On the Pulse of Morning

SUMMARY

A rock, a river, and a tree once provided a home to creatures that went extinct a long time ago. They left their mark on the mastodon and the dinosaur, whose fossils are the only evidence of their brief stay here on the earth's surface. If there was some kind of warning before those creatures quickly went extinct, it's been lost in darkness of the dirt that has since piled up and all the time that's gone by.

But now, the rock shouts out to us human beings in a clear and forceful voice, saying, "Come, you can stand on my back and look toward your faraway future, but do not look for shelter in my shadow.

I'm not going to let you hide anymore.

You were born with only a little less power than the angels, yet you have squatted for so long in that painful darkness. You have kept your head down for too long, refusing to acknowledge what's going on around you.

Your mouths are overflowing with words ready to kill."

The rock shouts now, "You can stand on me, but you have to face who you are."

On the other side of the wall that divides the world a river sings beautifully, "Come rest beside me.

Each one of you is a nation surrounded by fragile borders that make you strangely proud, yet you're always lashing out and constantly being attacked.

All your violent attempts to get richer have polluted me, left rings of garbage beside my waters and a steady flow of wreckage on my chest.

Despite this, I am calling you now to my riverside, if only you will stop devoting yourself to war. If you come to me dressed in peace, I will sing the songs God gave to me when I and the tree and the stone were not separate.

This was before your distrust of other people's motives became an open wound on your forehead, back when you still understood that you didn't understand anything at all."

The river keeps singing and singing.

There is an earnest desire to answer the singing river and the knowledgeable rock.

That's according to Asian, Hispanic, Jewish, African, and Native American people; people from the Sioux tribe; Catholic and Muslim people; French, Greek, and Irish people; leaders from all different religions; people of different sexual orientations; people who preach; rich people and people who don't have houses; people who teach. All these people, all of them, hear what the tree is saying.

Today, all the trees that have ever existed and that will ever exist are saying to humankind, "Come to me, here beside the river.

Put down roots beside me, here by the river.

Every one of you has an ancestor who travelled here and has given you the right to be here.

You, the Indigenous nations—Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, Cherokee—who first named me, who rested with me, who were later violently forced to leave me to the use of other people who were desperate to make money.

You, the person from Turkey, the person from Sweden, the person from Germany, the person from Scotland... You, a member of the Ashanti people, a member of the Yoruba people, a member of the Kru people, taken and sold into slavery, arriving in the worst possible circumstances and praying for freedom and equality.

Come here and put down roots beside me.

I am the tree rooted by the river, and no one will ever move me.

I—the rock, the river, and the tree—belong to you. Your journey here has been paid for."

Look up, because you have an intense need for this bright morning that is just beginning for you.

History, despite all its violence and agony, can't be undone. But if it's faced with courage, it doesn't have to repeat itself.

Look up, look at the new day that's beginning for you.

Remake the dream.

Women, children, men—all of you need to take the dream into your own hands.

Shape it into what you personally need the most. Shape it into what you as a people want to be. Let your heart be light. Each hour going forward contains a chance to start over.

Don't be committed to fear or forever attached to acting monstrously.

The horizon is approaching, giving you an opportunity to make different choices. Here, on the heartbeat of this beautiful day, you can have the courage to look at the rock, the river, the tree, your country.

This country that belongs to the rich and the poor alike.

This country that belongs as much to you as it did to the mastodon way back when.

Here on the heartbeat of this new day, have the dignity to look forward, to look into your sister's eyes, to look into your brother's face, to look at your country and say simply, so simply,

with hope, "Good morning."

THEMES

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACING THE PAST

"On the Pulse of Morning" is, in essence, a manifesto. Written and performed for Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration in January 1993, the poem reinforces the message of Clinton's inaugural speech, which called for the reinvention of America in order to ensure its continued survival. To that end, the poem urges its audience to avoid repeating history by "fac[ing] it with courage." Ultimately it argues that in order to move forward, America must reject ignorance of the horrors it has committed; rather than hiding from it or burying the past, the American people must confront their history of slavery, colonialism, and environmental destruction so that they can avoid repeating those mistakes in the future.

The poem begins by evoking the extinction of the mastodon and the dinosaurs, a fate America faces, the poem suggests, if it continues to hide "face down in ignorance." The speaker of the poem then goes on to describe this ignorance, listing the ways humanity has harmed itself and the earth in its quest for power and dominion. For example, the speaker implicates America's history of colonialism and slavery by referring to the Indigenous tribes who gave it its "first name" and who were later forced to leave their home "on bloody feet," as well as the African peoples who were enslaved and brought over on ships to serve America's "desperat[ion] for gain, [...] for gold."

The speaker contrasts this "nightmare" of slavery and genocide to "the dream"—that is, the American Dream, which implies equal opportunity for all. This contrast emphasizes America's past failures and what it must address moving forward. The speaker also addresses the "bordered" countries "perpetually under siege" in pursuit of "profit." This drive for gain, this greed, not only drives the violence between countries but leaves "collars of waste" and "currents of debris" on the earth, descriptions which evoke the damage being done to the earth through humanity's irresponsible handling of its resources.

The speaker goes on to assure the audience that though its history is filled with "wrenching pain," this history need not be repeated. Instead, America should learn from its mistakes and "clad [itself] in peace." Arguing that the American people must "seek no haven" in the earth's shadow, the speaker implies that in order to secure a future, people must stop hiding "face down in ignorance." In other words, America can't run from its mistakes, nor is there anywhere left to hide. Only by addressing its history can America hope to catch sight of its "distant destiny"—that is, a future which hasn't been imagined yet.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22
- Lines 26-33
- Lines 56-65
- Lines 73-75
- Lines 88-90

UNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The poem moves back and forth between the voice of the speaker and the voices of the Rock, the River, and the Tree, which together represent a whole and unified planet. In doing so, the poem gives voice to what it argues is the "true yearning" of all people for a brighter future. The poem is meant to inspire in its audience an understanding of the need for change in U.S. environmental and economic policy, suggesting that a viable future depends on America's ability to turn away from war, competition, and greed and towards unity—everyone working together for the well-being of all. Only through taking responsibility for the earth and its inhabitants, the poem argues, will humankind be able to build a harmonious, inclusive, and enduring future.

The speaker describes the River singing "a beautiful song" about a more peaceful world. According to the River, there was a time when cynicism wasn't "a bloody sear" across humanity's brow, a time when the River, the Tree, and the Rock were united and whole. The River's song implies that such unity is still possible, but in order to achieve it, humanity must take "new steps of change"—that is, commit to tangible policies that will put an end to warring with each other and wasting the earth's resources in pursuit of profit.

The speaker then lists off the various groups of people who "hear / the speaking of the Tree"—that is, the Tree's instruction to put down roots beside the River. The groups span different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, occupations, and socioeconomic statuses, thereby implying that *everyone* is capable of hearing and responding to this call for change and growth, and that *everyone* must be included in this vision of America's future—which is not only about ensuring the survival of the United States, but the survival of human beings and the earth more generally.

The listing of the various groups of people also draws attention to the economic disparities between groups of people; "the privileged" and "the homeless" both "hear / the speaking of the tree," but have vastly different experiences of the world. The speaker of the poem argues that through the enactment of responsible environmental and economic changes, however, these disparities can be addressed. By "molding it into the shape of [their] most private need [... their] most public self," Americans can turn their country into a more equitable and sustainable one, one that belongs as much to "the mendicant"

as to "Midas." In other words, regardless of their economic station, every person has the right to feel safe and included, and furthermore, every person has the responsibility to help "give birth" to this "dream" of the future.

The poem ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that by committing to a more responsible way of life, the American people will have earned the right to look each other in the eye. There is a sense of relief that the speaker infers Americans can look forward to when this happens. In this imagined future, a weight has been lifted. The poem concludes with the phrase "Good Morning," which implies a fresh start and an optimistic view of the future. The poem wants the reader to feel empowered, to "have the courage" to build a more responsible and unified tomorrow.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 23-106

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A Rock, A ...
... long since departed,

"On the Pulse of Morning" begins by evoking the Earth's long history, describing elements of nature that were once "Hosts to species long since departed." The capitalization of "A Rock, A River, A Tree" draws attention to each of these objects and their relationship to each other. The asyndeton implies that there is no hierarchy here; these elements are equals, and together, they gesture to the earth as a whole. That they together comprise the first line seems to emphasize the fact that the earth was here long before the various species who would come to occupy it, and long after those species disappeared.

The capitalization in the first line along with the immediate sense of history being evoked also lends itself to a feeling of importance. It is immediately clear that this is a speaker who has something to say, that this poem isn't internal and personal but broad, with an eye for generalizations: the Rock isn't a singular rock but all the various kinds of stone which make up the earth's surface. The River isn't a specific river but the waters of earth more generally. The Tree isn't a particular kind of tree but rather the idea of a tree, with all its symbolic connotations: wisdom, age, growth, life, shelter, and so forth. Likewise, the word "species" refers to any number of different kinds of animals that once roamed the earth and have "since departed"—or gone extinct.

LINES 3-8

Marked the mastodon, ...
... dust and ages.

The speaker goes on to say that the Rock, the River, and the Tree "Marked the mastodon, / The dinosaur." In other words, the earth marked the passing of these great species, the only evidence of whom is the "dry tokens" left behind—fossils, petrified remains, imprints of their bodies left in the very rock and sediment and wood of the elements that sheltered them.

The speaker describes these species' existence as a "sojourn," emphasizing the brevity of their time on the earth in the grand scheme of things. The alliteration present in these lines ("Marked the mastodon," "The dinosaur, who left dry tokens") adds musicality to the poem and also subtly draws attention to the relationship *between* the departed species and the earth itself—the earth "mark[ing] the mastodon," the dinosaur leaving an imprint of itself on the earth's floor. This relationship illustrates interdependence and the fact that, even though the earth was "host" to these species, these species had an impact on the earth as well.

In lines 7-8 ("Any broad alarm [...] dust and ages"), the speaker ends the stanza on a somewhat resigned note, saying that if there was some kind of huge and noticeable "alarm" that could have warned these now-extinct species of their impending destruction, it was lost in "the gloom of dust and ages." In other words, it is no longer clear what that alarm might have been, having been lost to time and buried under rock, sediments, the remains of civilizations.

The cross rhyme between "doom" at the end of line 7 and "gloom" in the middle of line 8 seems to imply a relationship between the ruin of an entire species and the "gloom" (or darkness) of ignorance. The speaker seems to be hinting that it would be helpful to know *why* the dinosaurs and mastodon went extinct, that such information would be useful to humanity to avoid repeating their fate.

