

On Aging



SUMMARY

The elderly speaker cautions younger readers that, if they see the speaker sitting around quietly like an abandoned sack, they shouldn't assume that the speaker wants company. The speaker is actually just spending time with their own thoughts. The speaker doesn't want condescending sympathy or pity from younger people: they'll take some sincere understanding, if it's available, but otherwise they don't need anything.

Even when the speaker's body gets too stiff and achy to climb stairs, they only want one favor from younger people: whatever younger folks do, they *shouldn't* bring the speaker a rocking chair to sit down in.

When younger people see the speaker walking with difficulty, they shouldn't misinterpret what they see: just because older people get tired, it doesn't mean they're lazy. And when they say goodbye, it doesn't mean they're dying. The speaker concludes by insisting that they're just the same person they were in their youth, even if they're a little balder, a little thinner, and much more easily winded. But in spite of all that, this speaker feels lucky to be alive.

condescension from the young, they argue by extension for the capability, dignity, and full personhood of senior citizens. The speaker rejects the assumption that they're lonely and in need of comfort every time they look pensive. Rather, they're thoughtful and independent ("listening to myself").

Likewise, the speaker rejects the idea that diminished mobility means they're "lazy" on the one hand or dying on the other. The speaker makes these points in amusingly blunt language ("every goodbye ain't gone") that highlights their sharp mind and strong personality. These qualities further argue against equating age with weakness.

The speaker admits that age takes a toll, but emphasizes their continuing vitality—and by extension, the vitality of seniors in general. After asserting that "I'm the same person I was," the speaker lists the ways in which age has changed their body. This shows that they aren't fooling themselves; they just view outward changes as superficial and unimportant. What the speaker values is their inner self, which hasn't significantly changed, and the life they still have—a self and life they want younger people to value, too.

The poem describes the general plight of aging rather than specific problems and ailments. This generalized quality suggests that its lessons are meant to be broadly applied. "On Aging" targets demeaning stereotypes about all seniors, not just the speaker, and makes the case for treating older people as dignified individuals.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20



THEMES



THE DIGNITY OF OLD AGE

"On Aging" expresses its aging speaker's desire to be treated with dignity rather than condescension.

Using blunt humor, the speaker knocks down a series of common assumptions about older people: that they're lonely, pitiable, fragile, lazy, dying, and/or fundamentally different from their younger selves. In place of these assumptions, the speaker calls for understanding and respect. While acknowledging that older people endure some physical decline, the poem voices—and demands—appreciation for all that they still have and are.

The speaker is not yet very old but is old enough to encounter and push back against misconceptions about aging. The poem is addressed to "you": a younger person (or any young people) who might hold such misconceptions. Much of the poem is also set in the future tense, suggesting that the speaker hasn't yet seriously declined. Still, the present-tense details show that the speaker has faced some of the changes, and stereotypes, that come with getting older. The speaker thus sets boundaries, establishing how they want to be treated as they continue to age.

For instance, when the speaker rejects "pity" and



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*When you see ...
... listening to myself.*

This poem's aging speaker begins by highlighting their self-sufficiency and independence in a confrontational [apostrophe](#) to an unknown "you." The "you" they're addressing in these lines might be a specific younger person, a group of younger people, or younger people in general. From its very first lines, the poem as a whole warns younger people not to stereotype, patronize, or underestimate their elders.

In particular, lines 1-4 warn against the assumption that the speaker (and, by extension, seniors in general) are always lonely, and need constant conversation to comfort them. If they're "sitting quietly," the speaker says, it's because they want

to be alone with their thoughts: it's because "I'm listening to myself." They're not secretly hoping someone will keep them company, and they don't need anyone else's "chattering" to cheer them up.

Though they're part of a larger stanza, these first four lines work as a [rhymed quatrain](#), with an ABCB pattern. But readers shouldn't get too comfortable with that pattern: it will change and shift throughout the poem, and so will the [meter](#)! Like the speaker's personality, the verse will be a little rough around the edges, and will sometimes defy expectations.

