

Woman Work



SUMMARY

The speaker lists out the many chores she has on her plate: she has to care for the kids, patch the clothes, clean the floor, and shop for the food. After all that, she has to cook, change the baby's diaper, feed the people who are visiting, tend to the garden, iron the shirts, get the kids dressed, cut the sugar cane, clean up the hut she's living in, check on the people who are sick, and pick the cotton.

The speaker appeals to the natural world for relief, calling on the sun to shine down her, the rain to gently fall on her, and the dewdrops to once again cool her forehead.

She calls on the storm's strongest winds to blow her away from this place and across the sky until she can rest again.

She calls on the white snowflakes to softly blanket her, their touch like cold kisses, so that tonight she can get some rest.

All these elements of nature—the sun, the rain, and the arc of the sky, the mountains, seas, forests, the shining stars, and the moonlight—are the only things that the speaker feels truly belong to her.

this labor is never-ending: the speaker's life is a constant series of things she's "got" to do.

In the end, all that she can "call [her] own" is the fleeting beauty of nature: the rain, sun, snow, and dew, none of which expect anything from her. In the end, the poem paints a picture of the endless, grueling labor that Black women have done and continue to do for others, and which is all too often ignored or minimized by the rest of society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30



THE COMFORT OF NATURE

In a world that claims to own Black women and their work, all the speaker of the poem can "call [her] own" is the beauty of the natural world. The poem implies that nature can offer a sense of relief, peace, and belonging for the speaker and for other women who have been forced into backbreaking and unjust labor over the centuries.

While unfair and incessant demands rob the speaker of her time and independence, she can still find consolation in things like the warm sunshine and the refreshing rain. The speaker says that "all that [she] can call [her] own" is nature, which exists outside of the "hut" in which she cooks, cleans, and cares for children.

Nature is one thing that lays no claim to the speaker's energy or time. In fact, nature seems to work for the speaker, who calls on it to "cool [her] brow" and grant her "rest." Nature thus represents freedom for the speaker, who imagines herself essentially dissolving into its beauty. She wants to "float across the sky," for example, and envisions herself covered with snow.

While these images bring a sense of relief and peace, they also might make readers think of death—of the speaker's body buried under the ground and her soul in heaven. In this reading, the poem implies that only in death—and, through death, becoming one with nature—can the speaker truly escape from the endless toil of her earthly work.

The poem's vision of nature is thus both consoling and bleak: on the one hand, the speaker finds relief and comfort in nature's refreshing beauty. On the other, it's possible that she feels as if she'll never truly be free until she's returned to nature in death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30



THEMES



BLACK WOMEN'S LABOR AND FREEDOM

"Woman Work" describes the pressure that women, and Black women in particular, face to work and care for other people. The speaker must cook, clean, pick cotton, cut sugar cane, and take care of everyone around her, finding brief respite only in the freedom offered by the natural world.

Through the speaker's experiences, the poem illustrates the way that society's relentless demands on Black women's time and energy can leave them with little, if anything, to call their own.

The speaker begins by listing out a series of domestic chores that have traditionally fall to women—like caring for children, cooking, and cleaning—before transitioning to details that specifically evoke slavery. As the speaker describes how she must "pick cotton" and "cut" sugar "cane," the poem places modern Black women's unpaid, often thankless labor within a vital historical context. By referencing both enslavement and traditional housework, the poem implies that society has long claimed Black women's work, their bodies, and their very lives.

Indeed, the speaker seems to sacrifice her own needs and desires even as she must always "see about the sick," cook for "company," and "tend" children. All of her time is filled with other people's demands, and the poem further suggests that



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*I've got the ...
... food to shop*

The title “Woman Work” lets the reader know right away what this poem will be about: women's labor. And in the opening lines, the speaker dives right in by describing some of the work that she has to do: she must take care of the children, patch up clothes, clean the floor, and shop for food. All of these are domestic chores that women have, historically, been expected to do without pay or recognition.

The poetic devices that Angelou uses here evoke the drudgery of this work. For example, the [anaphora](#) of these lines (that repetition of “The” over and over again) makes the list feel monotonous and relentless. Each line also ends with a verb (“tend,” “mend,” “mop,” and “shop”). This broader [parallelism](#) adds to the sense of an unending routine—that the speaker has to do all of this work, day after day.

The list also uses [asyndeton](#): the speaker omits conjunctions (like “and”) that might typically connect list items together. This speeds the poem up and also suggests that when the speaker completes one task, she must quickly go on to the next, with no time to rest.