LINES 9-13

But today, the ...
... place down here.

After the stanza break, the poem shifts gears. In contrast to the first stanza, which was looking back, the speaker addresses the present, saying:

> But today, the Rock cries out to us [...]

Because it's already been made clear that the Rock, along with the River and the Tree, represents the earth more broadly, the reader may infer that it is the earth itself which is crying out to humankind "clearly, forcefully." The speaker describes the earth saying that humankind is welcome to "stand upon [its] / Back and face [its] distant destiny," but that it shouldn't seek shelter in the earth's "shadow." The shadow relates back to the "gloom of dust in ages" in the previous stanza. In this poem, it seems, darkness represents the ignorance of history.

The earth is saying that humankind may have a "distant destiny"—that is, a future beyond what they can see or imagine in this moment—but in order to realize that destiny, they must turn away from the ignorance and mistakes of the past.

The speaker goes on to say that the earth will no longer allow humankind to hide. This speaks to how inhospitable the earth will become if humanity continues to abuse it, squandering resources and polluting their environment. Again, the relationship between earth and the various species who occupy it is interdependent—it is humankind who has driven the earth to banish them from the "hiding place" of history.

The enjambment as well as the use of antithesis (a juxtaposition, or contrast, that happens within a parallel grammatical structure) in lines 10-11 ("Come, you may stand upon my / Back and face your distant destiny") does a lot of work in this section, as having "Back" and "face" occupy the same line emphasizes the relationship between facing the past and facing the future. The passage seems to acknowledge a kind of paradox: that in order to move forward, people must look candidly and critically at where they've been.

LINES 14-18

You, created only ...
... down in ignorance.

The speaker continues to address humanity (and more specifically, based on the context of the poem, America) from the perspective of the earth, saying that even though human beings (from a Christian perspective) were created to be nearly as powerful as the angels, they have squandered this potential and chosen to "crouch" in the "bruising darkness."

The word "crouch" implies an animal posture as well as fear; human beings are not only not living up to their potential, the poem thus implies, they are acting like animals. By describing the darkness, which again represents the ignorance of the past, as "bruising," the speaker argues that such ignorance is harmful.

In the following lines, the speaker becomes more explicit, going beyond symbolism and metaphor to say plainly that human beings have "lain too long / Face down in ignorance." The parallelism—that is, the matching grammatical structure—between "Have crouched too long in / The bruising darkness" and "Have lain too long / Face down in ignorance" echoes the speaker's repetition of this key point. These are not two thoughts but the same thought delivered twice, the second time more explicitly.

The phrase "Face down" refers not to a literal hiding, but a metaphorical one: it implies shame and cowardice, a lack of courage.

LINES 19-22

Your mouths spilling ...
... hide your face.

Lines 19-20 ("Your mouths spilling words / Armed for slaughter") begin to describe the ignorance in which human beings have been hiding for so long. The speaker is condemning the violence with which, the poem argues, humanity is overflowing. The poem employs the metaphor of words being "armed for slaughter" to say people cannot even speak to each other without the intent to harm, dehumanize, destroy.

The speaker again describes the earth as "crying out." Through this use of personification, the poet allows the earth to speak for itself. It says that humankind "may stand on [the earth]," but it is no longer allowed to hide its face. In other words, no more shame, no more cowardice, no more hiding in ignorance. People may continue to live on the earth, but first there must be a reckoning, an understanding of what must change based on an understanding of what's already happened.

The repetition of the phrase "you may stand" and the repetition of no longer hiding allows the poet to again emphasize key points in the poem. It is important to remember here that this poem was always meant to be heard aloud. It was written to be performed in front of a large, generalized audience, and its themes needed to be immediately accessible. Repetition, along with the straightforward language of the poem, allows for people who are listening to the poem, rather than reading it on the page, to remember its themes after the poet has delivered it.

LINES 23-25

Across the wall ...
... by my side.

The speaker continues, saying "Across the wall of the world, / A River sings a beautiful song." By describing the world as "a wall," the speaker insinuates that human beings have created a reality in which the River's song is inaccessible, a reality that isolates people from each other and the wisdom of nature.

The alliteration of /w/ sounds in "**w**all" and "**w**orld" emphasize that there is a relationship between the idea of a wall and the idea of the world. While the word "earth" or "planet" would refer to only the natural aspects of humanity's home, the word "world" gestures too to human constructions such as countries, nations, ethnicities, races, and so on. These constructions are what comprise the "wall." They separate people from each other, and separate them from the River's song, which is to rest by its side. This passage implies that if people could only cross this wall—or tear it down—they would be able to access the River and its song.

The River is one of the three aspects of the earth first mentioned in the opening line of the poem. While up until this point the speaker has been using the Rock to speak on behalf of the earth, the poem shifts gears in line 24; the speaker has gone from talking about ignorance to talking about unity.

In nature, bodies of water feed into one another; rivers connect

smaller bodies of water to larger bodies of water and eventually empty into oceans, like a network that spans the entire earth. As such, the River is representative of earth's natural inclination toward unity—various individual parts of nature coming together to form a complex whole.

LINES 26-31

Each of you ...
... upon my breast.

The speaker continues to personify the River, again allowing it to speak as if it were a person. The River describes the world humankind has constructed, a world of "bordered countr[ies]" that are both fragile and arrogant, that find themselves "perpetually under siege." This state of affairs is the exact opposite of the River's song of unity and working together.

In lines 29-31 ("Your armed struggles [...] upon my breast"), the River expands on the nature of the violence between countries, which is their "struggle for profit." Here the poem begins to more directly address colonialism and environmental destruction. Countries don't fight with each other because there aren't enough resources to go around, the poem argues; they fight with each other because of greed, because some countries which to dominate and extract resources from other countries to increase their power. This greed leaves "collars of waste" upon the earth; the word "collar" brings with it connotations of constriction and ownership, rather than freedom and equality.

The parallelism present in "collars of waste upon/ my shore, currents of debris upon my breast" draws a comparison between the River's shore and a mother's breast. It implies that, similar to a breast given to a baby, the River's shore contains nourishment, sustenance. But this nourishment and sustenance is being buried beneath waste and debris. This speaks to the way human beings have treated their metaphorical mother, the earth.

LINES 32-36

Yet, today I ...
... stone were one.

Despite the awful way people have treated the earth and each other, the River assures humanity that it is not too late for them to "study war no more." The combination of assonance and consonance (in this case the repetition of /or/ sounds) creates a rhyme between "war" and "more." This rhyme has a closed feeling to it because of how close together the rhyming words are; it feels conclusive, immediate. There is no time, the River seems to be saying, to turn away from war gradually—it must happen now.

The River repeats its instruction to "Come / Clad in peace." The alliteration of "Come," "Clad," and "Creator" creates a resonance between the three words, as if by "wearing" peacefulness people might emulate God. The River claims that its song of unity is one it received from God (who might easily be interpreted as nature itself in this poem), and that when it first came into being it was not separate from the Tree or the Rock—together they formed a complex yet peaceful whole.

Note the presence of polysyndeton in lines 35-36:

> The Creator gave to me when I **and** the
> Tree **and** the stone were one.

This gives the passage momentum as well as underlining the sense of unity the River is trying to convey. While this passage might have utilized punctuation to avoid the repetition of "and," it would have created pauses and visual separation between the clauses of the sentence. The word "and" is indicative of the kind of joining the speaker wishes to see in the world.

LINES 37-42

Before cynicism was ...
... the wise Rock.

The oneness of the natural world, the poem says here, has been marred by cynicism, which the speaker describes as "a bloody sear across [humanity's] brow."

This metaphor speaks to the counter productiveness of distrusting one another's motives. Like an open wound above one's eye, bleeding into one's vision and making it difficult to see, cynicism erodes people's ability to see the world and each other clearly.

The speaker instead gestures to the innocence that preceded cynicism, a time when human beings "yet **knew** [they] still **knew** nothing." The diacope present in the repetition of the word "knew" across lines 38 and 39 illustrates another paradox the poem is addressing. Just as humanity needs to face its past in order to face its future, the notion of knowledge is complicated. Clearly there is no safety in ignorance, yet the arrogance of thinking one knows everything is equally fatal. The paradox implies that in order to truly understand their situation, people need to recognize how little they actually understand. Only in admitting their ignorance may they be able to address it.

The speaker says that "The Rivers **sings** and **sings** on." The presence of diacope (the repetition of "sings") here serves a different purpose: there is a steadiness to the River's song; it has always sung this song and it always will. It is consistent because it is true. And true too is humankind's "yearning to respond to / The singing River and the wise Rock." This yearning is true because deep down human beings understand nature to be wise and invested in its own survival.

LINES 43-48

So say the ...
... homeless, the Teacher.

The speaker goes on to list the diverse groups of people who

have "a true yearning to respond" to the earth's message of unity. These groups span different ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, vocations, and socioeconomic statuses, implying that anyone is capable of hearing and responding to the message of a more unified future.

The listing of peoples has a rhythm to it as well. The asyndeton throughout pushes the reader forward, creating momentum and suggesting that the list could be endless.

Angelou varies her use of punctuation in line 44 so that instead of occupying two distinct categories, "The African and Native American" are pushed together into a single breath. This gestures to colonialism; African slavers stole people from their communities and sold them to American slavers who brought them to America, where they were not only forced into slavery but completely cut off from their communities, their ancestors, their histories. There is a comparison being made here between the Native Americans and the Africans; both were forcibly removed from their homes.

These six lines are also notable in that they rhyme, following a rhyme scheme of AABBCC. In a poem that is mostly unrhymed, these lines thus stand out. The speaker seems to be implying a connection that runs through these groups of people—despite the violence of their past, despite their histories of using and abusing each other for profit, there is a natural law which cannot be broken: they are all able to hear the earth speaking to them. This song is their birthright.

LINES 49-53

They hear. They ...
... beside the River.

The speaker continues, saying that all the above mentioned diverse groups "hear / The speaking of the Tree." The presence of diacope with the repetition of "They hear" again emphasizes the clarity of the earth's message. The only word intervening in the repetition of "They hear" is the word "all" in the second half of line 49: "They hear. They **all** hear." The earth doesn't differentiate between groups of people; it speaks equally to everyone, and its message echoes the message of the River.