The [simile](#) "Like a sack left on a shelf" shows the speaker's willingness to poke fun at themselves. They know they look as plain as a "sack" at this stage of their lives, and might appear lonely or forgotten, as if "left on the shelf." (But that doesn't give others the right to make assumptions about them.) Their blunt self-deprecation helps gain the reader's trust while adding a twinkle of humor to their proud, defiant tone.

At the same time, the humble words "sack" and "chattering" (linked with /a/ [assonance](#)) contrast with the more elevated phrase "listening to myself." It's as if the speaker's saying: I may not look like much, but I'm more thoughtful than you realize—and probably more interesting than you!

LINES 5-8

*Hold! Stop! Don't ...
... do without it!*

The speaker gets even more brusque: in an irritated flurry of exclamation points, they refuse "pity" and "sympathy" from younger people.

The speaker equates pity and sympathy with condescension, not compassion. They want to be treated as a capable, independent person, not as a helpless sufferer. Instead of pity, they demand "understanding"—genuine recognition of who they are and what they're going through. If "you" can't give them that, they don't want to deal with "you." (Nor do they need to: they're so independent that they can "do without" understanding from the young. They also know they can't count on it, which is why they add the qualifier "if you got it.")

Lines 5-6 contain the poem's first use of [anaphora](#): both lines begin with "Hold! Stop [...]." And lines 5-8 ("Hold! [...] without it!") also form a pair of [rhyming couplets](#), unlike lines 1-4, which rhymed ABCB. The [repetition](#) and heavier rhyme, along with all the exclamation points, give these lines a sense of urgency and authority. The speaker is setting firm boundaries, not asking politely.

Line 7 also uses a casual, [colloquial](#) turn of phrase: "if you got it" (as opposed to "if you've got it"). That choice underscores the informality of the speaker's voice, making the speaker seem less "literary" and more candid and real. That fits right in with the poem's effort to portray older people as relatable, three-dimensional human beings.

LINES 9-12

*When my bones ...
... no rocking chair.*

In the middle of the poem, the speaker returns to the form they started with: a [quatrain rhymed](#) ABCB. But this time, the quatrain stands alone as an independent [stanza](#), making a bold demand.

The speaker claims that they'll have "only [...] one" request when they're too "stiff and aching" to get around easily: "Don't bring me no rocking chair." In other words, don't coddle me—don't *treat* me like an old person. (The "rocking chair" can be read literally, but also as a [symbol](#) of old age and decline.)

It could be argued that this request is stubborn or self-defeating; after all, a comfortable chair *would* be helpful to someone who was moving a little slower than they used to. But the speaker's sense of pride and independence is more important to them than comfort.

There's a subtle change in perspective here: while the first stanza seemed to be talking about the present, this stanza seems to be talking about the future. Before, the speaker suggested that "sitting quietly" and "listening to myself" are things they do currently; now, they refer to a favor they "will" ask when their feet "won't" climb stairs. Most likely, then, the speaker isn't in real decline yet, but is old enough to think seriously about that prospect.

Listen to the speaker's [assonance](#) here:

When my bones are stiff and aching,
And my feet won't climb the stair,
I will only ask one favor:
Don't bring me no rocking chair.

That repeated long /o/ sound helps to weave this stanza into one coherent piece, making the speaker sound even more emphatic. And listen to the [meter](#) in line 12, which uses *five* stresses (where most of the earlier lines used only three or four):

Don't bring me no rocking chair.

Those powerful stresses, plus the slight variation in the rhythm, makes the speaker sound dead serious: they will tolerate no rocking-chair condescension!

LINES 13-16

*When you see ...
... goodbye ain't gone.*

In these lines, the speaker warns the younger generation not to misunderstand—"study and get it wrong"—when they see the speaker stumbling. In crisp, playful, informal language, the speaker reminds the young that "tired don't mean lazy / And

every goodbye ain't gone." In other words, the speaker (and older people in general) may not have as much energy and mobility as the young, but that doesn't mean they're lazy, helpless, or dying. Their "goodbye[s]" don't necessarily mean "goodbye for good."