Adding to that sense of relentlessness is the poem's steady rhythm. While the poem doesn't stick to one [meter](#) overall, it does very often repeat the exact same, or close to the same, pattern in two lines in a row. This whole first section follows an [iambic meter](#), for the most part—a bouncy rhythm consisting of unstressed beats followed by stressed beats (da-DUM). Take lines 2-3:

The floor to mop
The food to shop

Even the sounds of the words themselves here are repetitive, as in the [alliteration](#) of “floor” and “food.” The quick, simple [rhyme scheme](#) makes the lines feel monotonous and predictable: “tend” rhymes with “mend,” while “mop” rhymes with “shop,” creating an easy AABB pattern. The speaker knows exactly what she's expected to do, and goes through the motions quickly and efficiently.

LINES 5-10

*Then the chicken ...
... tots to dress*

The speaker continues to describe all the work she must do. In addition to taking care of the children, darning the clothes, cleaning, and shopping for food (as she recounted in the opening lines), she must fry the chicken, change the baby's diaper, feed the “company” or visitors, tend to the garden, iron

the shirts, and get the children dressed.

As this list accumulates, it becomes clear that the work the speaker must do is overwhelming and unending: the people around the speaker seem to demand all of her energy, time, and attention. The poem also suggests that the speaker is caring not only for her own family and children, but also for her extended family and maybe even other people's families as well.

For instance, when the speaker describes how she must feed “company,” or people visiting, this could be her own “company,” but it could also refer to people visiting a domestic employer. Likewise, the speaker's reference to dressing the “tots”—a [colloquial](#) term for children—could mean she's dressing her own children, but it could also mean she must take care of other people's children. In this reading, the speaker could be working as a nanny, housecleaner, or cook—jobs that have often fallen to women of color. Whether she's caring for her own family or someone else's, one thing is clear: the speaker must constantly and continuously work.

The poem continues its use of [anaphora](#) here, again starting line after line with the word “The.” It also continues to use [asyndeton](#), leaving out conjunctions in the list. This combination of anaphora and asyndeton drives the poem forward, much as the speaker must constantly work for other people without rest or pause.

The poem also repeats the phrase “I got,” in the slightly varied “I've got,” emphasizing how much the speaker has to do. This repetition introduces a subtle layer of [irony](#) into the poem: while the speaker lists everything she has “got” to do for other people, it also becomes clear how little time, energy, or attention she actually has (how much she has “got”) that is truly her own.

LINES 11-14

*The cane to ...
... cotton to pick.*

The speaker makes clear that she is not only expected to do grueling domestic labor: she must also do backbreaking work like cutting sugar cane and picking cotton. She also says that she must “clean up this hut,” suggesting that she lives in a kind of shack, and after all of this, she has to “see about the sick,” or try to care for unwell people within her community.

These lines specifically [allude](#) to slavery on cotton and sugar cane plantations throughout the American South and the Caribbean. (Black Americans also continued to pick cotton by hand for decades after the end of slavery, often as sharecroppers or for low wages.) The speaker's reference to living in a “hut” further suggests the dehumanizing conditions of slavery.

By evoking slavery alongside types of work that women do well into the present, the speaker makes clear that she's not talking about one person or one moment in time. Instead, the poem is

more broadly about the way that the world has long claimed Black women's labor, their bodies, and their very lives.

The speaker also makes clear that despite her constant, unending work, she's not seeing any big benefits. She lives in a "hut" or a kind of ramshackle house. The speaker does her best to take care of this space she does have, and to take care of everyone around her. Yet despite all her labor, she's left with almost nothing of her own.

Once again, the sounds of these lines add to their meaning and feeling. For example, listen to all the hard /k/ sounds that echo in words like "cane," "cut," "clean," "sick," "cotton," and "pick." This [consonance](#) is harsh and sharp, in turn evoking the toil of the speaker's daily life.

LINES 15-18

*Shine on me, ...
... my brow again.*

After the long opening stanza, the poem shifts. Now, the speaker calls on the natural world to give her rest and relief from her endless work.

As in the first part of the poem, these lines follow a [parallel structure](#), though here that structure itself changes:

- Before, almost every line *ended* with a verb indicating work the speaker must do, such as "fry" the chicken, "feed" the company, and "cut" the sugar cane.
- Here, each line *begins* with a verb, as the speaker asks the sun to "Shine" on her, the rain to "Rain" on her, and the "dewdrops" to "Fall" onto her forehead, in order to "cool [her] brow."

This subtle shift indicates that it is only in the natural world that the speaker can rest. In the presence of the sun, rain, and dew she is granted some relief as nature does the work instead of her.

The speaker's use of [apostrophe](#) in these lines is also striking: she addresses the "sunshine," "rain," and "dewdrops" directly, calling on them to shine and fall on her. Although the sun and rain can't be expected to reply, this direct address suggests that in a sense, the speaker feels most connected to these natural elements. They make no claim on her or on her labor.

The poem's form shifts here too, reflecting the shift away from the speaker's relentless work:

- For one thing, the [rhyme scheme](#) changes. Where before the poem followed a quick AABB rhyme scheme (two lines in a row, followed by two lines in a row), now it follows an ABCB pattern: "rain" creates a [slant rhyme](#) with "again."
- Also notice how the poem also uses [caesurae](#) for the first time in these lines: the commas that appear

after "Shine on me," "Rain on me," and "Fall softly" add brief pauses to the poem. This contrasts with the way the opening lines barreled forward.

