

STAGES OF GRIEF AS SEEN IN MAYA ANGELOU'S "WHEN GREAT TREES FALL"

Rr. Arielia Yustisiana

English Language Study Program, Widya Mandala Surabaya Catholic University
arielia.yustisiana@ukwms.ac.id

Abstract

The research aimed to discuss the theme of the poem entitled "When Great Trees Fall" written by an African American poet, Maya Angelou. The theme stated implicitly in the poem was stages of grief. Due to the stages of grief implicitly seen in some symbols in the poem, the theory of poetic device, that is, symbol met the analysis. It is used to to analyze some images that presented some stages of grief experienced by the speaker of the poem. Moreover, the theory of stages of grief explained by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross were relevant to find out the results of the research. Besides, descriptive method was useful in the research, and three approaches were used to support the analysis were psychological, structural and formalist approaches. The findings were that there were four stages of grief portrayed in the poem implicitly, that is, isolation, anger, depression and acceptance. Even though the speaker felt grief because of the loss of the loved one, she is able to breathe in order to live the life.

Keywords: *stages of grief: isolation, anger, depression and acceptance, symbol*

A. Introduction

Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the emotional suffering someone feels when something or someone they love is taken away. Often, the pain of loss can feel overwhelming. Someone may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. The pain of grief can also disrupt their physical health, making it difficult to sleep, eat, or even think straight. These are normal reactions to loss—and the more significant the loss, the more intense their grief will be. Kübler-Ross said that

Grief is a multifaceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual and philosophical dimensions. While the terms are often used interchangeably, *bereavement* refers to the state of loss, and *grief* is the reaction to that loss (2008: 23).

In regard with the previous explanation, it often becomes of the themes of literary works produced by some famous authors and poets. Some authors create their literary works based on their experiences which are very influential in their lives. It seems like they want to share to the readers what they have been through. One of the authors that often uses their life experiences in their literary works is an African-American poet, Maya Angelou. She is an African-American author, feminist and

poet who has produced many remarkable literary works. Most of her literary works are poems. Poems are poet's pieces of work. According to Annas in *How the Poetry Works*, she says that

A poem is concerned with emotion, it is emotion shaped, controlled, and contained in form. A poem often says something significant; it attempts to achieve beauty. Of course, what is significant and beautiful is open to discussion and may change with time and place (1996: 181).

Reading a poem needs a particular emotion to understand its deep meaning because it is concerned with ideas and insights. Everyone has their own understanding in order to interpret the meaning of a poem. The readers may have found from their reading of poetry in their own language that they can often enjoy a poem without fully understanding its meaning. Before the readers can say why they like a poem, it is first necessary to understand its meaning well. Morris in his book entitled *The Language of Poetry* (2002: 3) states "three factors that should be taken into account in reading a poem: firstly, the readers must learn the person who wrote the poem; secondly, they must understand the thing that is written in the poem; the last but not least, it depends on the readers themselves who are the interpreters."

"When Great Trees Fall" is a simple poem written by an African-American poet, Maya Angelou. The poem depicts how the speaker feels grief because of the loss of the loved one. How the loss really influences the speaker's and the surroundings' lives becomes the important image in the poem. Maya Angelou uses some symbols to show the speaker's grief implicitly. Therefore, the research focuses on the theme in the poem. It discusses the stages of grief in the poem. There are some words or phrases or lines that symbolize the stages of grief. The speaker experiences the grief through some stages, such as isolation, anger, bargaining, and depression. Even finally, the speaker accepts what she has been through. Those stages are discussed through the symbols.

Maya Angelou uses symbolism and strong imagery in this poem to show a person's response to loss. It does not matter how strong or tough someone is; when an influential person in their life passes away, they will feel the effects. Although this poem shows that people experience regrets with things left unsaid, their lives are made better by that influence.