By now, readers might have noticed a pattern: every single stanza of this poem begins with the word "When." This insistent [anaphora](#) adds emphasis to the speaker's stern instructions: it's as if the speaker is trying to fight back against every annoying moment of condescension they've experienced. Similarly, the poem's four [repetitions](#) of "Don't" make it clear that this is a poem about how *not* to treat old people.

The speaker's [meter](#) also reflects what they're describing here. Notice how, right after the word "stumbling," the meter starts to vary a lot, as if the verse itself were "stumbling":

When you see me walking, stumbling,
Don't study and get it wrong.
'Cause tired don't mean lazy
And every goodbye ain't gone.

Line 13 uses four smooth [trochees](#) (two-syllable metrical feet with a stressed-unstressed or "DUM-da" rhythm). But from line 14 onward, the rhythm gets rougher, and never fully smooths out again: the unpredictable rhythms of "Don't study and get it wrong" taper off into unexpected three-stress lines. And the last few lines of the poem are about to get even wilder. These variations suggest the stiffness and stumbles of old age, keep the speaker's voice informal and conversational, and keep readers on their toes—something the speaker seems to want.

LINES 17-20

*I'm the same ...
... still breathe in.*

In the final four lines, the speaker insists that, despite the physical changes of old age, they're still "the same person" they were in their youth. Although their vitality has diminished in some ways, they're still very much alive—and grateful for the life they have.

The way the speaker describes their physical changes is playful and slightly indirect:

- "A little less hair" suggests balding or thinning hair.
- "a little less chin" suggests weight loss (their face is more gaunt).
- "A lot less lungs and much less wind" suggests a loss of energy and stamina: the speaker just can't catch their breath the way they used to.

But despite all these losses, the speaker feels "lucky [they] can still breathe in"—that is, they're happy just to be alive. Breathing here [symbolizes](#) life itself.

In these last four lines, the speaker's [rhymes](#) tie the poem up in a bow. While the pattern here still runs ABCB, the A and C [slant rhymes](#) here also nearly sound like [couplets](#): "then," "chin," "wind," and "in" all *almost* rhyme with each other. In other words, the poem ends with four near-rhymes in a row.

Those repeated sounds make the speaker's last lines sound solid and full of conviction. But they're also still just a little bit unexpected, a little bit off-kilter. The speaker finishes this poem just as they began: firmly committed to their own independence, and determined to undermine the younger generation's reductive expectations of the elderly.



SYMBOLS



THE ROCKING CHAIR

The rocking chair mentioned in the middle of the poem [symbolizes](#) the presumed helplessness of old age. The speaker literally says that they don't want a rocking chair when they lose mobility, but they're also [figuratively](#) saying that they don't want to be treated as delicate, fragile, or happy to gently rock back and forth on the sidelines of life. Rather, they want to be treated as independent and capable of managing their problems themselves.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Don't bring me no rocking chair."



BREATH

Breath is an age-old [symbol](#) of life and vitality. When the speaker admits having "A lot less lungs and much less wind" than when they were younger, they're literally saying that they get winded more easily, but they're also [figuratively](#) acknowledging that they're approaching the end of life. Still, they aren't gone yet, and they feel grateful for the life and vitality they still have—for the fact that they "can still breathe in."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "A lot less lungs and much less wind."
- **Line 20:** "But ain't I lucky I can still breathe in."



POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem's frequent [anaphora](#) helps to create the speaker's urgent, insistent tone. The speaker shows flashes of gruff humor, but ultimately, they want to deliver a pointed message:

Don't condescend to your elders. Treat them as human beings.

For instance, every single stanza here begins with the word "When"—a word that introduces a description of something the elderly speaker does, like "sitting quietly" or "stumbling." And a line that begins with "Don't" always follows hot on those descriptions' heels! This repeated structure highlights a key fact about the poem: it primarily explains how *not* to treat seniors. Just because they look lonely or weak from the outside doesn't mean they need condescending "pity" from younger people.

Anaphora also adds special emphasis to the speaker's cry:

Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!
Hold! Stop your sympathy!