- Finally, whereas in the previous stanza a single sentence extended over an exhausting 14 lines, here the speaker addresses the sun, rain, and dew in a simple [quatrain](#) (four-line stanza).

All of these changes create a rhythm that [juxtaposes](#) powerfully with the poem's opening. As the speaker addresses nature and asks it to grant her relief from her constant work, she seems to *find* this relief and rest, at least temporarily.

LINES 19-22

*Storm, blow me ...
... can rest again.*

The speaker continues to address the natural world, now asking a storm to "blow" her away so that she can "float across the sky" and "rest." In other words, the speaker calls on nature—and the "fiercest" of storms—to take her away from her endless work and bring her to a better place.

It's thus not just through gentle sunshine and dewdrops that the speaker finds relief, but also in nature's more violent, dangerous elements. That she needs the "fiercest wind" to "blow" her away suggests just how stuck she feels, how tethered to the world of endless work: not just any old wind will do.

The image of the speaker "float[ing] across the sky" might also make readers think of heaven and death. As the speaker asks the natural world to set her free from her unending labor, the poem might subtly suggest that she can only truly "rest" when she dies.

The sounds in these lines—with all their [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [sibilance](#)—add intensity to the speaker's language, and in doing so communicate the intensity of her longing for relief: "fiercest"/"float," "with"/"wind," "sky"/"I," and all those windy, whispery /s/ sounds in "fiercest," "across," "sky," and "rest."

As with the previous stanza, the [rhyme scheme](#) here is very loose. "Wind" and "again" create a very subtle [slant rhyme](#)—subtler than "rain" and "again" in the previous stanza. This shift, too, enacts the speaker's wish to be completely free from the world that seeks to control and take everything from her.

LINES 23-26

*Fall gently, snowflakes ...
... me rest tonight.*

Continuing to address nature directly, the speaker tells the snow to "[c]over" her up so that she can "rest." She [metaphorically](#) compares the snowflakes to "[c]old icy kisses," suggesting that she would experience the snow as caring and affectionate. Yet this image, like the one in the previous stanza,

also evokes death: the speaker envisions herself covered with snow and “rest[ing]” as though in a grave.

As the speaker has continued to address the natural world, then, the poem’s [imagery](#) conveys a sense of consolation but also of the ruthlessness of the speaker’s reality. The poem might even imply that, for the speaker, the only true relief and freedom can be found in death.

The speaker reinforces this sense by suggesting that for her, it is the snow—and not the people who demand and take everything from her—that is “gentl[e]” and even affectionate. The image of the “[c]old icy kisses” simultaneously conveys the relief the speaker imagines experiencing, as well as the coldness of death itself.

As before, the sounds of these lines add to their intensity and tone. For example, hard /c/ sounds link “Cover,” “Cold,” “snowflakes,” and “kisses,” the sharp [consonance](#) perhaps evoking teeth chattering in an icy storm. The quiet [sibilance](#) in “icy kisses,” meanwhile, conveys the haunting quality of this image: while the speaker envisions the snow “kiss[ing]” her in a kind of cool relief, these “kisses” would also bring death.

LINES 27-30

*Sun, rain, curving ...
... call my own.*

In the poem’s final stanza, the speaker addresses different parts of the natural world, saying that these are “all that” she can truly call her “own.” The rest of society, the poem suggests, takes almost everything from the speaker, demanding all her energy and time and leaving her with little, if anything, in return. It is only in nature, which doesn’t ask anything of the speaker, that she can find a sense of ownership and escape.

Notice how similar the language that the speaker uses in her apostrophe to nature is to the list that began the poem, in which the speaker named all of the work that she is expected to do. As in that previous work-related list of work, this nature-related list uses [asyndeton](#): the speaker omits conjunctions like “and” that would ordinarily link the items on the list together.

These *similarities* to the opening list, though, only emphasize the *difference* between the two. Whereas before, the speaker described the backbreaking work she had to do for other people, here she names aspects of nature that belong to her. This list, then, calls attention to the consolation and relief that nature offers the speaker.

The sounds of the lines fill the speaker’s closing language with music and passion. There’s the [alliteration](#) of “curving sky,” “can,” and “call,” for example, as well as the [sibilance](#) of “[s]un,” “sky,” “stone,” “[s]tar,” “oceans,” and “shine.”

Here, too, the poem returns to an intense, insistent rhyme scheme. [Assonantly](#) connects “stone,” “glow,” and “own,” ending the poem with a sonic flourish.



SYMBOLS



WATER

Partway through the poem, the speaker asks the rain to fall on her and the drops of dew to “cool [her] brow” (implying that the speaker’s forehead is sweaty and hot from all of her work). This water [symbolizes](#) the cleansing and renewing power of the natural world.