It says that humankind should "plant [itself] beside [the tree], here beside the River." The Tree is pointing to the fact that it thrives by placing itself beside the River; growth, its seems, happens through unity. "The first and last of every Tree" speaks as one, indicating another kind of unity—the unity of generations making choices that will benefit future generations.

The repetition of the Tree's message, seen in the epistrophe of "here beside the River" being repeated at the ends of lines 52 and 53, creates an insistence, as well as a sense of consistency. Like the River, the Tree's message is always the same. Like the River, the Tree is insisting that only through coming together and working for the good of all can humanity hope to survive longterm. Just as a tree needs water to thrive, people need harmonious relationships and access to resources.

LINES 54-55

Each of you, ...
... been paid for.

Lines 54-55 can be interpreted multiple ways. Generally, the speaker seems to be saying that simply by being born, a person has the right to exist and thrive. There is no one who does not deserve to be planted "beside the River," no one who does not deserve to be included in this vision for unity.

The word "traveller," in this interpretation, refers to the brief nature of human life—that as individuals, people are only on earth for a short while, but an individual's legacy will live on through the survival of their descendants. The term "paid for" may even be an allusion to the Christian belief that Jesus died for the sins of all humankind, so that they may be saved.

More specifically, the speaker is addressing America. America is known for being a "melting pot," a nation of many cultures, origins, histories. In this sense, every American is literally the descendent of someone who travelled there. (Even the Indigenous peoples are thought to have originated in Asia, crossing over by way of Beringia, an area which connects North America and Siberia.) In this interpretation, the speaker is saying that every American's passage to America was "paid for" by an ancestor who faced unknowable obstacles to travel there.

Even more specifically, the speaker may be addressing the African American population in particular; after all, their passage to America was literally "paid for" in the sense that their bodies were bought and sold.

LINES 56-61

You, who gave ...
... Starving for gold.

The Tree, still speaking, addresses the Indigenous peoples who first named it—that is, first encountered America before it was America, when it was still just the earth, rivers and rocks and trees.

These nations—the Pawnee, the Apache, the Seneca, the Cherokee—"rested" with the earth, implying a harmonious relationship between the people and their natural environment. Note the use of anaphora with the repetition of "you" throughout the first two lines (this is specifically anaphora because the repetition appears at the start of discrete clauses):

> **You**, who gave me my first name, **you**
> Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, **you**
> Cherokee Nation [...]

This repetition seems like a way of acknowledging these peoples who have so often gone unacknowledged, of drawing

attention to the fact that they knew and honored this part of the earth long before Europeans came and forced them to leave "on bloody feet."

The singling out of specific tribes and nations also speaks to the idea that these people also had their own individual cultures and customs, differences which did not interfere with an overall sense of harmony. It is possible, the speaker seems to imply, for different groups of people to live alongside each other without the degree of competition and greed that has occurred since the arrival of Europeans in America.

This is the ignorance of history that the earth will no longer allow humanity to hide from: colonialism, genocide, the exploitation of natural resources for profit. America cannot hope to build a better tomorrow if it refuses to acknowledge the harms of its past, its having been "desperate for gain, / Starving for gold." The Europeans having been so greedy as to kill and subjugate anyone it saw as competition.

LINES 62-65

You, the Turk, ...
... for a dream.

The speaker shifts gears after the stanza break, addressing a different set of nationalities than appeared in the previous stanza: "the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot..." The list trails off with the use of an ellipsis: the speaker doesn't have too much to say about these particular groups, except to juxtapose them with the "Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought / Sold, stolen."

The ellipsis, then, seems to imply a long list of nationalities that didn't arrive in America "on a nightmare," someone taking them from their homes with the express purpose of subjugating them (that is, bringing them under dominion or control). The speaker is expressing that there is a profound difference in experience between the people who came to America willingly in pursuit of profit or some idea of freedom, and the African peoples who were kidnapped and sold into slavery.

The end rhyme between "Scot" and "bought" really emphasizes this difference in experience; where someone of Scottish heritage is likely to know where they came from, the people brought over from Africa and sold into slavery were forcibly removed of their identities.

Unlike free Americans, enslaved Africans could only "pray for a dream." The word "dream" seems to be an allusion to the American Dream—America's ideal of equal opportunity for all. The experience of African Americans and Native Americans makes it painfully clear that this dream was never meant to be achievable for everyone. It is also perhaps more specifically an allusion to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, "I Have a Dream," which argued for equal rights for African Americans and an end to racism.

LINES 66-70

Here, root yourselves ...
... have been paid.

The speaker continues to give voice to the Tree, who again instructs humanity, and more specifically America, to put down roots beside it, by the River. The Tree says, "I am the Tree planted by the River, / Which will not be moved." There is some ambiguity as to whether "which" is referring to the Tree or the River, which ultimately serves the idea that they are one: together, they are immovable.

This unity is echoed in the following line through the use of parallelism:

> I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree.

The parallel grammatical structure (which includes the anaphora of "I the" as well as asyndeton) reflects that the Rock, the River, and the Tree are all individual voices and yet are also speaking the same phrase:

> I am yours—your Passages have been paid.

They are individual and yet it is a whole and *unified* earth which is speaking, an "I" rather than a "we."

The earth assures anyone who is listening that their "Passages have been paid." By saying, "I am yours," the earth emphasizes again that simply by being born, each and every human being has the right to be here. And again, even more specifically, the speaker seems to be addressing those whose ancestors were brought over on slave ships, the capitalization of "Passages" likely being an allusion to the Middle Passage, the part of the slave trade in which enslaved Africans were carried in ships across the Atlantic ocean to America.

LINES 71-75

Lift up your ...
... be lived again.

After having gone into some of the horror of America's history—colonialism, genocide, slavery, environmental destruction—the speaker returns to the present, saying:

> Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
> For this bright morning dawning for you.

This echoes the Rock's sentiment from early in the poem for humanity to stop hiding in the "shadow" of ignorance. The speaker insists that each and every American has a "piercing need" to commit to a different vision of America, indicating the urgency of their instruction that Americans lift their faces to the light and see that a new future is possible.

Morning, in this context, becomes a symbol for a bright and

unified future, a future in which Americans have taken responsibility for their past in order to never repeat it. This notion of responsibility is addressed in the following lines, with the speaker saying that America must "face" its past, however painful, in order to avoid repeating its horrific mistakes.

The imperfect rhyme at the ends of lines 73 and 75 ("pain" and "again") adds some emphasis to the speaker's point that repeating the past can be avoided by owning up to it. This passage feels almost like an aphorism in that it seems to be concisely presenting a kind of universal truth—while the speaker is specifically addressing America in this poem, there's no doubt that everyone would benefit from keeping this truth in mind.

LINES 76-81

Lift up your ...
... of your hands.

The speaker reiterates lines 71-72 ("Lift up your [...] dawning for you") in lines 76-77, saying "Lift up your eyes upon / The day breaking for you." Again morning is a symbol of the future available to Americans (and all of humanity) if they will only commit to change and growth, setting aside the competition and greed of their past in favor of working together for the well-being of all.

The speaker instructs Americans to "Give birth again / To the dream." This is again an allusion to the American Dream and to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. By telling Americans to give birth to the dream again, the speaker is saying that the dream needs to be remade, that America itself needs to be rebuilt in favor of racial and economic equality.

The metaphor of giving birth illustrates the difficulty of remaking the dream. Giving birth is extraordinarily painful, and requires a great deal of courage. And the work doesn't end when the birth is over—in fact, birth is just the beginning! A baby requires nurturing. A baby is a huge responsibility. In order for this "reborn" America to live, everyone needs to take responsibility for it.

The speaker addresses "Women, children, men," telling them to "Take it into the palms of [their] hands." This imagery—holding the dream in the palms of their hands—speaks both to the care and attentiveness required in holding a baby, as well as to the malleability of dreams, the fact that they can always be shaped anew.

LINES 82-87

Mold it into ...
... For new beginnings.

The speaker instructs Americans to take their dream of a better America and:

> Mold it into the shape of your most
> Private need. Sculpt it into
> The image of your most public self.

The parallelism present in these lines, in addition to the alliteration of /p/ sounds in "Private" and "public," draws attention to the relationship between these seemingly disparate spheres. The speaker seems to imply that the "Private" and the "public" are not so separate after all, that they are interdependent, that the individual and the collective are two sides of the same coin.

The imagery of molding and sculpting evokes someone working with clay. This is earthy imagery, speaking again to the connection between human being and the earth they inhabit. It speaks to the way that, with the right touch, humans are capable of turning even the most modest materials into something intentional and beautiful. It also illustrates the power they have over their own futures, that they get to decide what the future will look like; they can make it in the image of themselves, in the image of what they need and want to be.

"Lift up your hearts," the speaker instructs. The phrase "Lift up," through the use of repetition, has become a kind of refrain throughout the second half of the poem. Lifting requires strength; to lift one's heart is an act of courage, hope. The speaker says that "Each new hour holds new chances / For new beginnings." The presence of diacope here with the repetition of the word "new" places emphasis on the need for Americans to create something which has never existed before: a truly responsible and unified country.

LINES 88-92

Do not be ...
... steps of change.

The speaker continues to reiterate the need for change, saying, "Do not be wedded forever / to fear, yoked eternally / to brutishness." The parallelism present in these lines, which feature the same grammatical structure, points to the fundamental relationship between fear and brutishness. By acting from a place of fear and distrust, the speaker seems to argue, people will only ever continue to treat each other monstrously. The only way to commit to a more humane future is to trust one another and work together. Similar to facing the past, such trust requires courage.

The words "wedded" and "yoked" are also telling, as to be wed to something is to commit oneself to it, while being yoked to something is not so much a choice—one thinks of oxen who are yoked together and forced to pull heavy farm equipment. In other words, by committing to fear, people sacrifice their own and others' freedom. In order to be free, Americans must let go of their fear.

The speaker then claims that "The horizon leans forward, / Offering you space to place new steps of change." The

metaphor of the forward-leaning horizon reflects the dawning of a new day, of time and progress moving ahead. That feeling of potential is echoed by the sound of these lines. There is a rhythmic quality to line 92 due to the assonance of long /ay/ sounds in "space," "place," and "change," which creates a sense of pleasure which the listener or reader might feel as evocative of hope.

LINES 93-98

Here, on the ...
... the mastodon then.

The poem begins to reach its conclusion: by having the courage to face the past and the courage to leave fear behind and trust each other and commit to change, Americans will finally be looking at their country, their home, the earth, with clear eyes, no longer face down in ignorance, no longer hiding from the truth. That the speaker refers to "the pulse of this fine day" reflects the idea that the day itself is alive with possibility; days do not *literally* have pulses, of course, but the metaphor here evokes the sense of blood-flowing through the day's veins. In other words, the day is awake, ready and eager to get started.