The research needs a fundamental theory. The following theories are relevant to meet the aims; the first is the theory of symbol as the basic theory dealing with poetic devices. The second is the stages of grief. Both terms are learned because they are related to the topic of the research, that is, the stages of grief in a poem entitled "When Great Trees Fall" written by Maya Angelou.

1. Symbol

Symbol is something that refers to something else. Finding out a symbol deals with figurative meaning because it means beyond its real meaning or literal meaning. William Morris states that 'symbol is defined as something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or conversation especially a material object used to represent something invisible' (1969: 1302). It clarifies that a symbol is a way to represent another image or illustration.

A symbol is something that is literally itself (a shiny, patent leather shoe, for example) at the same time that it represents or suggests something else (childish innocence or purity). In other words, a symbol is a literal object or thing that suggests another level of meaning; a symbol may suggest a person, an abstraction, or an idea. A symbol is basically a kind of image, differing from other images in the use to which it is put (Kenney, 2005: 75). A symbol in a story may, in fact, harbor multiple levels of meaning. In addition, Kenney also claims 'it is this attempt that the symbol, while evoking a concrete, objective reality, also suggests an additional 'level of meaning' beyond that reality (1988: 75). Moreover, a symbol is something that means more than what it is fact. The other definition of symbol is stated by Kennedy in his book entitled *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*:

“A symbol is a thing that suggests more than its literal meaning. Symbols generally do not “stand for” any one meaning, nor for anything absolutely definite” (2010: 113).

2. Grief

Grief is a multifaceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. While the terms are often used interchangeably, *bereavement* refers to the state of loss, and *grief* is the reaction to that loss. Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the suffering one feels when something or someone the individual loves is taken away. The grief associated with death is familiar to most people, but individuals grieve in connection with a variety of losses throughout their lives. Archer states that

Loss can be categorized as either physical or abstract, the physical loss being related to something that the individual can touch or measure, such as losing a spouse through death, while other types of loss are abstract, and relate to aspects of a person's social interactions (2014: 23).

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has introduced five stages of grief in her book entitled *On Death and Dying*. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages of grief are based on her studies of the feelings of patients facing terminal illness, but many people have generalized them to other types of negative life changes and losses, such as the death of a loved one or a break-up.

The five stages of grief:

Denial: “This can’t be happening to me.”

Anger: “*Why* is this happening? Who is to blame?”

Bargaining: “Make this not happen, and in return I will ____.”

Depression: “I’m too sad to do anything.”

Acceptance: “I’m at peace with what happened.” (Kübler-Ross, 2008: 67)

If someone experiences any of these emotions following a loss, it may help to know that their reaction is natural and that they will heal in time. However, not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages—and that is okay. Contrary to popular belief, **someone does not have to go through each stage in order to heal**. In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through *any* of these stages. And if they go through these stages of grief, they probably will not experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don’t worry about what they “should” be feeling or which stage they are supposed to be in.

In the poem written by Maya Angelou entitled “When Great Trees Fall”, she also describes the stages of grief that are similar to the theory of Kübler-Ross. Moreover, she aligns the grief implicitly she mentions with the concept of human and nature. Maya Angelou portrays the environmental elements with the stages of grief that make the poem more beautiful.

B. Methodology

The data of the research are taken from words, phrases, lines and stanzas of the poem entitled “When Great Trees Fall” written by Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou is an African-American poet who mostly elevates her truly life experiences in her poems. Not only has she shown racism and segregation she has been through, but loss experience as well, such as, in her poem “When Great Trees Fall.” Moreover, she always uses sense devices, for example, she implicitly reveals the detailed meaning of her poems using symbols, metaphor and other poetic devices. Additionally, in the poem the research focuses on, the poet also aligns the loss of the loved one with nature. She would like the readers to feel

the speaker's bereavement. The poem tells about the loss of the loved one suffered by the speaker. The poem is written beautifully by composing the concept of human and nature that also reveals the loss felt by the speaker.