The rain and dew literally offer the speaker respite and relief, washing away the sweat and dirt from her body. At the same time, they also evoke the way that nature offers the speaker a kind of *spiritual* renewal, momentarily washing away the deeper burdens of her work.

Dew in particular suggests rebirth and new beginnings, given that it appears on plants early in the morning. Its mention here evokes the way that nature helps the speaker find renewed strength in nature.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** “Rain on me, rain”
- **Line 17:** “Fall softly, dewdrops”



THE WIND AND SKY

The wind and sky in the poem represent the sense of freedom and escape that the speaker finds in nature.

When the speaker calls on the “Storm” to “blow” her away with its “fiercest wind,” this speaks to her desire escape to somewhere far away from the world that places all of these demands on her time and body. Her desire to “float across the sky” similarly represents her desire to be free of the endless work she is expected to do on the ground.

At the same time, these [symbolic](#) associations might suggest that the speaker feels she can only truly find freedom in death. The sky often represents the afterlife in literature (given its association with heaven). That the speaker envisions herself floating in the sky, then, might imply that in such oppressive circumstances, the speaker can only find true relief in death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-21:** “Storm, blow me from here / With your fiercest wind / Let me float across the sky”
- **Line 27:** “curving sky”



THE SNOW

Snow and cold are linked with winter, a season that generally [symbolizes](#) death. When the speaker calls on the “snowflakes” to “[c]over” her, then, this might subtly

represent her belief that she can only escape her endless work by dying (and, in turn, being buried in the earth and becoming one with the natural world that provides her with "rest").

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-26:** "Fall gently, snowflakes / Cover me with white / Cold icy kisses and / Let me rest tonight."



POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The poem uses [anaphora](#) to emphasize the endless labor that the speaker is expected to do. For example, the word "The" repeats in line after line in the opening stanza, each time to name a task that the speaker must accomplish. This relentless repetition reflects the relentlessness of the speaker's work.

The speaker also repeats the phrase "I've got" anaphorically in this stanza, along with the slightly different versions "I got" and "I gotta." This anaphora again reinforces just how much the speaker has on her plate, as well as the fact that she has little say in the matter: this labor is something that she *has* to do, suggesting that she has next to no ownership over her own work, body, or life.

The poem's anaphora also calls attention to the [parallelism](#) throughout this stanza. Note that in these opening lines, each line begins with an object, and then moves to the verb, or the action the speaker must take. For instance, the speaker notes that she has "The floor to mop / The food to shop," and so on. This parallelism reinforces the idea that in this constant, backbreaking labor, the speaker is almost entirely erased, reduced to these tasks that she must do.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I've got"
- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 3:** "The"
- **Line 4:** "The"
- **Line 6:** "The"
- **Line 7:** "I got"
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 9:** "I've got"
- **Line 10:** "The"
- **Line 11:** "The"
- **Line 12:** "I gotta"

REPETITION

In addition to its frequent [anaphora](#), the poem uses other forms of [repetition](#)—specifically, [polyptoton](#) and [diacope](#)—to emphasize important words and phrases.

For example, as she addresses the natural world and asks it to offer her relief, the speaker repeats the words "shine" (in "shine" and "sunshine"), "rain," "rest," and "again." These moments of repetition—an instance of polyptoton in the case of "shine" and "sunshine" and diacope in the other words—emphasizes the speaker's yearning for rest and freedom, as well as the fact that she can *find* this rest, however fleetingly, in such natural elements as the sun and rain. She's asking the sun and rain to do what it is that they *naturally* do—shine and rain—and in this way emphasizes that the natural world is a space of freedom from labor.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I've got"
- **Line 7:** "I got"
- **Line 9:** "I've got"
- **Line 12:** "I gotta"
- **Line 15:** "Shine," "sunshine"
- **Line 16:** "Rain," "rain"
- **Line 18:** "again"
- **Line 21:** "sky"
- **Line 22:** "rest," "again"
- **Line 26:** "rest"
- **Line 27:** "rain," "sky"
- **Line 29:** "shine"

COLLOQUIALISM

The speaker uses several [colloquialisms](#), or everyday, informal, words and phrases. For instance, the speaker says "I gotta" and "I got" when describing the endless work that she must do. She also refers to children with the colloquial term "tots," and additionally says she must "tend" the children, meaning that she must take care of them. Finally, the speaker says she must "see about the sick," meaning she must see what she can do to take care of those who are sick in her family or community.

These colloquial words and phrases give the poem an immediate, spoken quality. The poem feels conversational, as though the speaker is directly addressing the reader and simply describing her reality. The speaker's colloquial language also creates a kind of intimacy with the reader, creating the sense that the reader is being let in on the speaker's inner thoughts.