Line 96 then relates all the way back to the beginning of the poem. The speaker began the poem with "a Rock, A River, a Tree," and now, in lines 95-96, echoes that with "the Rock, the River, the Tree, your country." The shift in article—from "a" to "the"—reflects the fact that listeners are now familiar with these characters, and underscores that they are meant to symbolically stand in for something more than themselves, for the earth as a whole. The shift to "your country" at the end of the phrase then stands out, implying that this "country" is one and the same as those natural entities, that each of these individual words are part of the whole that makes up America. At the same time, the possessive "your" implies a sense of *responsibility* that people have towards "the Rock, the River, the Tree." People must recognize the inherent unity of the earth, and then work towards the betterment and well-being of all its inhabitants.

The speaker continues, saying that this vision of America belongs as much to "the mendicant"—that is, a beggar—as it does to Midas, an allusion to a figure from Greek mythology who turned everything he touched to gold. In other words, those who have nothing are just as much a part of this vision as people who have acquired fortunes.

Likewise, the speaker says, this country is as much the listeners' as it was the mastodon's—a reminder that human survival is not guaranteed, and that America, no matter how giant and powerful it may seem, is fragile. People were not the first inhabitants on this land, and may not be the last; though the speaker called it "your country," it is not *only* your country. It *also* belonged to creatures as old as "the mastodon" way back when.

The parallelism present between lines 97 and 98 imply that just as Midas is no more deserving than the mendicant, neither is America guaranteed a future any more than the mastodons were.

LINES 99-102

Here on the ...
... face, your country

The speaker repeats the phrase "on the pulse of this new day," now adding, "You may have the grace to look up and out." Where before the speaker said "You may have the courage" to face the past (line 94), the speaker is now speaking about grace—about having the goodwill—to look "into your sister's eyes, into / your brother's face."

In this way, the speaker is arguing for the fundamental simplicity of treating other people with dignity and respect. The parallelism present between "into your sister's eyes" and "into your brother's face" creates a feeling of equality between these relationships. The speaker is visualizing an America where everyone is able to look into each other's eyes, both because no one is any longer subjected to crimes which characterize America's history, and because each and every person has done the work of turning away from fear and brutishness.

In doing so, they have earned the right to be respected by one another. The parallelism also implies that "your sister's eyes" and "your brother's face" are both "your country"—in other words, rather than allegiance to profit and personal gain, the speaker is asking Americans to instead commit themselves to each other. America isn't an idea, in other words—it's a collection of people.

LINES 103-106

And say simply ...
... Good morning.

The result of all this owning up to the past and committing to a future where the violent crimes of America's history are never repeated is that Americans will have acquired a kind of simple certainty: that there is hope. That their country will survive. That the earth itself will continue to flourish. That war and genocide and slavery and mass extinction will not hang over their heads.

Where they can look out upon their country, the people that make up their country, "And say simply / Very simply / With hope / Good morning." The use of diacope here (the repetition of "simply" with only a single intervening word) emphasizes this simplicity, this ease. While there was a kind of refrain earlier in the poem of "lifting up," this ending implies that on the other side of this work—the work of confronting the past, the work of building an equitable and harmonious future—the weight will have been lifted. There will be room to breathe, room to greet one another with hope.

The poem ends with the phrase "Good morning," yet "good

morning" is a phrase of greeting—it is often the beginning of a conversation or interaction. "Good morning" implies a whole new day filled with possibility. So too does this poem aim to start a conversation, and so too does it imply a future America hasn't imagined yet.

SYMBOLS

THE ROCK, THE RIVER, AND THE TREE

"On the Pulse of Morning" personifies elements of the earth, giving voice to the concerns and inherent wisdom of nature. The Rock, River, and Tree that appear throughout the poem, then, symbolize the earth itself and its various lessons. Each of these individual elements offers a particular lesson, but together they represent the whole of the planet, and more specifically, the United States—a country for which its inhabitants must learn to take responsibility, the poem argues.

In the beginning of the poem, the Rock, the River, and the Tree are mentioned together as if they are a single unit. Together, they are "hosts to species long since departed." As the poem progresses, however, each aspect of the earth has some particular wisdom to offer its inhabitants. The Rock, for example, "cries out [...] forcefully" that humankind must abandon its ignorance and "face [its] distant destiny." The Rock's message is about no longer hiding from the mistakes of the past (no longer hiding under a "rock," as it were). The sturdy Rock can be thought of as specifically representing strength and courage—specifically the strength and courage to learn from the past.

The River then "sings a beautiful song." The song is for humankind to come together and stop its warring, stop all the "armed struggles for profit." It speaks of the "waste" and "debris" cluttering its shores, reflecting the way greed has led to environmental destruction, and demands that people "study war no more." It promises that once people leave behind their cynicism and pride, they will finally be able to rest in a state of unity with other people as well as the environment. The flowing River, then, represents the inherent connection between all people. Only by recognizing this connection can humanity overcome selfishness and greed, and then move forward together.

Finally, the Tree instructs humanity to "plant" itself by the River. It assures people that each and every one of them has the right to "root" themselves next to it, to establish a solid sense of home. The Tree insists that neither it nor the River will "be moved"—there is a future in working together. The Tree demands that humankind take responsibility for that future by committing to growth and change, by turning their faces to the "bright morning dawning" for them. With its roots firmly planted in the ground, the Tree represents the responsibility people have for their country, for each other, and for the earth itself.

Finally, the Rock, the River, and the Tree instruct people to "look up and out upon me [...] your country." Here, the Rock, the River, and the Tree symbolize America itself, and more specifically, a *unified* America where Americans have listened to the wisdom of nature and embraced its lessons.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "A Rock, A River, A Tree / Hosts to species long since departed, / Marked the mastodon, / The dinosaur"
- **Lines 9-12:** "the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully, / Come, you may stand upon my / Back and face your distant destiny, / But seek no haven in my shadow."
- **Lines 21-22:** "The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me, / But do not hide your face."
- **Lines 24-25:** "A River sings a beautiful song, / Come rest here by my side."
- **Lines 29-32:** "Your armed struggles for profit / Have left collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast. / Yet, today I call you to my riverside,"
- **Lines 35-36:** "I and the / Tree and the stone were one"
- **Line 40:** "The River sings and sings on."
- **Line 42:** "The singing River and the wise Rock."
- **Lines 49-50:** "They all hear / The speaking of the Tree."
- **Lines 51-53:** "the first and last of every Tree / Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the River. / Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River."
- **Lines 67-70:** "I am the Tree planted by the River, / Which will not be moved. / I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree / I am yours"
- **Lines 95-96:** "the / Rock, the River, the Tree, your country."

SHADOW, DARKNESS, AND GLOOM

In this poem, shadow, darkness, and gloom all symbolize ignorance, something the poem cautions Americans they must address if they are going to build a better future.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the remnants of dinosaurs and mastodons who once walked the earth. Despite their massive size and power, all that's left of them are "dry tokens"—fossils, for example—"on [the] planet floor." One might wonder how such incredible creatures went extinct, but the speaker says that "Any broad alarm of their hastening doom" has been "lost in the gloom of dust and ages." There is resignation in this statement; the speaker seems to be saying that any kind of certainty regarding the dinosaurs and the mastodon is irretrievable now. It was a long time ago. Nothing can save them now.

On the contrary, the Rock's message is one of urgency; "today," it cries out "clearly," "forcefully." Its message is that humanity may continue to live on this earth, but only if they "seek no haven it [its] shadow." In other words, there's nowhere left for humankind to hide. The Rock goes on to say that while humans were created with nearly the potential and power of divine beings, they have "crouched too long in / The bruising darkness." The speaker makes it explicitly clear that by crouching in the darkness they mean laying "face down in ignorance." Hiding from the truth won't save humanity; instead, they must turn and face what they've done.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "the gloom of dust and ages"
- **Line 12:** "seek no haven in my shadow"
- **Line 16:** "The bruising darkness"

MORNING

The poem's title is a clear indication of what is important in this poem. Day and morning both symbolize a future brightened by truth and responsibility, a future where unity between peoples and harmony with the earth is possible. Morning often connotes new beginnings, and it does so in this poem quite explicitly. In short, the light of day symbolizes hope.

The speaker argues that humans have "a piercing need / For this bright morning dawning." Their very survival depends on their ability and willingness to turn a new page. By courageously facing their collective history, Americans may put the past to rest and lift their eyes "upon / The day breaking." "Daybreak" refers to morning's first light; after the darkness of night, that first visible light signals the start of a new day full of possibilities.

The speaker repeats variations of the title toward the end of the poem: "Here, on the pulse of this fine day," and "Here on the pulse of this new day." In other words, the heartbeat of the future depends on the courage of humans now, depends on how people treat the earth and each other now. The heartbeat of America—the survival of America—depends on Americans facing their past so that they do not have to relive it.

The poem ends with the phrase "Good morning," indicating the hope and optimism of a future defined by courage and responsibility, by looking "into your sister's eyes, into / Your brother's face, your country." By seeing and recognizing the humanity in each other, by treating each other with dignity and respect, by creating a more equitable and harmonious future, Americans will have turned the page. They will have a fresh day in which to greet each other. They will have hope.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 72:** "this bright morning dawning for you"
- **Line 77:** "The day breaking for you."
- **Line 93:** "the pulse of this fine day"
- **Line 99:** "the pulse of this new day"
- **Line 106:** "Good morning."

PLANTING AND ROOTS

Angelou utilizes the imagery of planting to symbolize the idea of sustainability and community, of people working together to create a viable future. The Tree instructs people to "plant" themselves beside the River, which represents unity. By "rooting" itself in unity, humankind has a chance at a more hopeful future, one which "will not be moved"—that is, it is steadfast, sturdy, built to last. The term "putting down roots," when used to describe a person, means to form connections to a place, to have human attachments. When used to describe a plant, it means to draw nutrients and water up through the soil into the plant, so they it may be nourished. In other words, roots represent connection and interdependence, and a strong foundation which allows whatever is rooted to thrive.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 53:** "Plant yourself beside me"
- **Line 66:** "root yourselves beside me"
- **Line 67:** "planted"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

In general, Angelou uses enjambment as a means of pacing the poem. In the first stanza, it's clear that enjambment allows the speaker to dole out information in bits and pieces, each line broadening the reader's picture of what's going on. Enjambment lengthens thoughts and images (in that these literally take up more space on the page) and also creates momentum in the poem by pulling the reader forward.