The most suitable method of research used is descriptive method. Punch explains that descriptive method is setting out to collect, organize and summarize information about the matter being studied (2000: 38). Hence, this method is aimed to describe the topic of the research, that is, stages of grief shown in Maya Angelou's "When Great Trees Fall".

The primary data that are used in the research are lines that describe the stages of grief. Therefore, the most suitable method of collecting the data is the library research. George states that library research involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research question; necessary component of every other research method at some point (2008: 6). It means that some materials in the form of printed media are needed in order to support the analysis. Moreover, the data are also collected from some literary sites in the internet to support the analysis.

There is one problem discussed in the research, that is, the depiction of the stages of grief through some symbols in the poem "When Great Trees Fall" written by Maya Angelou. Three approaches are used to support the analysis. The approaches intended include psychological approach, structural approach and formalist criticism. The approach needed by the researcher is psychological approach.

"Psychological approach is an approach to art that can generate three kinds of illumination: First, provide a more precise language with which to discuss the creative process; second, go back to study of the life of an author as means of understanding his art, and third, able to explain fictitious character" (Scott, 1962: 71-72).

The researcher would like to learn the suffering of the speaker in the poem psychologically in which she feels grieved because of the loss of the loved one.

Structural approach is applied in this research because this kind of approach is very effective for analyzing a poem which has some poetic meaning of the words. Structural approach concentrates on each constituent of the construction. By understanding the meaning of the words, the truth can be discovered. D'haen states that structural approach is producing relevant results by looking in places where one would not look without being urged by sturdy model (2014: 143). In other words, the structural approach is used to get the mastery over the structures. It concentrates on each word to get the detailed meaning.

Formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human's knowledge that needs to be examined in its own terms. The natural, sensible starting point is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves. To explore the intense relationship within a poem is done by close reading, a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text. The formalist criticism which is now called as the new criticism or formalistic approach is defined by Guerin as the assumption that a given literary experience takes a shape proper to itself, or at the least that the shape and the experience are functions of each other (2005: 83). It means that the formalist criticism is concerned primarily with the work itself. The form and content cannot be meaningfully separated since the various stylistic elements of literary work influence each other.

C. Results and Discussion

Loss is a tragic yet inevitable part of the human experience. When it strikes, it leaves despair and misery in its path. Loss can eat away at the very heart and soul of a human being. It leaves a gnawing pain that nothing can heal. It leaves an open wound that tries to heal and yet is re-opened again and again by memories and regret. In this poem, *When Great Trees Fall* by Maya Angelou, the speaker identifies with all who have felt the deep searing pain of losing someone close. 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.

The research focuses on the stages of grief experienced by the speaker in the poem. The poem is simple but there are some symbols and images that are implicitly revealed. Those symbols and images deal with the stages of grief suffered by the speaker of the poem. The poem is the following:

When Great Trees Fall

When great trees fall,
 rocks on distant hills shudder,
 lions hunker down
 in tall grasses,
 and even elephants (5)
 lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
 in forests,
 small things recoil into silence,
 their senses (10)
 eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
 the air around us becomes
 light, rare, sterile.
 We breathe, briefly. (15)

Our eyes, briefly,
 see with
 a hurtful clarity.
 Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
 examines, (20)
 gnaws on kind words
 unsaid,
 promised walks
 never taken.

Great souls die and (25)
 our reality, bound to
 them, takes leave of us.

Our souls,
 dependent upon their
 nurture, (30)

now shrink, wizened.
 Our minds, formed
 and informed by their
 radiance,
 fall away. (35)

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

And when great souls die, (40)
 after a period peace blooms,
 slowly and always
 irregularly. Spaces fill
 with a kind of
 soothing electric vibration. (45)
 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. (50)

According to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, there are five stages of grief that happens someone who just feel loss of the loved one, that is, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. From the five stages, there are four that match the speaker's stages of grief: isolation, anger, depression and acceptance. The speaker does not experience the stage of denial, but she feels isolated.