At the same time, it is notable that the poem subtly shifts *out* of these more colloquial phrases when the speaker addresses the natural world. This change conveys the sense that at this point in the poem, the speaker can move beyond her everyday reality of unending work and find relief—however fleeting or elusive—in nature.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tend"

- **Line 7:** “I got”
- **Line 10:** “tots”
- **Line 12:** “I gotta”
- **Line 13:** “see about the sick”

JUXTAPOSITION

“Woman Work” uses [juxtaposition](#) to emphasize the difference between the endless labor the speaker is expected to do and the relief and freedom she can find in the natural world.

Several aspects of the poem contribute to this juxtaposition, including the shift in stanza length (from the long opening stanza to the [quatrains](#) in the poem’s second half), rhythm, and [tone](#).

For example, when the speaker describes all the work she must do, she does so in one long stanza (which is also one long continual sentence). This emphasizes the fact that she expected to work without rest or pause. This list also suggests that to the rest of society, the speaker only exists to do this work.

Then, when the speaker turns to nature and asks it to offer her rest, the poem completely changes. Here, the speaker uses shorter sentences—each extended over a single quatrain (or four-line stanza)—and even, measured stanzas. Additionally, instead of just naming what she must do, the speaker speaks to nature, suggesting that she finds a sense of true connection in the natural world. Finally, the speaker describes sensory experiences that the reader can envision, like the rain and snow falling on her, or floating through the sky.

All these aspects of the poem help to create the strong contrast between the poem’s opening stanza and the closing four quatrains. This juxtaposition reinforces the fact that nature really is all the speaker can “call [her] own” and only in the natural world can she find freedom and relief from the larger society that claims to own her body, her work, and her life.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

CAESURA

The speaker only uses [caesurae](#) when addressing nature, conveying the sense that the speaker can find rest—however temporary or fleeing—in the natural world.

Notice how there are *no* pauses within lines throughout the entire opening stanza. Instead, the speaker lists each task that she must do, and then goes on to list the next task. None of these lines contain any internal punctuation, which would create space for a quick rest or breath. This absence of caesurae thus subtly illustrates the fact that the speaker must work constantly, without pause.

Then, though, as the speaker turns to nature, the poem slows

down. For example, consider the first three lines of the second stanza:

Shine on me, sunshine
Rain on me, rain
Fall softly, dewdrops

These pauses in the middle of lines suggest that even as the speaker asks for elements of the natural world to offer her relief, she *experiences* some of this relief, as she can move out of the relentless pace of her labor.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** “me, sunshine”
- **Line 16:** “me, rain”
- **Line 17:** “softly, dewdrops”
- **Line 19:** “Storm, blow”
- **Line 23:** “gently, snowflakes”
- **Line 29:** “shine, moon”

ASYNDETON

The speaker uses [asyndeton](#) throughout the opening stanza, emphasizing the fact that she must work continually, without pause. Throughout this stanza, the speaker lists each task that she is expected to do, and then goes swiftly on to the next, leaving out conjunctions that might ordinarily connect the items on the list together. Consider, for example, the opening three lines:

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop

Each item on the list gives way immediately to the next, separated only by the white space at the end of each line. This asyndeton calls attention to the long, continual list, suggesting that the speaker is expected to work constantly and endlessly.

In an interesting turn, the poem again uses asyndeton in the closing stanza, as the speaker addresses each element of the natural world:

Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow

The speaker smoothly moves from one natural element to the next, only using a conjunction (“and”) between “leaf and stone.” This list evokes the long list with which the poem began, but the similar use of asyndeton only calls attention to the *difference* between the natural world and the domestic one. Whereas in the first stanza the speaker’s use of asyndeton emphasized the endless claims on her time and energy, here, asyndeton helps to

convey the infinity of the natural world, which is endless and varied in its beauty. This asyndeton also emphasizes the freedom and boundlessness the speaker can find in nature, even if this sense of freedom is fleeting.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-13:** "I've got the children to tend / The clothes to mend / The floor to mop / The food to shop / Then the chicken to fry / The baby to dry / I got company to feed / The garden to weed / I've got the shirts to press / The tots to dress / The cane to be cut / I gotta clean up this hut / Then see about the sick"
- **Lines 27-29:** "Sun, rain, curving sky / Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone / Star shine, moon glow"

APOSTROPHE

Throughout the second half of the poem, the speaker addresses elements of the natural world directly. Since these natural elements can't be expected to reply to the speaker, this is an example of [apostrophe](#).

This apostrophe has several effects in the poem. First, the speaker's direct address to nature creates a sense of intimacy and connection. The speaker's use of apostrophe, then, conveys the sense that the speaker feels far more connected to nature than to those people who demand endless work from her.

The speaker's use of apostrophe also emphasizes the fact that the speaker is asking nature to take care of *her*, rather than the other way around. Throughout the whole opening stanza, the poem makes clear that the speaker is constantly expected to work and care for those around her. Yet here, the speaker asks nature to "[s]hine on" her, "[r]ain on her," and "blow" her away to a better place.