While for the most part line breaks tend to coincide with where one might naturally expect to take a breath, the poem occasionally uses them more strategically. One such instance is lines 10-11:

> "Come, you may stand upon my
> Back and face your distant destiny,"

A more natural line break would be something like: "Come, you may stand upon my back / And face your distant destiny." However, because the line is broken where it is, it encourages the reader not to pause for breath at the end of line 10. The

pronoun "my" at the end of the line is inconclusive, pushing the reader to carry their breath over to the next line in order to complete the phrase or thought. By pushing the word "Back" to the beginning of line 11, the poem places a different kind of emphasis on it: it ends up occupying the left margin and being capitalized. Placing "Back" and "face" and "distant destiny" all on the same line allows the poem to actually enact the process being described: the reader must look back before moving forward.

The poem's use of enjambment also, of course, serves to contrast with the use of end-stopped lines. These lines tend to break up the flow of the poem, allowing the reader to land, pause, and take note of where they are.

This happens directly after the previous example. Both lines 12 and 13 ("But seek no [...] place down here.") are end-stopped, lending a sense of finality to the Rock's instruction to humanity to stop hiding. The fact that the line does not carry on forces the reader to pause and consider what they've just read, just as the Rock is asking humankind to pause and consider where it's been, what mistakes it has made, how it may avoid repeating them in the future.

The poem often omits punctuation where readers would naturally pause, creating lines that are only very subtly end-stopped—or that some readers may even argue are actually enjambed. Line 1, for example, contains no punctuation after "Tree," but it's clear from context that the following line begins a new modifying phrase. There is thus an implied pause after "Tree," yet the lack of punctuation also makes sure that this doesn't feel too forced. The reader is still pulled forward, sensing from that lack of punctuation that the thought is incomplete.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** “tokens / Of”
- **Lines 5-6:** “here / On”
- **Lines 7-8:** “doom / Is”
- **Lines 10-11:** “my / Back”
- **Lines 14-15:** “than / The”
- **Lines 15-16:** “in / The”
- **Lines 17-18:** “long / Face”
- **Lines 19-20:** “words / Armed”
- **Lines 29-30:** “profit / Have”
- **Lines 30-31:** “upon / My”
- **Lines 34-35:** “songs / The”
- **Lines 35-36:** “the / Tree”
- **Lines 37-38:** “your / Brow”
- **Lines 38-39:** “still / Knew”
- **Lines 41-42:** “to / The”
- **Lines 43-44:** “Jew / The”
- **Lines 44-45:** “Sioux, / The”
- **Lines 45-46:** “Greek / The”
- **Lines 46-47:** “Sheikh, / The”
- **Lines 47-48:** “Preacher, / The”
- **Lines 49-50:** “hear / The”
- **Lines 51-52:** “Tree / Speaks”
- **Lines 54-55:** “passed / On”
- **Lines 56-57:** “you / Pawnee”
- **Lines 57-58:** “you / Cherokee”
- **Lines 58-59:** “then / Forced”
- **Lines 59-60:** “of / Other”
- **Lines 71-72:** “need / For”
- **Lines 74-75:** “faced / With”
- **Lines 76-77:** “upon / The”
- **Lines 78-79:** “again / To”
- **Lines 82-83:** “most / Private”
- **Lines 83-84:** “into / The”
- **Lines 85-86:** “hearts / Each”
- **Lines 86-87:** “chances / For”
- **Lines 88-89:** “forever / To”
- **Lines 89-90:** “eternally / To ”
- **Lines 94-95:** “courage / To”
- **Lines 95-96:** “the / Rock”
- **Lines 100-101:** “out / And”
- **Lines 101-102:** “into / Your”

CAESURA

Due of the length of the poem and the fact that it was written to be read aloud, it's no surprise that Angelou provides plenty of opportunities for pausing and taking breaths. Caesura affects the poem's pacing, often creating opportunity for a more dramatic verbal delivery of the poem—which is in keeping with the poem's aims: Angelou was, after all, an activist, and was also well-versed in the dramatic arts. The poem has the feel of a speech; it makes a clear argument, and follows a logical progression. For that reason, it seems caesura works largely in the service of slowing things down and allowing for clarity.

For example, many instances of caesura in this poem occur as a result of rhetorical flourishes deployed to spark in the audience a sense of immediacy and urgency. Examples of this include "But today, the Rock cries out to us" (line 9), "The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me" (line 21), "Yet, today I call you to my riverside" (line 32), "Today, the first and last of every Tree" (line 51), "Come to me, here beside the River" (line 52), "Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River" (line 53), "Here, root yourselves beside me" (line 66), and "Here, on the pulse of this fine day" (line 93).

This kind of language echos the speeches of activists and religious leaders meant to incite a sense of responsibility and action. By repeatedly pausing to specify a time ("Today") and a place ("here"), the speaker conveys that the time for this historical reckoning, this owning up to past mistakes, is here and now. There is no more time to waste.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Rock, A," "River, A"
- **Line 4:** "dinosaur, who"
- **Line 9:** "today, the," "us, clearly, forcefully"
- **Line 14:** "You, created"
- **Line 15:** "angels, have"
- **Line 21:** "today, you"
- **Line 31:** "shore, currents"
- **Line 32:** "Yet, today"
- **Line 43:** "Asian, the," "Hispanic, the"
- **Line 44:** "American, the"
- **Line 45:** "Catholic, the," "Muslim, the," "French, the"
- **Line 46:** "Irish, the," "Rabbi, the," "Priest, the"
- **Line 47:** "Gay, the," "Straight, the"
- **Line 48:** "privileged, the," "homeless, the"
- **Line 49:** "hear. They"
- **Line 51:** "Today, the"
- **Line 52:** "humankind. Come," "me, here"
- **Line 53:** "me, here"
- **Line 54:** "you, descendant"
- **Line 55:** "traveller, has"
- **Line 56:** "You, who," "name, you"
- **Line 57:** "Pawnee, Apache," "Seneca, you"
- **Line 58:** "Nation, who," "me, then"
- **Line 59:** "feet, left"
- **Line 60:** "seekers--desperate"
- **Line 62:** "You, the," "Turk, the," "Swede, the," "German, the"
- **Line 63:** "Ashanti, the," "Yoruba, the," "Kru, bought"
- **Line 64:** "Sold, stolen, arriving"
- **Line 66:** "Here, root"
- **Line 69:** "I, the," "Rock, I," "River, I"
- **Line 70:** "yours--your"
- **Line 71:** "faces, you"
- **Line 73:** "History, despite"
- **Line 74:** "unlived, and"
- **Line 75:** "courage, need"
- **Line 80:** "Women, children, men"
- **Line 83:** "need. Sculpt"
- **Line 89:** "fear, yoked"
- **Line 93:** "Here, on"
- **Line 96:** "Rock, the," "River, the," "Tree, your"
- **Line 101:** "eyes, into"
- **Line 102:** "face, your"

PERSONIFICATION

This poem relies heavily on personification. The speaker gives voice to the wisdom of nature by allowing it to speak for itself, as if it were a person. The Rock "cries out," the River "sings a beautiful song," and the Tree "speaks to humankind." In this poem, nature is not indifferent but rather invested in the survival of humanity, as the survival of humanity is tied up in the earth's own survival. The survival of earth and the survival of its inhabitants are too intertwined for the earth to allow humanity to ignore its needs any longer. The speaker isn't simply observing the state of the environment but instead allows the environment to say, as if it too were a person:

> Your armed struggles for profit
> Have left collars of waste upon
> My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.

By personifying the River and giving it human attributes (not only a voice and a perspective, but a "breast"), the poem suggests that the relationship between that of humanity and the earth should not be one of ownership and exploitation, but that of the relationship between one living, sentient being and anothe—equal, respectful, and harmonious.

While the Rock, the River, and the Tree are personified in obvious ways, even the horizon is personified, though more subtly; it is given agency, as it:

> [...] leans forward
> Offering [humanity] space [...]

The poem implies that by treating the earth as a living, complex being rather than just as a myriad of resources that might be exploited for profit, humanity will have entered into a more symbiotic relationship with the earth, one in which the earth will make room for the continued evolution of human beings.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-13:** "But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully, / Come, you may stand upon my / Back and face your distant destiny, / But seek no haven in my shadow. / I will give you no more hiding place down here."
- **Lines 21-22:** "The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me, / But do not hide your face."
- **Lines 24-25:** "A River sings a beautiful song, / Come rest here by my side."
- **Lines 30-31:** "collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast."
- **Lines 32-36:** "Yet, today I call you to my riverside, / If you will study war no more. Come, / Clad in peace and I will sing the songs / The Creator gave to me when I and the / Tree and the stone were one."
- **Line 40:** "The River sings and sings on."
- **Line 42:** "The singing River and the wise Rock."
- **Line 50:** "The speaking of the Tree."
- **Lines 51-53:** "Today, the first and last of every Tree / Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the River. / Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River."
- **Lines 66-70:** "Here, root yourselves beside me. / I am the Tree planted by the River, / Which will not be moved. / I,

the Rock, I the River, I the Tree / I am yours"
- **Lines 91-92:** "The horizon leans forward, / Offering you space to place new steps of change"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is one of several devices used to draw readers' attention to certain images and make the poem sound more musical. Remember that this poem was written to be read aloud, and the use of sonic devices like alliteration keep the poem feeling dramatic and interesting throughout.

For example, note the rich alliteration of the first stanza, with "Marked the mastodon," "dinosaur [...] dry tokens," and "doom [...] dust." The poem feels forceful and unified thanks to these alliterative moments. Alliteration continues into the next stanza as well, with the hard, harsh /c/ sounds of "cries," "clearly," and "come" reflecting the loud, passionate call of the "Rock" to humanity.

In line 11, the thudding /d/ sound returns in "distant destiny," adding weight and emphasis to this phrase referencing humanity's future. Thanks to alliteration, it's difficult for the reader to separate these words; they become bound together in a way that the reader is unlikely to remember the word "destiny" without also thinking of the word "distant." (This is an effect reinforced by consonance as well, with the /st/ and /n/ sounds also repeating in both words.)

Other times, alliteration provides a kind of propulsive force for a line or even an entire section of the poem. Take lines 30-35:

> Have left collars of waste upon
> My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
> Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
> If you will study war no more. Come,
> Clad in peace and I will sing the songs
> The Creator gave [...]