1. Isolation

Isolation is a state of being separated whether the one separates herself from others and vice versa. In the poem, the speaker feels isolated. It is not because she is isolated by the community but she isolates herself from others because she feels grieved. She has lost someone she loves so much, even other things that are far from her surrounding feel what she feels. "When a great tree falls" (line 1), it is felt for miles around. In the same way, when a great soul departs, the effects are felt deep and far. The image of the "rocks on distant hills shudder[ing]" (line 2) symbolizes the ways in which the death causes people, even distant people, to feel despair and shudder. The lions which "hunker down" (line 3) reflects the way some people will react to the loss. The loss causes a certain amount of fear and the pressing need to hide away and escape to safety. Only, there is no escape from the feeling of despair that comes from losing someone great.

The feeling of isolation felt by the speaker is clearly shown in the following stanza:

When great trees fall
 in forests,
 small things recoil into silence,
 their senses (10)
 eroded beyond fear.

In the previous stanza, the speaker has already revealed the way in which great things are affected by the death of someone great, now turns her attention to the "small things". This suggests that the loss of someone great is felt among the great and among the small. Stage of isolation centers from the 9th to 11th lines of the poem. The left one only remains silence because of the eternal loss she has faced. She tends to recoil from the surrounding. She is hurt because her loss, even she does not realize that she enjoys her solitude. She does not care with the people who need her because she has deeply mourned.

2. Anger

Anger is a natural response to perceived threats. It causes the body to release adrenaline, the muscles to tighten, and the heart rate and blood pressure to increase. The senses might feel more acute and the face and hands flushed. However, anger becomes a problem only when we do not manage it in

a healthy way. The anger that is felt by the speaker is different. Her anger appears because she has to control over her deepest grief. The anger is shown in the 3rd stanza of the poem:

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly. (15)
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines, (20)
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

With the third stanza, the speaker speaks directly about death. Just as the great tree falling causes ripples for miles, so the great soul departed move affects the hundreds or thousands of hearts he has touched during the time he lived. The speaker describes the way in which the air, even, seems to become “light” and “sterile” (line 14). It is hard to breathe, when one has lost a great loved one. The speaker describes the way in which those affected by loss have a brief moment of “hurtful clarity” in which they are able to see and understand just what a valuable soul has been lost. When loss hits, often a person’s memory is “suddenly sharpened” (line 20) and they are able to remember the moments spent with the one who has been lost. These memories, though precious, also feel like a dagger to the soul. The speaker then explains the feelings of regret that can often plague a person who has lost someone. When one loses a loved one, he or she will sometimes regret “kind words unsaid” (lines 21-22). The speaker has clearly experienced the kind of loss which left her desperately longing for more time to express the love she felt in her heart for the person who was taken too soon. She thinks about the walks she promised to take with that loved one. Having never fulfilled those promises leaves her with a gnawing pain of despair and regret. The speaker’s regret emerges repressed anger that makes her feel languish. The death of the loved one has evoked a hurtful clarity (line 18).

The repressed anger that is suffered by the speaker makes her always think of the memories she has spent with the loved one who has passed away. Here is part of the third stanza:

...
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines, (20)
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

It echoes in the speaker’s mind and heart as a comfort when she has lost someone, and is still grieving. The third stanza speaks to us about what it feels like to lose someone suddenly, to gnaw at the unsaid conversations that still rattle on in the speaker’s mind years after the physical departure, or to wish her had said something different than what she’d last said to the loved one. The third stanza speaks to the intensity of a memory of loss, a sharpened cluster of images and sounds and smells.

Furthermore, the speaker may feel regretful that when the loved one departs suddenly, they actually have something to say to each other. Her regret of something unsaid causes her to get angry with herself. She recalls all the memories and promises that they have kept, but they are not able to make them come true.

