

Chapter 7: The Trees

Thinking about the Poem

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.....1’? What could the poet mean by the sun’s ‘feet’?

Answer:

- i. The three things that cannot happen in a treeless forest are – the sitting of a bird on trees, the hiding of insects and the sun burying its feet in the shadow of the forest.
- ii. The sun’s ‘feet’ refers to the rays of the sun that fall on the earth. When there is no shadow on the ground, because there are no trees, the rays fall directly on the ground. In a forest with trees, the shadow hides the sun rays and it seems that the sun is burying its feet in the shadow that fall from the trees.

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:

1. In the poem, the trees are trapped in the poet’s house. Their roots work all night to disengage themselves from the cracks in the veranda floor. The leaves try very hard to move towards the glass and put a lot of pressure on it so that it breaks, while the small twigs get stiff with exertion.
2. The poet compares the branches to newly discharged patients of a hospital. The large branches of the trees become cramped due to the roof above them, and when they get free they rush stumblingly to the outside world. While doing so, they look half-shocked like the patients, who wait for a long time to get out of the hospital.

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 says that the full moon is shining in the open sky in the fresh night. At the end of the stanza, she describes that the moon breaks into pieces like a broken mirror and shines on the heads of the tallest oak trees. As the trees move outside, they cover some of the shine of the moon and it can be seen only in parts. This is why, it seems that the moon has broken into pieces.
- ii. When the trees move out of the house, the glasses break and the whispers of the trees vanish, leaving the house silent.
- iii. The poet hardly mentions about “the departure of the forest from the house” in her letters because it is humans, who did not care for nature in the first place. So, maybe, the poet now thinks that nobody

would be interested in knowing about the efforts that the trees are making in order to set themselves free. If other men cared about the trees, they would not have destroyed them. It seems that this whole beauty of trees moving back to forests can be seen and felt only by the poet.

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:

Since a poem can have different meaning for different readers and the poet can mean two different things using the same imagery, both these meanings can be justified in context of the poem:

- i. Yes, the poem presents a conflict between man and nature. Man has always caused much harm to nature, without realizing that it actually is a harm to the human race. Humans cut down forests for forest goods, which has destroyed a lot of natural beauty. By keeping trees inside walls and denying them their natural home, they are denying them their freedom. That is why, the trees want to move out. Similarly, in the poem A Tiger in the Zoo, the poet shows that animals feel bounded by cages and they want to get free and run wild in the open.
- ii. If trees have been used as a metaphor for human beings, then the poem would mean that like the trees, humans too want to break free of the boundaries that life puts on them. Modern life with all kinds of physical comfort has also brought a lot of moral downfall. Our lives have become busy and we have become selfish and greedy. Man would also want to enjoy the beauty of nature and go out in the open and be free, just like trees.