The recurrence of hard /c/ sounds throughout these lines is spaced out enough to not feel overwhelming or obvious, but it creates a subtle thread that pulls the reader along.

Oftentimes there are multiple alliterative sounds happening at once, such as in lines 37-39, where there are repeated /b/, /s/, and /n/ sounds at the beginning of words:

> Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
> Brow and when you yet knew you still
> Knew nothing.

Shared sounds add to the richness of the language, making the speaker's declarations feel powerful and elevated. (Again, the effect here is bolstered by consonance, and specifically sibilance—the /s/ sound repeating in "cynicism" and "across.")

Finally, alliteration can be used to imply relationships between words. In lines 60-61, for example, "gain" and "gold" are connected through both alliteration and parallelism:

> Other seekers—desperate for gain,
> Starving for gold.

Here, both words refer to human greed.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Rock," "River,"
- **Line 3:** "Marked," "mastodon"
- **Line 4:** "dinosaur," "dry"
- **Line 7:** "doom"
- **Line 8:** "dust"
- **Line 9:** "cries," "clearly"
- **Line 10:** "Come"
- **Line 11:** "distant destiny"
- **Line 14:** "little lower"
- **Line 17:** "lain," "long"
- **Line 19:** "spilling"
- **Line 20:** "slaughter"
- **Line 23:** "wall," "world"
- **Line 24:** "sings," "song"
- **Line 27:** "strangely," "proud"
- **Line 28:** "perpetually," "siege"
- **Line 29:** "struggles," "profit"
- **Line 30:** "collars"
- **Line 31:** "currents"
- **Line 32:** "call"
- **Line 33:** "Come"
- **Line 34:** "Clad," "sing," "songs"
- **Line 35:** "Creator"
- **Line 37:** "Before," "cynicism," "bloody," "sear"
- **Line 38:** "Brow," "knew"
- **Line 39:** "Knew nothing"
- **Line 41:** "respond"
- **Line 42:** "River," "Rock"
- **Line 46:** "Priest"
- **Line 47:** "Preacher"
- **Line 48:** "privileged"
- **Line 54:** "passed"
- **Line 55:** "paid"
- **Line 59:** "Forced," "feet"
- **Line 60:** "gain"
- **Line 61:** "gold"
- **Line 64:** "Sold," "stolen"
- **Line 69:** "Rock," "River"
- **Line 70:** "Passages," "paid"
- **Line 83:** "Private"
- **Line 84:** "public"
- **Line 85:** "hearts"
- **Line 86:** "holds"

- **Line 88:** "forever"
- **Line 89:** "fear"
- **Line 92:** "space," "steps"
- **Line 96:** "Rock," "River"
- **Line 97:** "Midas," "mendicant"
- **Line 98:** "mastodon"
- **Line 103:** "say simply"

PARALLELISM

"On the Pulse of Morning" uses parallelism frequently to emphasize key points and to illustrate the relationships between ideas.

For example, in lines 3-4 ("Marked the mastodon, / The dinosaur, who left dry tokens"), it's clear that the mastodon and dinosaurs are being equated to each other through the use of a parallel grammatical structure—not because they were particularly similar, but because they have both been extinct for a long time. The "Marked" at the start of line 3 applies to both creatures. Here, as in many other instances of parallelism in the poem, the speaker also uses asyndeton, omitting conjunctions and creating a closer relationship between the phrases at hand.

There are several forms of parallelism present in this poem. One such example is that of antithesis, which appears in lines 11-12:

> [...] face your distant destiny,
> But seek no haven in my shadow.

Unlike the previous example, where parallelism was showing the similarity between the mastodon and the dinosaur, the use of antithesis here helps to illustrate the *difference* between facing the future and looking away from the past. The use of antithesis allows the speaker to make the paradoxical point that in order for humanity to face its future, it must first face its history.

Sometimes parallelism allows the speaker to make a kind of progression, where the first clause in a parallel grammatical structure is meant to illustrate something that is made more explicit in the second clause. This happens in lines 14-18:

> You, created only a little lower than
> The angels, have crouched too long in
> The bruising darkness,
> Have lain too long
> Face down in ignorance.

In this case, the clause "have crouched too long in / the bruising darkness" is descriptive—the meaning is inferred through the use of imagery; while the second clause, "Have lain too long / Face down in ignorance" is explicit. It's clear that "the bruising darkness" is, in fact, ignorance.

Similar parallelism occurs in lines 30-31:

> Have left collars of waste upon
> My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.

The shared grammatical structure of the lines reflects that they are talking about the same thing: the way "armed struggles for profit" pollute the natural environment. The same can be said for the parallelism of lines 60-61, where "desperate"/"Starving" and "gain"/"gold" serve as synonyms describing people's thirst for wealth (as previously noted in this guide, the alliteration on the /g/ sound further reinforces the connection between the ideas here):

> [...] desperate for gain,
> Starving for gold.

Later, in lines 82-84, the speaker instructs humanity on what to do with "the dream":

> Mold it into the shape of your most
> Private need. Sculpt it into
> The image of your most public self.

In this case, the speaker is actually equating two things which appear on the surface to be very different: a "private need" and a "public self." This parallelism seems to imply that the distinction between private and public (or the personal and the political) is not so black and white as one might think. The parallelism here also suggests that people must enact the lessons of the poem on both an internal and external level—that the poem's teachings apply to what people do for themselves and what they do for others.

The poem also contains an instance of epistrophe, which is a kind of parallelism:

> [...] Come to me, here beside the River.
> Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.

The repetition of this phrase has a grounding effect, illustrating the nature of the Tree's advice: that by rooting themselves by the River, which represents unity, humanity may find the strength to grow and ultimately survive.

Note: while anaphora is technically another form of parallelism, this device is discussed separately in this guide.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "the mastodon, / The dinosaur,"
- **Lines 10-12:** "you may stand upon my / Back and face your distant destiny, / But seek no haven in my shadow."
- **Lines 15-18:** "have crouched too long in / The bruising

darkness, / Have lain too long / Face down in ignorance."
- **Lines 30-31:** "Have left collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast."
- **Lines 52-53:** "Come to me, here beside the River. / Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River."
- **Lines 56-58:** "You, who gave me my first name, you / Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you / Cherokee Nation"
- **Lines 60-61:** "desperate for gain, / Starving for gold."
- **Lines 62-63:** "You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot ... / You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, "
- **Lines 82-84:** "Mold it into the shape of your most / Private need. Sculpt it into / The image of your most public self."
- **Lines 88-90:** "Do not be wedded forever / To fear, yoked eternally / To brutishness."
- **Lines 97-98:** "No less to Midas than the mendicant. / No less to you now than the mastodon then."
- **Lines 101-102:** "into your sister's eyes, into / Your brother's face"
- **Line 102:** ", your country"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used a few times in this poem, creating moments of forward momentum and emphasis. For example, in lines 56-58, the speaker is directly addressing a series of specific Indigenous nations who lived in what is now the United States, before it was the United States:

> You, who gave me my first name, you
> Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you
> Cherokee Nation, who rested with me [...]

In this case, anaphora shows up in the repetition of the pronoun "You" at the beginning of each successive clause. The effect of anaphora here is that though the speaker is listing off different nations, the pronoun "you" stays the same, creating a relationship between nations by way of the fact that they are all being addressed together. This anaphora picks up again in lines 62 and 63, as the speaker again addresses various groups of people:

> You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot...
> You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought

Again the speaker is using the pronoun "you" to address particular groups even while also addressing a general audience. The effect of listing is that even groups who are not specifically named are implied; the reader, too, may feel implicated.

Later, anaphora functions similarly in lines 69-70, with the repetition of "I, the" interspersing each of the aspects of earth. The implication is that even though each aspect is being named separately, they are each part of the "I" that is speaking—and are all a part of the listener's country:

> I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree
> I am yours [...]

Finally, the anaphora (and parallelism) of lines 97-98 reflects the relationship between the phrases at hand:

> No less to Midas than the mendicant.
> No less to you now than the mastodon then.

The "country" belongs as much to the rich as to the poor, the first line implies, while the second says it belongs as much to the poem's listeners as it did to the "mastodon" many thousands of years ago. The message, reinforced by anaphora, is one of unity and shared responsibilty.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A Rock, A River, A Tree"
- **Lines 56-58:** "You, who gave me my first name, you / Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you / Cherokee Nation, who rested with me"
- **Lines 62-63:** "You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot ... / You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru,"
- **Lines 69-70:** "I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree / I am yours"
- **Line 97:** "No less to Midas"
- **Line 98:** "No less to you"

ASSONANCE

Assonance contributes to the music of the poem and, like alliteration and consonance, draws readers' attention to specific moments. For example, in lines 7-8, the assonance of the /oo/ sound in "doom" and "gloom," combined with the consonance of the /m/ sound at the end of both words, results in a cross rhyme:

> Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
> Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

The rhyme insinuates a relationship between the words "doom" and "gloom." The latter word means darkness, which is symbolic of ignorance in the poem. The message here, reinforced by assonance, is thus that ignorance and doom are connected.

Later, in lines 43-48 (So say the [...] homeless, the Teacher."), the assonance of /oo/ and /ee/ sounds at the ends of lines, in concert with consonance, results in three sets of rhyming couplets. The effect of this uncharacteristic rhyme scheme in the midst of a long poem that is otherwise, for the most part, unrhymed, is again a sense of a relationship between these particular words. One might ask, what does "the Jew" and "the

Sioux" have in common? What about "the Greek" and "the Sheikh?" Or "the Preacher" and "the Teacher"? The poem goes on to answer this question explicitly, using more assonance: "They all hear / The speaking of the Tree."

In line 92, assonance of long /ay/ sounds (along with consonance and sibilance) directly contributes to a sense of rhythm, as does the use of (imperfect) iambic pentameter:

> Of- | fering | you space | to place | new steps | of change.