These forceful [repetitions](#) don't just make the speaker's *feelings* clear: they *characterize* the speaker, making them sound proud, independent, and no-nonsense.

But this speaker has a sense of humor, too. At the end of the poem, anaphora combines with [diacope](#) to shape a self-deprecating joke:

A little less hair, a little less chin,
A lot less lungs and much less wind.

Here, the movement from the anaphora of "a little less" into "a lot less" and "much less" makes the speaker sound like they're making a joke at their own expense. They have to admit, they're not as young as they used to be—but their sense of humor is just one part of what still makes them feel "lucky" to be alive.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When"
- **Line 3:** "Don't"
- **Line 5:** "Hold! Stop!"
- **Line 6:** "Hold! Stop"
- **Line 9:** "When"
- **Line 12:** "Don't"
- **Line 13:** "When"
- **Line 14:** "Don't"
- **Line 18:** "A little less," "a little less"
- **Line 19:** "A lot less"

SIMILE

The poem uses just one [simile](#), in its opening lines:

When you see me sitting quietly,
Like a sack left on the shelf,

But this single funny, homespun, and self-deprecating simile says a lot about the speaker. This is a speaker who doesn't put

on airs or take themselves too seriously. They know that old age has taken away some of their good looks and energy, and when "sitting quietly," they might appear frumpy and abandoned. Or at least, they might seem that way to younger people who don't know better—and that's the wrong impression the speaker aims to correct. Perhaps, then, this simile combines the speaker's view of themselves with their impression of how others view them.

The speaker doesn't pretend that they're still young and beautiful, but they do want their audience to know they're still intelligent and independent. When they're "sitting quietly," they explain, they're "listening to [themselves]." Notice how this phrase highlights the contrast between a thoughtful, interesting human being and a thoughtless, inanimate sack. While a "sack left on the shelf" is probably either empty or stuffed with things no one needs anymore, this speaker is full of thoughts and opinions, and still has plenty to contribute to the world.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When you see me sitting quietly, / Like a sack left on the shelf,"

APOSTROPHE

"On Aging" addresses an unnamed "you." This "you" might be a younger person, or a group of younger people, listening to the speaker deliver their lecture. It's even possible that the "Hold!" of lines 5 and 6 is directed at a listener who's about to interrupt the speaker. However, it's equally likely that the speaker is addressing the reader of the poem, or younger people in general. In this case, the speaker would be addressing an absent audience and therefore using [apostrophe](#).

Speaking directly to a "you," the poem's speaker isn't just talking into the void or reflecting internally (as is the case in many lyric poems). There's a strong implication that the speaker is trying to connect with, and convince, the unnamed "you." This "you" is most likely younger than the speaker, and seemingly prone to misconceptions about older people. The speaker's insistence on respect, and on setting the record straight, make the poem more emotionally compelling.

And by never specifying exactly who this "you" is, the speaker makes it clear that this poem could be addressed to *anyone* who condescends to the elderly—not just to one annoying nephew, for instance. The big, broad address in this poem makes it sound like it's meant for the whole world to hear.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When you see me sitting quietly,"
- **Line 3:** "Don't think I need your chattering."
- **Lines 5-7:** "Hold! Stop! Don't pity me! / Hold! Stop your

sympathy! / Understanding if you got it,"

- **Line 12:** "Don't bring me no rocking chair."
- **Lines 13-14:** "When you see me walking, stumbling, / Don't study and get it wrong."

ALLITERATION

The [alliteration](#) in "On Aging" helps to create the speaker's playful, emphatic tone, and often mimics what the speaker is describing.

For instance, listen to the [sibilant](#) alliteration in lines 1-2:

When you see me sitting quietly,
Like a sack left on the shelf,

These whispery opening sounds suit the [image](#) of the speaker "sitting quietly [...] listening to myself." But a few lines later, that same /s/ sound does something rather different:

Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!
Hold! Stop your sympathy!

Here, all those /s/ sounds start to feel more like an angry hiss as the speaker gets more and more worked up.