Finally, the speaker's use of apostrophe reinforces the idea that she can find some sense of ownership in nature. In calling out commands to each element of the natural world, the poem demonstrates that the speaker can call nature her "own."

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-30:** "Shine on me, sunshine / Rain on me, rain / Fall softly, dewdrops / And cool my brow again. / Storm, blow me from here / With your fiercest wind / Let me float across the sky / 'Til I can rest again. / Fall gently, snowflakes / Cover me with white / Cold icy kisses and / Let me rest tonight. / Sun, rain, curving sky / Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone / Star shine, moon glow / You're all that I can call my own."

ALLITERATION

"Woman Work" contains a few moments of [alliteration](#) that add rhythm and emphasis to the poem.

For example, in the opening lines, the /f/ sounds of "floor" and "food" add intensity and a sense of repetitiveness to the speaker's list of chores. Then, toward the end of this stanza, hard /c/ sounds link "cane," "cut," "clean," and "cotton." These sharp sounds evoke the harshness of the speaker's labor.

Later, alliteration adds a certain forcefulness to the speaker's language as she calls out instructions to the natural world. The intensity of sound here reflects the intensity of the speaker's call:

With your fiercest wind
Let me float across the sky

The [consonance](#) here (note all those /s/ sounds in "fiercest," "across," and "sky") adds to the effect, as does the [assonance](#) of "With"/"wind" and "sky"/"I." Altogether, the speaker's call sounds passionate and rousing.

Sharp /c/ sounds then return in the next stanza, with "cover," "cold," and "kisses" (and, as consonance, in "snowflakes"). Again, this burst of shared sound helps to amplify the speaker's language (and might even subtly evoke the chattering of teeth in that "icy" cold).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "floor"
- **Line 4:** "food"
- **Line 11:** "cane," "cut"
- **Line 12:** "clean"
- **Line 13:** "see," "sick"
- **Line 14:** "cotton"
- **Line 15:** "Shine," "sunshine"
- **Line 20:** "With," "fiercest," "wind"
- **Line 21:** "float," "across," "sky"
- **Line 24:** "Cover"
- **Line 25:** "Cold," "kisses"
- **Line 27:** "Sun," "sky"
- **Line 28:** "stone"
- **Line 29:** "Star shine"
- **Line 30:** "can call"

CONSONANCE

Much like [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) works in the poem to intensify the speaker's language. For example, notice all the /s/ and /c/ sounds in the third stanza:

[...] fiercest wind
Let me float across the sky
'Til I can rest again.

As noted in this guide's discussion of alliteration, the many shared sounds of these lines elevate the poem's language and, in doing so, call attention to the passion of the speaker's call.

The next stanza is particularly filled with consonance, and more specifically with sibilance. Note how whispery /s/ sounds mix with chattering /c/ sounds and lilting /l/ and /f/ sounds:

Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and

The gentle [sibilance](#) here evokes the hushed, quiet atmosphere of a snowy night, while the sharpness of those /c/ sounds cuts through like the chattering of teeth.

At the same time, this sibilance might seem haunting or ominous to the reader. Its hush might even suggest that while the speaker would experience this snow as a form of relief, those “icy kisses” would also bring death.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “floor”
- **Line 4:** “food”
- **Line 7:** “feed”
- **Line 8:** “garden,” “weed”
- **Line 9:** “shirts,” “press”
- **Line 10:** “tots,” “dress”
- **Line 11:** “cane,” “cut”
- **Line 12:** “clean”
- **Line 13:** “see,” “sick”
- **Line 14:** “cotton,” “pick”
- **Line 15:** “Shine,” “sunshine”
- **Line 17:** “Fall softly”
- **Line 20:** “With,” “fiercest,” “wind”
- **Line 21:** “float,” “across,” “sky”
- **Line 22:** “can rest”
- **Line 23:** “Fall gently, snowflakes”
- **Line 24:** “Cover”
- **Line 25:** “Cold,” “icy kisses”
- **Line 27:** “Sun,” “curving sky”
- **Line 28:** “oceans,” “stone”
- **Line 29:** “Star shine”
- **Line 30:** “all,” “can call”

ASSONANCE

In addition to its use of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), the poem also incorporates several moments of [assonance](#) to give the poem a musical, song-like quality. (Note that here we’re focusing on internal assonance that’s separate from the poem’s [rhyme scheme](#).)

This assonance is clearest at the very end of the poem, where long /oh/ sounds connect “oceans,” “stone,” “glow” and “own.” Here, the poem’s assonance calls attention to the fact that the natural world is all the speaker can “call [her] own.” These long vowel sounds also create a sense of space and expansiveness, conveying the vastness and freedom of the natural world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** “With,” “wind”
- **Line 21:** “sky”
- **Line 22:** “I”
- **Line 28:** “oceans,” “stone”
- **Line 29:** “glow”
- **Line 30:** “all,” “call,” “own”



VOCABULARY

Tots (Line 10) - "Tots" is a colloquial term for "children."