In a poem that otherwise eschews conventions of meter and rhyme, such a line is notable. There is something measured and musical in the notion of small, progressive steps. The poem wants the audience to feel a sense of balance and harmony in imagining such progress.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "tokens"
- **Line 5:** "sojourn"
- **Line 7:** "doom"
- **Line 8:** "gloom"
- **Line 9:** "clearly," "forcefully"
- **Line 11:** "destiny"
- **Line 23:** "Across," "wall"
- **Line 27:** "strangely made"
- **Line 29:** "profit"
- **Line 30:** "collars," "upon"
- **Line 33:** "war," "more"
- **Line 35:** "Creator gave"
- **Line 43:** "Jew"
- **Line 44:** "Sioux"
- **Line 45:** "Greek"
- **Line 46:** "Priest," "Sheikh"
- **Line 47:** "Gay," "Straight," "Preacher"
- **Line 48:** "Teacher"
- **Line 50:** "speaking," "Tree"
- **Lines 51-52:** "every Tree / Speaks"
- **Line 54:** "passed"
- **Line 55:** "traveller," "has"
- **Line 56:** "gave," "name"
- **Line 57:** "Pawnee, Apache," "Seneca"
- **Line 58:** "Cherokee," "rested," "me," "then"
- **Line 59:** "bloody feet, left me"
- **Line 60:** "seekers"
- **Line 62:** "Scot"
- **Line 63:** "bought"
- **Line 64:** "Sold," "stolen"
- **Line 77:** "day breaking"
- **Line 92:** "space," "place," "change"
- **Line 99:** "day"
- **Line 100:** "grace"
- **Line 102:** "face"
- **Line 103:** "say"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used frequently throughout the poem, often overlapping with alliteration and assonance. The effect of all these repeated sounds is a subtle sense of sonic continuity, which makes the poem more pleasurable to read or experience aloud. For example, take a look at lines 2-8:

> Hosts to species long since departed,
> Marked the mastodon,
> The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
> Of their sojourn here
> [...]
> Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
> Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

In addition to the alliteration previously described in his guide, these lines feature intense repetition of the /t/, /d/, and /s/ sounds. The sibilance is particularly clear, lending the lines a hushed, whispery quality that suggests a sort of reverence for the ancient scene being described.

This quiet spell is then broken in lines 9-12, as the hard /c/ sound bursts in with the Rock's call to humanity. The back and forth in this stanza between the consonance of hard /c/ sounds, which happens in the back of the throat, and sibilance, which happens in the front of the mouth, between teeth, seems to subtly echo the speaker's sentiments about looking back and looking forward:

> [...] the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
> Come, you may stand upon my
> Back and face your distant destiny,
> But seek [...]

The intense consonance of the individual phrase "distant destiny," which in fact uses the exact same consonant sounds, also draws readers' attention to these words—and thus to humanity's future.

By contrast the repetition of /l/ sounds in the following stanza ("only," "little," "lower," "angels," "long," "lain," "long") has a slow and stationary effect, fitting the description of humanity's long history of hiding from the truth. Then, in lines 19-20, the consonance of /s/ and /l/ sounds combines with one-off /t/ and /p/ sounds to make it seem as though the speaker is bitterly spitting out these words, which describe humanity's tendency towards violence:

> Your mouths spilling words
> Armed for slaughter.

To that end, the same sounds can have different effects depending on where they appear in the poem. For example, in lines 23-25, sibilance helps to create the soothing sound of the River's song:

> Across the wall of the world,
> A River sings a beautiful song,
> Come rest here by my side.

Yet the sibilance in line 37 feels much more sinister:

> Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your

Finally, consonance, combined with assonance, also helps to create infrequent rhyme, such as the rhyme between "Scot" and "bought" in lines 62-63. Another example is lines 73 and 75, where the imperfect rhyme between "pain" and "again" is actually only held together by consonance; the vowel sounds don't match, but there is enough of a resonance for it to feel like a rhyme.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Rock," "River," "Tree"
- **Line 2:** "Hosts," "species," "since," "departed"
- **Line 3:** "Marked," "mastodon"
- **Line 4:** "dinosaur," "dry"
- **Line 5:** "sojourn"
- **Line 7:** "broad," "alarm," "doom"
- **Line 8:** "lost," "gloom," "dust"
- **Line 9:** "Rock cries," "us," "clearly," "forcefully"
- **Line 10:** "Come," "stand"
- **Line 11:** "Back," "face," "distant destiny"
- **Line 12:** "seek," "shadow"
- **Line 14:** "only," "little lower"
- **Line 15:** "angels," "long"
- **Line 17:** "lain," "long"
- **Line 19:** "spilling"
- **Line 20:** "slaughter"
- **Line 23:** "Across"
- **Line 24:** "sings," "song"
- **Line 25:** "rest," "side"
- **Line 26:** "bordered"
- **Line 27:** "Delicate," "strangely made proud"
- **Line 28:** "thrusting perpetually," "siege"
- **Line 37:** "cynicism," "sear across"
- **Line 43:** "Jew"
- **Line 44:** "Sioux"
- **Line 45:** "Greek"
- **Line 46:** "Sheikh"
- **Line 47:** "Preacher"
- **Line 48:** "Teacher"
- **Line 57:** "Apache," "Seneca"
- **Line 58:** "Cherokee"
- **Line 60:** "seekers"
- **Line 62:** "Turk," "Scot"
- **Line 63:** "Kru," "bought"
- **Line 69:** "Rock," "River," "Tree"
- **Line 73:** "pain"
- **Line 75:** "again"
- **Line 92:** "space," "place," "steps"
- **Line 96:** "Rock," "River," "Tree," "country"

DIACOPE

There are several instances of diacope in this poem. Generally speaking, they add dramatic emphasis by allowing the speaker to repeat important words. For example, take lines 37-39:

> Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
> Brow and when you yet knew you still
> Knew nothing.

Line 38 makes it sound like whatever knowledge humanity had will be revealed in the third line, but what is revealed in the third line is paradoxical: the only knowledge humanity ever had was of its own ignorance.

Another example of diacope follows directly after, in line 40: "The River sings and sings on." This example is less complex; it mostly just illustrates the River's consistency. Likewise, later in the poem, when the speaker describes humanity saying good morning "simply / Very simply" (lines 103-104), the repetition of the word "simply" is, in fact, quite simple. It emphasizes the weight that's been lifted, and allows the reader to feel the sense of relief that will settle on the world once humanity has committed to letting go of fear and cynicism.

In line 49, after having listed various groups of people from all walks of life, the speaker says "They hear. They all hear / The speaking of the Tree." In this case the repeated words are interrupted by one additional word: "all." Because only one word varies, it is the varying word that actually ends up being emphasized. The speaker is making it very clear that no one will be left out of the Tree's call to humanity to come sit beside the River. In contrast, across lines 86 and 87, it is the repeated word which is emphasized:

> Each new hour holds new chances
> For new beginnings.

The repetition of the word "new," in this case, illuminates the inherent possibility of each and every moment.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Lines 38-40:** "Brow and when you yet knew you still /

Knew nothing. / The River sings and sings on."
- **Line 49:** "They hear. They all hear"
- **Lines 86-87:** "Each new hour holds new chances / For new beginnings."
- **Lines 103-104:** "And say simply / Very simply"

METAPHOR

This poem utilizes a great deal of figurative language to address humanity's history of hiding from truth and responsibility, and its need to confront this history in order to ensure its survival.

Lines 19-20, for example, include a fairly straightforward metaphor:

> Your mouths spilling words
> Armed for slaughter.

In this case, the mouths and words are literal, but the description of the words as "armed for slaughter" is figurative—that is, the image conveys the violent nature of the way human beings talk to each other. Furthermore, the word "spilling" is evocative of a container that is overflowing, suggesting that humanity is full to the brim of this kind of violence (the enjambment here mimics the line's content, those "words" spilling across the line break).

Similarly, a few lines later, the speaker describes the "wall of the world." This is another very straightforward metaphor; the speaker is saying that humanity has created a world, or reality, that ultimately functions as a wall separating human beings from each other and from the innate wisdom of the earth.

In addition to several fairly straightforward metaphors, there is one extended metaphor in the poem, which is first introduced in lines 64-65, when the speaker describes enslaved Africans arriving in America "on a nightmare / Praying for a dream." This seems like a simple metaphor at first: the nightmare represents the hellish reality of enslavement. The dream represents being lifted out of dehumanizing circumstances and into a world where such horrors do not exist. The metaphor becomes extended when the speaker returns to the idea of the dream in lines 78-79, telling humanity, and America in particular, to "Give birth again / To the dream." The speaker then goes on to say:

> Women, children, men,
> Take [the dream] into the palms of your hands.
> Mold it into the shape of your most
> Private need. Sculpt it into
> The image of your most public self.

The speaker wants human beings to understand the malleability of the dream, the power that each and every person possesses, the role they can play in shaping it. Here the dream takes on the characteristics of clay—it can be held in the hands, it can be molded and sculpted. While shaping the future of a country or the world might feel daunting, the speaker illustrates that each person has the responsibility and the power to take part in this undertaking.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "Your mouths spilling words / Armed for slaughter."
- **Line 23:** "the wall of the world"
- **Lines 30-31:** "collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast."
- **Lines 37-38:** "cynicism was a bloody sear across your / Brow "
- **Lines 64-65:** "arriving on a nightmare / Praying for a dream."
- **Lines 78-79:** "Give birth again / To the dream."
- **Line 81:** "Take it into the palms of your hands."
- **Lines 82-84:** "Mold it into the shape of your most / Private need. Sculpt it into / The image of your most public self."

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used a handful of times throughout the poem, often in service of parallelism. The very first line of the poem contains asyndeton; there is no coordinating conjunction between "A River" and "A Tree." The result of the lack of coordinating conjunction here is that each of these aspects of the earth seem to maintain their separate identities while also comprising a list of things that, in the next line, are revealed to be "hosts to species long since departed."

Following this, asyndeton appears in lines 3-4, this time in service of parallelism. The choice of a comma instead of a coordinating conjunction alters the rhythm of the passage while also allowing the reader to make the connection between the mastodon and the dinosaur themselves.

Similarly, in line 48, there is no coordinating conjunction at the end of the long list of groups the speaker has mentioned:

> So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew
> The African and Native American, the Sioux,
> The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek
> The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
> The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
> The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.

By not concluding with "the homeless, and the Teacher," the speaker eschews a sense of completion. In other words, one gets the sense that this list is *representative* rather than *exhaustive*—to actually include every single group who can hear the Tree's message would take too long.

In addition to asyndeton, the poem also employs polysyndeton

in lines 34-36; rather than omitting coordinating conjunctions, the speaker uses a coordinating conjunction where one might traditionally expect to see punctuation:

> Clad in peace and I will sing the songs
> The Creator gave to me when I and the
> Tree and the stone were one.