Later on, alliteration adds emphasis to the phrase "every goodbye ain't gone." The repeated /g/ sounds link "goodbye" and "gone" in order to draw out their similarities and differences: both are ways of leaving, but one is temporary and the other permanent. (The speaker is dryly suggesting that not all old people are close to death: when they say goodbye, it doesn't necessarily mean goodbye forever.)

Finally, heavy /l/ alliteration connects the last three lines:

A little less hair, a little less chin,
A lot less lungs and much less wind.
But ain't I lucky I can still breathe in.

These light, playful /l/ sounds match the speaker's comical self-deprecation here. And in the closing line, the important word "lucky" gains a little extra punch from its connection to the /l/s that came before. The poem's final emphasis is on gratitude and good fortune.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "see," "sitting"
- **Line 2:** "sack"
- **Line 5:** "Stop"
- **Line 6:** "Stop," "sympathy"
- **Line 13:** "stumbling"
- **Line 14:** "study"
- **Line 16:** "goodbye," "gone"

- **Line 18:** "little less," "little less"
- **Line 19:** "lot less lungs," "less"
- **Line 20:** "lucky"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#), like [alliteration](#), helps to create the speaker's playfully indignant [tone](#), evoking their emotions through sound.

For instance, listen to the flurry of /p/, /t/, and /d/ sounds in lines 5-8:

Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!
Hold! Stop your sympathy!
Understanding if you got it,
Otherwise I'll do without it!

All those hard, plosive sounds make it seem as if the speaker is sputtering indignantly as they reject young people's pity.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "see," "sitting," "quietly"
- **Line 2:** "Like," "sack," "left"
- **Line 4:** "listening," "myself"
- **Line 5:** "Hold! Stop! Don't pity"
- **Line 6:** "Hold! Stop," "sympathy"
- **Line 7:** "Understanding," "got it"
- **Line 8:** "do without it"
- **Line 9:** "stiff"
- **Line 10:** "feet," "stair"
- **Line 11:** "favor"
- **Line 13:** "stumbling"
- **Line 14:** "Don't study"
- **Line 16:** "goodbye," "gone"
- **Line 18:** "little less," "little less"
- **Line 19:** "lot less lungs," "less"
- **Line 20:** "lucky"

END-STOPPED LINE

"On Aging" is heavily [end-stopped](#) throughout: every line here ends with a clear pause. This effect makes the verse flow smoothly, since the pause of each [line break](#) coincides with a natural break in speech. The poem lays out its thoughts in a rhythmic, logical, organized way, making it easy to read, memorize, and recite.

This style seems well suited to the speaker, who's trying to impart a lesson—to teach younger folks how to treat older folks. Remember, most of the poem amounts to a list of "Don't"s. The highly organized, heavily end-stopped structure is a good match for the lesson format: it makes each of the speaker's points feel clear and memorable.

The poem does use some devices (such as casual, humorous

[diction](#) and [metrical](#) variations) that add surprise to the verse, but ultimately, this speaker also has a series of points to make. They're going to let you know what's what, one end-stopped line at a time.

For instance, take a look at the end-stops in the middle of the poem:

When my bones are stiff and aching,
And my feet won't climb the stair,
I will only ask one favor:
Don't bring me no rocking chair.

The first two lines here use commas as end-stops, a small pause that helps to shape the steady build of the speaker's thought. Then, the speaker comes to a bigger pause, a dramatic colon marking out that "one favor"—and that pause sets readers up for the speaker's firm conclusion, making the last line of this stanza land like the punchline to a joke.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "quietly,"
- **Line 2:** "shelf,"
- **Line 3:** "chattering."
- **Line 4:** "myself."
- **Line 5:** "me!"
- **Line 6:** "sympathy!"
- **Line 7:** "it,"
- **Line 8:** "it!"
- **Line 9:** "aching,"
- **Line 10:** "stair,"
- **Line 11:** "favor:"
- **Line 12:** "chair."
- **Line 13:** "stumbling,"
- **Line 14:** "wrong."
- **Line 15:** "azy"
- **Line 16:** "gone."
- **Line 17:** "then,"
- **Line 18:** "chin,"
- **Line 19:** "wind."
- **Line 20:** "in."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem's unusual shape reflects its speaker's independent-minded ideas about getting older.