Cane (Line 11) - "Cane" refers to sugar cane. Along with cotton, sugar cane was a major crop grown by slave labor in the Americas. The speaker's reference to having to cut the sugar cane, then, suggests she is [alluding](#) to slavery, and to backbreaking work she must do with no ownership over her labor or her life.

Hut (Line 12) - A "hut" is a small, makeshift house, like a shack or lean-to.

See about (Line 13) - When the speaker says she must "see about the sick," she means she has to see what can be done to take care of the sick.

Brow (Line 18) - "Brow" is another word for "forehead." The speaker is asking the dew to cool off her forehead, which is sweaty from so much work.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem’s 30 lines are organized into five stanzas of various lengths:

- The first stanza is fourteen lines long.
- The other four stanzas are [quatrains](#), meaning that each is four lines long.

This form helps to convey the poem’s meaning. In the first, long stanza the speaker describes the backbreaking work she is expected to do. The length of the stanza calls attention to the speaker’s relentless labor, suggesting that her work is neverending.

Then, as the speaker addresses the natural world, the form shifts. The even, measured quatrains in this second half of the poem suggest that the speaker *is* able to find some sense of relief in nature. Each quatrain is made out of a single sentence (each shorter than the long opening sentence), allowing for a moment of pause and rest in the white space between these stanzas as well.

METER

“Woman Work” is written in accentual meter. In this type of meter, each line has a set number of **stressed** syllables, regardless of the total number of syllables in the line. (By contrast, in other types of meter like [iambic](#) pentameter, each line has a fixed number of stresses *and* syllables).

Throughout the poem’s opening stanza, each line has two stressed beats (for the most part), even though the lines have varying numbers of syllables. Consider, for example, lines 2-5:

The **clothes** to mend
The **floor** to mop
The **food** to shop
Then the **chicken** to fry

Note that each line has two stressed syllables, even though the lines vary somewhat in syllabic length; the first three lines here have four beats, but the fifth has six beats. Still, this pattern of two stresses per line creates a regular rhythm that conveys the monotony and relentlessness of the speaker’s work.

Additionally, this stress pattern calls attention to the verb and object in each line: the speaker must “mend” the “clothes,” “mop” the “floor,” and so on.

The meter changes in the second half of the poem. As the speaker addresses the natural world, the lines contain more stressed beats and also vary in how many stresses they do have. For example, in the second stanza, each line has three to four stressed syllables:

Shine on me, sunshine
Rain on me, rain
Fall softly, dewdrops
And **cool** my **brow** again.

Then, in the closing stanza, each line has four to five stressed syllables:

Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own.

This increasing number of stresses in each line illustrates the sense of rest, peace, and expansiveness the speaker can find in the natural world. The variation in the number of stresses from stanza to stanza also conveys this sense of freedom, as the poem moves out of its prior constraints and creates a different kind of rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

The [rhyme scheme](#) changes over the course of the poem.

The first stanza follows a steady pattern of AABCC etc. In

other words, the stanza is made up of rhyming [couplets](#):

[...] tend A
[...] mend A
[...] mop B
[...] shop B

And so forth. In this first, long, stanza, the AABB rhyme scheme contributes to the sense that the speaker must work relentlessly, without pause. Each rhyme ending is followed in quick succession by another, illustrating the way in which the speaker must move immediately from one task to the next.

Then, as the speaker addresses nature and asks it to help her rest, the poem shifts to an ABCB rhyme scheme. Here's stanza 2, for example:

[...] sunshine A
[...] rain B
[...] dewdrops C
[...] again. B

Through the end of the poem, this more open, alternating pattern structure slows the poem down and creates a different kind of music. The change in rhyme scheme reflects the fact that the speaker can find some sense of peace and relief in nature.

Importantly, too, the rhymes themselves become looser at this point in the poem. For example, “rain” and “again” are [slant rhymes](#), and “wind” and “again” in the next stanza are even looser slant rhymes (the [consonant](#) /n/ sounds connect the words together, but both the vowel sounds and end sounds of the words are different). This loosening of the rhyme scheme suggests that in nature, the speaker can finally feel free of the control imposed on her by the rest of society.

Additionally, in the last three lines of the poem, “stone” and “own” create full rhymes, while “glow”—which appears in the intervening line—echoes this rhyme with its long /oh/ sound:

Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own.

These long vowel sounds help to convey the rest and peace the speaker imagines herself experiencing, and also end the poem on an especially musical, passionate note.



SPEAKER

The speaker is someone burdened with the kind of domestic labor—cooking, cleaning, and caring for children—that has traditionally fallen to women. She might be a housekeeper,

cook, nanny, or simply a wife and mother tasked with caring for her home and family. The speaker is also implied to be Black, given that she alludes to enslavement in her references to picking cotton and cutting sugar cane.