In contrast to the opening of the poem, where asyndeton allowed the Rock, the River, and the Tree to each maintain its individual identity, the use of polysyndeton here encourages the reader to not only think of these elements as parts of a whole, but to *experience* them as "one."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A Rock, A River, A Tree"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Marked the mastodon, / The dinosaur,"
- **Line 9:** "clearly, forcefully,"
- **Lines 15-18:** "have crouched too long in / The bruising darkness, / Have lain too long / Face down in ignorance."
- **Lines 30-31:** "Have left collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast."
- **Lines 43-48:** "So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew / The African and Native American, the Sioux, / The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek / The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh, / The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher, / The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher."
- **Lines 60-61:** "desperate for gain, / Starving for gold."
- **Lines 62-65:** "You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot ... / You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought / Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare / Praying for a dream."
- **Line 80:** "Women, children, men,"
- **Lines 88-90:** "Do not be wedded forever / To fear, yoked eternally / To brutishness."
- **Lines 95-96:** "the / Rock, the River, the Tree, your country"
- **Lines 101-102:** "And into your sister's eyes, into / Your brother's face, your country"

VOCABULARY

Mastodon (Line 3) - An extinct mammal of the elephant family.

Dry tokens (Lines 4-6) - Referring to fossils, or preserved remains, of extinct animals, be they bones or imprints in stone, petrified wood, etc.

Sojourn (Line 5) - A temporary stay somewhere.

Hastening doom (Line 7) - A reference to the mass extinction of the dinosaurs and mastodon.

Haven (Line 12) - Shelter or safe place.

Perpetually (Line 28) - Constantly; never-ending and changeless.

Under seige (Line 28) - A state of being attacked.

Debris (Line 31) - Scattered pieces of something that's been destroyed or discarded.

Clad (Line 34) - Another word for dressed or clothed.

Cynicism (Lines 37-38) - An inclination towards distrusting the motives of other people.

Yoked (Lines 89-90) - Harnessed together, as in oxen or other farm animals who are made to pull loads in pairs.

Brutishness (Lines 89-90) - Behavior which is characteristic of a brute (or beast); cruel, violent, or stupid.

Midas (Line 97) - Midas is a figure from Greek mythology who is known for turning everything he touched into gold.

Mendicant (Line 97) - A beggar; someone whose primary form of survival is begging.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On the Pulse of Morning" is a free verse poem, comprised of 34 stanzas of varying lengths—from eight lines to just one. In this way, the poem expands and contracts throughout. That the single-line stanzas are allotted space before and after them lends these lines a sense of power and authority. Take line 66, which stands apart from the stanzas that surround it:

> Here, root yourselves beside me.

This statement feels bold and firm, a call for listeners to feel connected to their country.

In contrast, both of the stanzas listing out various kinds of people (i.e., "So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew" and "You, who gave me my first name, you / Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, You") are some of the longest in the poem. With this length, it is as though the poem itself is expanding to contain *all* facets of humanity, to invite everyone to "root" themselves in the land.

Also note how Angelou uses stanza breaks to create a kind of logical progression. The poem is meant to be persuasive, and, as such, is structured like an argument. For instance, the Rock, the River, and the Tree are introduced at the beginning of the poem, and then the poem goes on to give voice to each of these elements in the order they were introduced. There is a clear progression of ideas which concludes tidily in the final stanza. In this way, the poem emulates the speeches of activists, politicians, and religious leaders. It is meant to be very clear and accessible, and to inspire in its audience a sense of responsibility and hope.

METER

As it is written in free verse, the poem does not utilize meter. The lack of meter contributes to the rather loose structure of the poem, which is guided by ideas rather than the constraints of language. This, in turn, contributes to the poem's accessibility; it was written with a broad audience in mind, and indeed, part of the appeal of Angelou's poetry is that anyone can read it and get a clear sense of what she is trying to convey. The language feels natural, without any rigidity that would inhibit the poem's performance out loud.

There is one line in the poem that utilizes meter, however. This is line 92:

> Offering | you space | to place | new steps | of change.

The meter here is not quite iambic pentameter due to the extra stressed foot at the start of the line, but it comes very close. The result is that this line feels more balanced than the ones surrounding it, with a sense of beauty that comes from the rhythm created by meter. This is fitting, as the speaker is talking about letting go of a "brutish" past in favor of a future where human beings are courageous enough to change.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse and as such does not have a rhyme scheme. This keeps things feeling interesting and unpredictable throughout. There are a few moments of rhyme in the poem, however, and the lack of a predictable overall pattern of rhyme makes these moments stand out. Here are a few examples:

- At the end of the first stanza, there is a cross rhyme between the words "doom" and "gloom." This rhyme is fairly subtle due to its positioning, but it suggests a relationship between the "doom" of a species and the "gloom" (or darkness) of ignorance.
- In line 33, there is an internal rhyme with the words "war" and "more." Here the rhyme lends a sense of finality to the speaker's statement—that by letting go of its preoccupation with war, humanity may turn a fresh page, leaving behind a violent future in favor of harmony between countries, peoples, and the earth.
- In lines 62-63 ("You, the Turk [...] the Kru, bought"), there is an end rhyme between the words "Scot" and "bought." This particular rhyme reflects the hierarchical relationship between groups of people who settled in America willingly and enslaved Africans who were brought to America against their will.
- There is an imperfect rhyme (also known as a slant, half, or near rhyme) in lines 73 and 75 between the words "pain" and "again." The imperfection of the rhyme (the consonant /n/ sound matches but the vowel sounds do not) is effective as it almost seems to suggest the uncoupling of these two words if humanity is able to face its history with courage.
- The presence of assonance and consonance in lines 92-93 ("Offering you space [...] this fine day") creates a noticeable rhythm that is absent in other parts of the poem.

Finally, the poem also contains a stanza which *does* utilize an actual rhyme scheme. Lines 43-48 (So say the [...] homeless, the Teacher.") follow a very straightforward pattern of:

AABBCC

The simplicity of the rhyme scheme—three couplets—has a childlike quality to it, perhaps evoking the innocence of children who have not yet learned to discriminate against each other based on identity. The rhyme between these disparate groups seems to suggest that they are more similar than they are different.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "On the Pulse of Morning" is someone who is concerned for the future of humanity and in particular the future of America. This person has a great deal of authority; they understand American history and the way many of its atrocities have been glossed over and left unacknowledged, unaddressed. They understand that in the grand scheme of things, human survival is not guaranteed.

Additionally, the speaker is someone who is comfortable giving voice to the wisdom of the natural world. They are someone who respects and reveres the natural world, and someone who believes that by paying attention to the lessons of nature, humanity can build a stronger and brighter future. To that end, nature itself can be considered another speaker in the poem, as the "Rock," "River," and "Tree"—all symbolic representations of the earth and, specifically, America—exhort humanity to listen to their teachings throughout the poem.

While the speaker should not be confused with the poet, it is worth considering that this poem was written specifically to be read aloud at a presidential inauguration, and therefore is meant to address the nation—a broad audience of many backgrounds and beliefs. Angelou's own role as a prominent activist in the civil rights movements gave her the unique authority to address the nation about the need for progress and change in regard to economic and environmental policy.

SETTING

Very broadly, the setting for this poem is the earth itself. The

poem begins by describing the earth as home to creatures that inhabited it millions of years ago—flashing all the way back to the age of dinosaurs and mastodons—and then quickly shifts to the present, to the here and "now," "today."

The poem deals predominantly in figurative language; the Rock, the River, and the Tree each represent aspects of the earth—they are not *literal* descriptions of any specific place. Yet, late in the poem, it becomes clear that the Rock, the River, and the Tree also represent America more specifically. For this reason, it's not unreasonable to think of the setting of this poem as America—though not any physical place located in America so much the idea of America itself.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou was part of the Harlem Writers Guild, a group which supports and honors writers of the African Diaspora. Her work was heavily influenced by the work of other civil rights activists, especially Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and also later by the loss of many of these figures to racial violence. Angelou wrote extensively about the situation of Black Americans, from slavery to the fight for equal rights. For Angelou and her contemporaries, there was very little divide between literature and activism; art in every form was one more way to reflect, represent, and advocate for Black people and to protest the injustices of racism.

Some critics argue that Angelou's work is best understood as belonging to an oral tradition. Many indigenous African cultures (as well as other non-European cultures) used oral forms rather than written to pass on information, history, and stories from generation to generation. Additionally, under slavery, Black Americans were generally not permitted to read or write as slave-owners feared education would provide slaves the opportunity to organize their own liberation. For this reason, the oral traditions of their African ancestors continued to play a strong role in the culture of many Black Americans even after they had been cut off from their origins by slavery.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In addition to being a poet, autobiographical writer, playwright, actress, singer, dancer, and composer, Angelou was also a prominent civil rights activist and served on two different U.S. presidential committees.

Bill Clinton asked her to write and perform a poem at his presidential inauguration in January 1993. Clinton's campaign was successful largely due to his focus on reinvigorating the U.S. economy; in his inaugural speech, he claimed that "a new season of American renewal has begun. To renew America, we must be bold." Angelou supported Clinton's vision for America, and later said of her poem that her intention was to draw attention to the ways human beings are more similar to each other than they are different.

Her poem is also in direct correspondence with the only other poem read for a United State presidential inauguration. In January 1961, Robert Frost read his poem "The Gift Outright" at John F. Kennedy's inauguration. His poem begins, "The land was ours before we were the land's." Angelou's poem argues the opposite, that the earth has a history that stretches back far beyond the arrival of human beings, and that if human beings hope to avoid the fate of the mastodon and the dinosaurs, they need to reevaluate their relationship not only to the earth, but to each other.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Gift Outright — Another inaugural poem, this one by Robert Frost, which was performed at John F. Kennedy's inauguration, and with which Angelou's poem is in conversation. (https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/the-gift-outright-by-robert-frost)
- Maya Angelou's Biography — Learn more about the poet at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou)
- Poetry and Civil Rights — An introduction to the poetry of the Civil Rights Movement. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146367/poetry-and-the-civil-rights-movement)
- The Poem Out Loud — Watch a video recording of Maya Angelou's performance of "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59xGmHzxtZ4)
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" — An audio recording and written transcript of King Jr.'s famous civil rights speech, which Angelou references in the poem. (https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- Caged Bird
- Harlem Hopscotch
- Phenomenal Woman
- Still I Rise

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*On the Pulse of Morning*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Jul 2020. Web. 29 Sep 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*On the Pulse of Morning*." LitCharts LLC, July 8, 2020. Retrieved September 29, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/maya-angelou/on-the-pulse-of-morning.