"On Aging" doesn't follow a traditional form. It contains three [stanzas](#)—of eight, four, and eight lines, respectively—but its [rhyme scheme](#) also breaks it up into five four-line stanzas, or [quatrains](#). In other words, the patterns of rhyme make the eight-line stanzas feel like two quatrains put together: for instance, lines 1-4 ("When you [...] myself.") form one quatrain with an ABCB rhyme scheme, and lines 5-8 ("Hold! Stop! [...] without it!") form another quatrain with a DDEE rhyme scheme.

The sounds, rhythms, and structures here feel a little unpredictable: the speaker uses [slant rhymes](#), a varied [meter](#), and unusual stanza forms. All these choices match the speaker's personality. This form, like the speaker, is lively and memorable, but not too fancy—and it doesn't always follow expectations!

METER

This poem's [meter](#) is as lively and unpredictable as its speaker. A lot of the lines here feel like accentual verse. That means that the lines don't consistently use any one metrical foot; instead, they use a certain number of stresses in an irregular pattern. For instance, take a look at lines 18-19:

A little less hair, a little less chin,
A lot less lungs and much less wind.

Here each line contains six strong stresses, but their placement and the syllable count varies.

Lines 3-4, meanwhile, use only three strong stresses:

Don't think | I need | your chattering.
I'm list- | ening to | myself.

Lines 9-10 have a similar rhythm, with three stressed beats a piece falling in the same spots:

When my bones are stiff and aching,
And my feet won't climb the stair,

In general, the poem handles meter in a natural, unfussy, idiosyncratic way that suits the speaker's style. It seems to reinforce the speaker's point that, whatever anyone else might assume, they're highly capable and independent. They're able to do meter the "regular" way, but they like to do it *their* way.



VOCABULARY

Chattering (Line 3) - Rambling talk. Here, the word implies unwanted, annoying chit-chat.

Understanding (Line 7) - Here, the speaker contrasts "understanding"—true appreciation and respect for what someone's going through—with shallower, more condescending "pity" and "sympathy."

Study (Line 14) - "Study" in this context can mean to stare attentively, to reflect, or both.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's unconventional [rhyme scheme](#) flips between two different patterns. The first stanza provides a good example. Its rhymes run ABCBDDEE, like this:

[...] quietly [A]
 [...] shelf [B]
 [...] chattering [C]
 [...] myself [B]
 [...] pity me [D]
 [...] sympathy [D]
 [...] got it [E]
 [...] without it [E]

Both that back-and-forth ABCB pattern and that concluding pair of [couplets](#) come back in the last stanza; the shorter middle stanza just uses the ABCB pattern. This movement from singsongy variations to punchy one-two couplets fits right in with the speaker's funny-but-forceful [tone](#).

The poem also often uses [slant rhymes](#) and imperfect rhymes—a choice that reflects how keen this speaker is to defy expectations! For instance, the slant rhyme between "got it" and "without it" in lines 7-8 reflects the speaker's emphatic rejection of the younger generation's "pity." The imperfect rhyme between "wrong" and "gone" in lines 14 and 16 does something similar, deflecting young folks' "wrong" assumptions with a slightly "wrong" rhyme.

All these variations help to evoke the speaker's rough-edged, unpretentious, unpredictable voice.



SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an elderly person talking candidly about the aging process, confronting some of the stereotypes aging people face with crisp, no-nonsense humor.

It's likely that this speaker isn't *that* elderly yet, and certainly not in severe decline, because they're anticipating *future* decline: "When my bones are stiff and aching, etc." Still, as they acknowledge in the final stanza, age has already begun taking its toll on their body. They've lost some "hair," some weight ("a little less chin" suggests their face is leaner), and some stamina ("A lot less lungs and much less wind").

