020, para. 2) observes: "In the poem, Dr. Angelou recognizes several of Mandela's life moments including inviting his former prison guards to sit front seat "at his presidential inauguration and winning the Nobel Peace Prize. The invitation of his former prison guards at his inaugural ceremony can be seen on lines 28-29, and his Nobel Prize on lines 30-31. These are the soul-lifting facts that lead the speaker to praise Mandela as follows: "No sun outlasts its sunset, but it will rise again and bring the dawn" (line 32). In the Afrocentric viewpoint when "Great Souls" die (implying only the decaying of the Khat) they become our ancestors, who are part of our daily lives, in our prayers, our desires, our regrets, our memories, and our future.

### **5. Hope, Gratitude and Remembrance**

The Ubuntu concept "I am because others are" further explains the Afrocentric notion of life and death. One is not actually the opposite of the other. They are both part of a whole cyclical process in the cosmic reality. The offspring that is yet to come, the living of the present, and the ancestors of the past are always

interconnected. Birago Diop (1960) clearly explains this African world view in his poem "Souffle",

Ceux qui sont morts ne sont jamais partis  
Ils sont dans l'ombre qui s'éclaire  
Et dans l'ombre qui s'épaissit,  
Les morts ne sont pas sous la terre  
Ils sont dans l'arbre qui frémit,  
Ils sont dans le bois qui gémit,  
Ils sont dans l'eau qui coule,  
Ils sont dans la case, ils sont dans la foule  
Les morts ne sont pas morts.

These lines consider death as a transition of energy from one plane to another. The dead are never dead. They continue their cosmic journey in another dimension. Bearing this in mind, hope becomes realistic. This is what the ending of the two poems under study present to the reader. In this respect, A. Corfman (2017, para. 19) notes: "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." The scholar further explained that "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" (para. 5).

In this last section of "When Great Trees Fall," Maya Angelou was able to reconnect with the permanently "rising spirit" one may observe in her writings. As Eleanor W. Traylor (2005, p. 14) put it: "It is, of course, difficult to determine the dominant motif in a living author's life, for the last word is not written; another book may appear this afternoon." This assertion used to be relevant, but now that Maya Angelou has become a fallen great tree herself, it is much easier to delve into the matter. "Of the twenty thousand words that comprise the four volumes of the Angelou poetic canon so far, ten thousand and fifty ring the word remember or its cognates" (p. 11). "They existed. They existed./ We can be. Be and be better./ For they existed" (lines 47-49) is a perfect illustration of this stance.

In fact, the two verbs (exist and be) strongly echo remembering or commemorating. "If the word remember signals the project of Maya Angelou's experiments in the poetics of identity, the six autobiographical narratives create a genre which actualizes what André Maurois has called "the magnificent poetry of life" (Traylor, 2005, p. 14). These two verbs connect existence with itself the past (existed) and the present (can be). The over repetition of the phrase "They existed" destroys any attempts of denial of existence to the dead. Because their presence transcends the physical existence, we

the living "can be. Be and be / better." Ubuntu, here again, helps to better grasp this reality. The existence of the living validates the existence of the dead. In other words, great souls become ancestors only through the living. This uninterrupted dialogue between life and death.

In addition, the past tense used in the last lines of the poem consolidates this dialogue. Mary Jane Lupton (2014, p. 84) observes the same thing: "The poem ends in past tense: "They existed. They existed. / We can be. Be and be / better. For they existed." "The tense expresses the completion of the Khat's journey in this physical realm. Yet, this completion absolutely excludes the idea of their absence. Through the remembering of the living, the dead live again, and because they live, exist, the living can be and be better. This is the whole influence the dead have on the living. Where they fell, we stand. Where they made mistakes, we fix them. Where they stand tall, we take it from there and stand taller. This determination of the living is what Maya Angelou demonstrate in the last section (four) of "His Day Is Done."

In this fourth section of "His Day Is Done", the speaker expresses gratitude to Mandela, the African great soul. The section elaborates on Mandela's legacy, and the speaker's promises to carry on the struggle for the better life Angelou alludes to in the ending lines of "When Great Trees Fall." The "Yes" (line 34) that begins this section breaks the tone of the poem, "His Day Is Done." This use of this affirmative and positive adverb coupled with "yet" on the same line, not only creates minimal pair (yes-yet) but also accentuates the change of tone.

In this high dimension of the poem, Angelou reemphasizes the legacy of Nelson Mandela. "He has offered us understanding" (line 37). This legacy urges "we" the living, who adopt the Afrocentric philosophy of Ubuntu, to keep his fire (legacy) burning. Angelou hammers: "we, his inheritors, will open the gates wider for reconciliation, and we will respond generously to the cries of Blacks and Whites, Asians, Hispanics, the poor who live piteously on the floor of our planet" (lines 34-3). Mandela has applied Ubuntu to all his struggle. He saw his humanity through the humanity of others, and by doing so, he could not be a racist, nor a tyrant as much as he could not stand injustice and oppression some humans have been imposing on others. Ubuntu is far beyond non-violence. It calls for building humanness in every human being. But it takes a lot of courage, which is why many people thank and celebrate Nelson Mandela. Maya Angelou said: "Thank you our Gideon, thank you our David, our great courageous man" (line 40). In the same respect, Sylvia Obell. (2020, para. 4) also confirms that Dr. Angelou ends her poem by thanking Madiba and stating, "We will remember and be glad you lived among us."

In the ending lines of "His Day Is Done", Maya Angelou made an outstanding promise to Nelson Mandela, who has become our ancestor. This promise fuses together with the concept remembrance that is underpinning Angelou's poetry. "We will not forget you, we will not dishonor you, we will remember and be glad that you lived among us, that you taught us, and that you loved us all" (lines 41-42). The Mandela Maya Angelou addresses in the closing lines is not the decaying Khat, but rather his Ka which is immortal.

When "Great Trees" fall, they scatter hundreds of seeds that will become great trees someday.

## CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to analyze how Maya Angelou artistically uses language to represent the concept of death and its depressive impacts on the living. It also scrutinizes how the latter mourn and honor the departure of great souls through the study of "When Great Trees Fall" and "His Day Is Done". To this end, the ecocriticism, Afrocentricity and Ubuntu have been applied as the theoretical frame. Stylistics has also been used as an additional tool that helps complete a better appraisal of the two poems considering the use of language.

Ecocriticism has helped to establish the relationship that exists between trees, rocks, lions, elephants, and small things, which "When Great Trees Fall" presents through a metaphor of great souls. Afrocentricity sheds light on the African conception of death through the Ancient Egyptians' perception of the human soul, death, and eternal life or immortality. In this regard, great souls never die. Of the nine parts of the Egyptian understanding of the human soul, only the Khat may decay while the eight others continue their journey in the cosmos. As of Ubuntu, it has highlighted the link between the living and the ancestors whose existence validates the presence of the living and vice-versa.

This paper finds out that though death may bring in pain, sorrow, grief, and depression, it is a mere transition from the physical realm to the one of the ancestors. It has also come up with that time soothes and cures the wounds death has left behind. In addition, the departure of great souls such as Nelson Mandela, refreshes and renews the engagement of the forces of good, men and women fighting evil like racism, injustice, and oppression, to continue the struggle for a better life.

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