3. *Depression*

Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. Depression affects how someone feels, thinks and behaves. Moreover, it can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. Someone who is depressed may have trouble doing normal day-to-day activities, and sometimes they may feel as if life is not worth living. In the poem “When Great Trees Fall”, the speaker also feels depression because of her loss. The deepest loss she feels is stated in the fourth stanza. Here is the fourth stanza of the poem:

Great souls die and (25)
 our reality, bound to
 them, takes leave of us.
 Our souls,
 dependent upon their
 nurture, (30)
 now shrink, wizened.
 Our minds, formed
 and informed by their
 radiance,
 fall away. (35)
 We are not so much maddened
 as reduced to the unutterable ignorance
 of dark, cold
 caves.

In this stanza, the speaker gives insight into the mental and emotional effects of losing someone close. In this stanza, the loss of a “great soul” (line 25) means the loss of a soul that has had great impact on one’s everyday life. She expresses the way 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 (line 30), and when that person dies, it leaves us feeling small, like our very souls have shrunk.

Furthermore, the speaker describes the way in which one’s mind can be “informed by their [Great One’s] radiance” (lines 32-34) and the way those suffering loss can feel as though their minds “fall away”. The speaker identifies with others who have felt this loss when she uses the second person point of view and claims, “We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves” (lines 36-39). This reveals that the speaker, in the face of loss, is not necessarily angry, though anger can be a part of the feelings that come from this loss. She feels a sense of despair more than anger, however. This despair can only be described as a “cold dark cave”. The feelings are so strong that they are “unutterable”. The speaker identifies with all who have felt this deep despair as a result of losing someone great.

4. *Acceptance*

Acceptance is able to help depression. Acceptance is the first step towards getting better. Someone has, for whatever reasons, developed major depression. They have to accept it. No amount of denial is going to help. No amount of trying to figure out what has happened, how it has happened, what has precipitated it, etc., is going to help either. The stage of acceptance is depicted in the fifth stanza of the poem. The following is the last stanza:

And when great souls die, (40)
 after a period peace blooms,
 slowly and always
 irregularly. Spaces fill
 with a kind of
 soothing electric vibration. (45)
 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. (50)

With the final stanza of this poem, the speaker offers hope to all who have suffered loss by revealing the healing that has occurred in the aftermath of the death. The speaker seems to imply that time has allowed for this healing to occur. She explains that “after a period” she was able to feel “peace bloom” (line 41). It happened “slowly and always irregularly” (lines 42-43). This reveals that she still had moments of despair and anguish even as she was slowly beginning to heal and feel peace. She described the feelings in between the healing as something “with a kind of soothing electric vibration”.

Additionally, in a sense, the pain the speaker felt still buzzed in the background of her very being, and yet the memory of the lost one was soothing and comforting. She explains that eventually her senses were “restored” even if they were “never to be the same”. In the back of her mind and in the background of all that she does, she hears the presence of the one lost. She hears the whisper, “they existed. They existed” (line 48). This gives her a new meaning and purpose in her life. She claims that because this great one existed, she can “be better”.

The ending of this poem offers great hope to all who have experienced loss. The speaker continues to identify with others who have lost loved ones. This also creates the 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.

D. Conclusion

The research aims to explain the stages of grief in a poem entitled “When Great Trees Fall” written by Maya Angelou. Through the analysis, the messages that are voiced by the speaker of the poem can be achieved. In the research, it is found that there are four stages of grief in the poem. They are isolation, anger, depression and acceptance. The four stages are stated implicitly in the stanzas of the poem. The stage of grief, isolation, is stated in the first and second stanzas, anger in the third, depression in the third and fourth, and acceptance in the fifth stanza.

When Great Trees Fall by Maya Angelou is a five stanza poem that is separated into uneven sets of lines. The stanzas range in length from five lines up to fourteen. There is no specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern but Angelou makes use of several poetic techniques that help to unify the text and create a feeling of rhythm and rhyme. *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, the speaker 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".

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