Their language is plainspoken and homespun rather than lofty and lyrical. They use humble [figures of speech](#) ("Like a sack left on the shelf") and lots of informal English ("if you got it," "Don't bring me no rocking chair," "ain't I lucky," etc.). But they don't reveal many personal details, making them a pretty universal and relatable spokesperson for older folks.

Maya Angelou's poems contain a variety of first-person speakers. Some closely reflect her real-life experience; others are clearly *not* her; others fall somewhere in between. This speaker is more informal than a lot of Angelou's voices but also

overlaps with other Angelou speakers whom many readers interpret as "her"—for instance, the speaker of "[Phenomenal Woman](#)," who also uses [colloquial](#) language. Maybe Angelou wanted to leave some ambiguity: the speaker could be read as a version of her *or* as an invented persona who channels her feelings about getting older.



SETTING

The poem doesn't specify any clear [setting](#). The speaker's heavy use of [colloquial](#) English ("Don't bring me no rocking chair," etc.) might suggest they come from somewhere in rural America—but again, that doesn't narrow things down too much!

The generic setting of the poem reinforces its purpose: it's meant to be, not a detailed portrait of a particular person in a particular time and place, but a universal statement about getting older.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou (1928-2014) first published "On Aging" in her popular 1978 collection *And Still I Rise*, the source of two of her best-known poems: "[Still I Rise](#)" and "[Phenomenal Woman](#)." Though not as widely quoted as these other two, "On Aging" shares a family resemblance with them: it contains a strong first-person voice, defiantly addresses an unnamed "you," and asserts pride and self-worth in the face of condescension.

The pride Angelou voiced in these poems had a deeply political as well as personal dimension. A Black American woman from working-class roots, she survived an abusive childhood and worked variously as a cable car conductor, nightclub dancer, actress, and journalist before achieving literary fame. She began writing seriously just when the Civil Rights Movement, in which she was personally active, gave way to the Black liberation and feminist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

She earned widespread acclaim for her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), titled after a line in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "[Sympathy](#)." Much of her work, including "On Aging," celebrates the dignity of the disrespected, marginalized, and misunderstood.

As her career progressed, she became one of the bestselling and best-loved poets in the United States, as well as a highly sought-after lecturer and performer. She published six more autobiographies, read "[On The Pulse of Morning](#)" as the featured poet at the 1993 presidential inauguration, and directed a [feature film](#).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On Aging" is not set during a particular period, and it doesn't engage directly with historical themes. It deals with timeless subjects: aging, loss, pride.

However, it was published in 1978, after a generation of activism had brought the concerns of senior citizens to greater public awareness. Recent decades had seen the founding of the American Association of Retired Persons (a senior citizens' lobbying group), the passage of the Older Americans Act (which expanded federal funding and services for the elderly), and the formation of the Gray Panthers (an anti-ageism activist network).

As a writer and activist, Maya Angelou participated in other social justice campaigns of the period, including the Civil Rights Movement. Though she wasn't personally involved in the "elder rights" movement, and didn't necessarily intend "On Aging" as a political statement, the poem aligns with that movement's pursuit of respect for seniors. More broadly, it reflects Angelou's career-long concern with amplifying voices from the social margins.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Interview with Angelou](https://hbr.org/2013/05/maya-angelou) — Read an interview with Angelou in which she looks back on her extraordinary life. (<https://hbr.org/2013/05/maya-angelou>)
- [A Performance of the Poem](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STtIKn3lx60) — Watch a performance of "On Aging" by actors Phylicia Rashad and Alexandria Wailes. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STtIKn3lx60>)

- [The Poet Speaks About Aging](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlzrYiKxWdY) — Watch Angelou chat with Oprah Winfrey about the experience of getting older. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlzrYiKxWdY>)
- [More on Angelou's Life and Work](https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou) — Check out a bio of Angelou, and a selection of her poems, at the Academy of American Poets. (<https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou>)
- [A Biography of the Poet](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou) — Read the Poetry Foundation's summary of Angelou's life and career. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- [Caged Bird](#)
- [Harlem Hopscotch](#)
- [On the Pulse of Morning](#)
- [Phenomenal Woman](#)
- [Still I Rise](#)



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