

The Trees

Thinking about the Poem (Page 100-101)

Question 1:

- (i) Find, in the first stanza, three things that cannot happen in a treeless forest.
- (ii) What picture do these words create in your mind: "... sun bury its feet in shadow..."? What could the poet mean by the sun's 'feet'?

Answer:

- (i) The three things that cannot happen in a treeless forest are listed below:
- (a) the sitting of a bird on trees
 - (b) the hiding of insects on the trees
 - (c) the sun burying its feet in the shadow of the forest
- (ii) The sun's 'feet' refers to the heat and rays of the sun that fall on the ground. Since there are no trees, there will be no shadow, the sun rays will fall on the ground directly. However, in a forest full of trees, the shadow hides the sun rays and it appears that the sun is burying its feet in the shadow of the trees in the forest.

Question 2:

- (i) Where are the trees in the poem? What do their roots, their leaves, and their twigs do?
- (ii) What does the poet compare their branches to?

Answer:

- (i) In the poem, the trees are confined within the limits of the poet's house. Their roots work all night to separate themselves from the cracks in the veranda floor. The leaves make attempts to move towards the glass and exert pressure to break it, while the small twigs get stiff and tight with exertion.
- (ii) The poet compares the 'long-cramped' branches shuffling under the roof to newly discharged patients from a hospital who look half-disoriented and confused after suffering long illnesses as they move towards the clinic doors. The large branches of the trees become cramped under the roof as they want to be set free so that they are able to spread themselves fully in the open air outside.

Question 3:

- (i) How does the poet describe the moon: (a) at the beginning of the third stanza, and (b) at its end? What causes this change?
- (ii) What happens to the house when the trees move out of it?
- (iii) Why do you think the poet does not mention "the departure of the forest from the house" in her letters? (Could it be that we are often silent about important happenings that are so unexpected that they

embarrass us? Think about this again when you answer the next set of questions.)

Answer:

(i) At the beginning of the third stanza, the poet mentions that the full moon is shining in the open sky in the fresh night. Towards the end of the stanza, she describes that the moon breaks into many pieces just like a cracked mirror and shines on the heads of the tallest oak trees. As the trees move outside from her home, they cover some moonlight and it can be seen only in small portions. This justifies the fact when the poet says that the moon has broken into pieces.

(ii) When the trees move out of the house, the glasses break and the smell of leaves and lichen still reach the rooms of the house like a voice.

(iii) The poet scarcely mentions about “the departure of the forest from the house” in her letters because human beings generally don’t care for nature in the first place. Hence, she thinks that nobody would be interested to know how hard the trees are trying to set themselves free. She also mentions that if humans would have really cared for the trees, they would never think of destroying them. Therefore, we can understand that the poet could feel the whole beauty of trees moving back to the forest and she was immensely happy to realise it.

Question 4:

Now that you have read the poem in detail, we can begin to ask what the poem might mean. Here are two suggestions. Can you think of others?

(i) Does the poem present a conflict between man and nature? Compare it with A Tiger in the Zoo. Is the poet suggesting that plants and trees, used for ‘interior decoration’ in cities while forests are cut down, are ‘imprisoned’, and need to ‘break out’?

(ii) On the other hand, Adrienne Rich has been known to use trees as a metaphor for human beings; this is a recurrent image in her poetry. What new meanings emerge from the poem if you take its trees to be symbolic of this particular meaning?

Answer:

The poem may connote different meanings to different readers. The poet tries to explain two different things using the same metaphors in the poem.

(i) Yes, the poem presents a conflict between man and nature. Humans have always had the tendency to damage or harm nature without even realizing the usefulness and the benefits that mankind derives from it. They do mass deforestation which disturbs the environmental balance and results in destruction of natural scenic beauty. Man tries to contain plants and trees within limited spaces that deny their natural freedom. Due to this reason, the branches of the trees want to spread themselves and feel the fresh air outside. Similarly, in the poem ‘A Tiger in the Zoo’, the poet shows that animals which are kept in cages are unable to enjoy their freedom as even they want to be set free and run around freely in the open space.

(ii) If trees have been used as a metaphor for human beings, then it could be said that just like trees, humans would also like to break away from the shackles of their busy schedules and restricting boundaries that life puts on them. Although men strive harder in their daily routines to earn a living, they don’t always have the privilege to enjoy its benefits. Modern life brings in a lot of physical comfort, but also has its equal share of drawbacks. Hence, even man wants to break free from all his tasks and enjoy the peaceful nature out in the open just like the trees.

Question 5:

You may read the poem 'On Killing a Tree' by Gieve Patel (Beehive – Textbook in English for Class IX, NCERT). Compare and contrast it with the poem you have just read.

Answer:

Activity to be done by yourself.