These details are essential to the poem: the poem isn't talking about the drudgery of work in general but is specifically highlighting the experiences of Black women, which have all too often been erased and unacknowledged by the rest of society.

It's possible to read the speaker as one individual person who must literally do all of this work. At the same time, the speaker can be read as a kind of collective voice, one that brings together experiences of many Black women throughout history who were expected to devote all their time and energy to others.



SETTING

The poem combines a few different settings into one, seeming to span landscapes and centuries in order to make a broader point about the expectations placed on Black women throughout history.

The speaker says that she must pick cotton and cut sugar cane, for example, work that enslaved people were forced to do throughout the American South and the Caribbean. Black Americans continued to pick cotton by hand in the South well into the 20th century, often as sharecroppers or for low wages. The speaker also mentions the kind of domestic work that society often expects of women even into the modern day (i.e., cooking, cleaning, and caring for children).

The fact that the speaker mentions all these types of work suggests that the poem is actually incorporating different physical locations and periods of time. In doing so, the poem shows how Black women have been expected to do seemingly unending labor over the course of centuries.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou first published “Woman Work” in her 1978 collection *And Still I Rise*. Before writing “Woman Work,” Angelou wrote a poem called “[One More Round](#)” (also published in *And Still I Rise*), which describes work done by both men and women. Upon hearing “One More Round” read aloud by a man, however, Angelou [said](#) that she realized that it was, in fact, a poem primarily about men’s labor. As such, she decided to write this poem about the specific work that women have traditionally done in society.

Angelou was a major voice in American literature. Her work, which often explores themes of trauma, oppression, racism, survival, and strength, includes collections of poetry, plays,

autobiographies, and children’s literature. In addition to “Woman Work,” *And Still I Rise* includes several of Angelou’s most famous poems, including “[Still I Rise](#)” (the title poem) and “[Phenomenal Woman](#).”

Angelou also participated in the [Black Arts Movement](#) of the 1960s and '70s, a movement in which Black artists centered their own experiences and encouraged Black pride. The movement formed in response to the ongoing racist oppression of Black Americans and included writers and artists such as [Gwendolyn Brooks](#), [Amiri Baraka](#), [Sonia Sanchez](#), [Audre Lorde](#), [Nikki Giovanni](#), [June Jordan](#), and [Etheridge Knight](#). “Woman Work” reflects some of the aims of the movement, in that it explores experiences of Black women that have all too often been overlooked, minimized, and erased by the dominant white society.

Angelou continued to write until the end of her life in 2014. Her memoirs, poetry, and activism have had a profound and lasting impact on American society. In recognition of her life’s work, President Barack Obama awarded Angelou the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Angelou wrote “Woman Work” in the late 1970s, during the women’s rights movement in the United States. This movement emerged out of the civil rights movement and fought for gender equality and a range of legal reforms, including increased reproductive rights and equal pay. The women’s movement also called attention to the extensive unpaid, domestic work that women historically have done—the kinds of work that this poem highlights.

Angelou also wrote the poem in the wake of the civil rights movement and, as noted above, the Black Arts Movement. It’s important to note that, while the title refers to women’s work in general, the poem itself specifically centers Black women’s experiences, illustrating how society makes intense demands on their energy, time, and bodies.

The poem draws on a range of other historical contexts as well. For example, the speaker [alludes](#) to slavery and references being forced to do backbreaking work like picking cotton and cutting sugar cane. At the same time, the speaker references what could be interpreted as modern-day domestic labor that has historically fallen to women of color, including housecleaning, cooking, and nannying. By referencing these different contexts, the poem shows how the demands placed on Black women in the present are part of a larger historical framework.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Maya Angelou Reading “Woman Work”](#) — Listen to

Angelou recite both this poem and her poem “One More Round” aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy9DW8J8KaE>)

- [Official Website of Maya Angelou](https://www.mayaangelou.com) — Learn more about Maya Angelou’s life and legacy at her official website, which includes information about her books, music based on her poems, and more. (<https://www.mayaangelou.com>)
- [Biography of Maya Angelou](https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou) — Read about Maya Angelou’s life, her poetry, and her civil rights work. (<https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou>)
- [Maya Angelou’s “Odd Jobs”](https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou) — While “Woman Work” explores the typical, unending work expected of Black women, Maya Angelou herself had a range of unusual jobs—including as the first Black woman streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Learn more in this article from the Academy of American Poets, which also explores the “odd jobs” of other American poets. (<https://poets.org/poet/maya-angelou>)
- [And Still I Rise](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/3912/and-still-i-rise-by-maya-angelou/) — Read more about And Still I Rise, the 1978 collection in which Angelou first published “Woman Work,” at the website of the book’s publisher, Penguin Random House. (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/3912/and-still-i-rise-by-maya-angelou/>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

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



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