

On Killing a Tree

by Gieve Patel



Central Idea of the Poem

The poem 'On Killing a Tree' by Gieve Patel is a symbolic composition. As evils are deep rooted in us, tree is also deep rooted. We should try to eliminate them permanently. At times, we think, we have got rid of these evils but suddenly it appears before us again as tree grows if not cut properly. We must put our best efforts to uproot them.

The poet has another view that once we start an assignment, we must bring it to the end. A half finished job is no job done. So, the poet advocates the totality of a work. This will make one responsible and sensible for one's assignments.

Explanation of the Poem

Stanza 1

It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. It has grown
Slowly consuming the earth,
Rising out of it, feeding

Upon its crust, absorbing
Years of sunlight, air, water,
And out of its leprous hide
Sprouting leaves.

WORD MEANINGS

jab	to hit something forcefully
consuming	using the resources
feeding upon	to derive nutrition from
crust	the top layer of the soil
absorbing	to take inside (especially material things)
leprous hide	discoloured bark of the tree
sprouting	giving rise/birth to

Explanation In this stanza, the poet comments on the way a person cuts down a tree in order to serve his purpose. The poet says that it is not easy to cut down a tree because a simple jab of the knife is never enough to wipe out its existence. The reason behind its strength is its consuming the resources which it has got from the earth's crust so powerfully. Years of absorption of sunlight, air and water from which the earth has made its growth so perfect that a jab of knife won't do much. It will come out with leaves again and will grow as ever.

Stanza 2

So hack and chop
But this alone wont do it.
Not so much pain will do it.
The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground

Will rise curled green twigs,
Miniature boughs
Which if unchecked will expand again
To former size.

WORD MEANINGS

hack	cutting with heavy blows
chop	cut in piece
pain	suffering out of something
bleeding bark	the secretion of the liquid from the bark when it is cut with a sharp object
heal	recovering from a wound
curled	with twists and graceful moves
twigs	tenderly leaves
miniature	tiny and small
boughs	branches
unchecked	not being stopped
expand	to grow in an enormous way
former	belonging to the earlier

Explanation In this stanza, the poet further states the ways of cutting a tree. As the job of the knife was not sufficient, the poet advises us to hit the tree severely in the form of hacking and chopping. But, the poet contrasts that even that won't be enough to kill the tree. This hacking and chopping would raise a pain to the tree but not good enough to kill it. The bark will ooze (leak) out with the liquid secretion, but over a period of time, it gets healed. Then, the fighting spirit of the tree will make it alive again. From close to the ground, it will start a new life again by giving rise to new leaves and small boughs. These will make the tree so glorious again that it will acquire its former size. Therefore, it is not easy to cut or kill a tree.

Stanza 3

No,
The root is to be pulled out—
Out of the anchoring earth;
It is to be roped, tied,
And pulled out—snapped out
Or pulled out entirely,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed
The source, white and wet,
The most sensitive, hidden
For years inside the earth.

WORD MEANINGS

pull out	to take out from somewhere by force
anchoring earth	trees are held securely with the help of roots in the earth
snapped out	chopped out
entirely	completely, fully
earth-cave	the inside of the earth
strength	power
exposed	subjected to one's limitations
wet	damp
sensitive	prone to tender feelings
hidden	remaining behind the scenes

Explanation In the previous stanzas, the poet has discussed the various ways of killing the tree, but still the tree has managed to survive so the poet came up with another idea. He says that the root needs to be pulled out of the earth where it has stocked its strength. To do this, one needs to rope the roots, then pull out the whole mass outside. When the roots are out of the earth cave, then the actual strength of the tree i.e. the roots are exposed to the sun or environment. The source of life of the tree which is roots, is now exposed and out and its root matter is white and wet with absorption of water. It is now subjected to the outside world. This is the actual start of the death of the tree as the life-source of tree, its roots, are exposed.

Stanza 4

Then the matter Browning, hardening,
Of scorching and choking Twisting, withering,
In sun and air, And then it is done.

WORD MEANINGS

scorching and choking	the drying up of the tree after being uprooted
browning	the colour gradually getting brown
hardening	the process of becoming hard
twisting	getting bent and moved
withering	the process of decaying

Explanation In the previous stanza, the poet discussed the way a tree is uprooted and exposed to the surrounding. When the tree is uprooted and left open in the surrounding, then the sun starts drying it up with the burning heat. This intense heat makes the root of the tree getting choked in the air and sunlight. Heat makes the root brown which was white earlier and hardens it by soaking all the moisture content. Then, the root starts twisting from its original shape and finally gets withered from its parts. This brings the actual end to the life of the tree and that is how it is done in the end. The poet takes us into a detailed account of how we kill a tree, what suffering does it have to face and how harsh our attitude is for the ones which is the breath of our lives.

Poetic Devices Used in the Poem

Stanza 1 & 3

Metaphor A device which compares two things or qualities which are unlike.

- And out of its leprous hide
- Anchoring earth

Stanza 2 & 4

Alliteration Repetition of initial consonant sounds in the same line.

- The bleeding bark will heal
- And the strength of the tree exposed
- The source, white and wet

Rhyme scheme No rhyme. The poem is in free verse

NCERT FOLDER

(Here we have covered questions given in the NCERT textbook along with their answers.)

Thinking about the Poem (Page 111)

- 1 Can a "simple jab of the knife" kill a tree? Why not?

Ans. No, a simple jab of the knife wouldn't be enough to kill a tree because it will heal itself in the due course of time if it is not destroyed by uprooting it totally. Only chopping or cut cannot kill it as it will slowly rise again and grow to its original size.

- 2 How has the tree grown to its full size? List the words suggestive of its life and activity.

Ans. The tree grows to its full size by absorbing years of sunlight, water and air. The tree has grown to its full size slowly consuming the earth and rising out of it. It fed upon the earth's crust for years, absorbing sunlight, air and water.

The words are consuming, rising, feeding and absorbing.

- 3 What is the meaning of 'bleeding bark'? What makes it bleed?

Ans. The 'bleeding bark' refers to the bark of the tree which gives out a liquid after it is cut or hurt. Hacking and chopping the tree make its bark bleed.

- 4 The poet says "No" in the beginning of the third stanza. What does he mean by this?

Ans. The poet says "No" in the beginning of the third stanza to highlight the fact that a tree cannot be killed merely with a jab of a knife or by hacking and chopping.

- 5 What is the meaning of 'anchoring earth' and 'earth cave'?

Ans. 'Anchoring earth' refers to the soil in which the roots of the tree are kept hidden. 'Earth cave' also refers to the same. The soil and the roots of the tree form a very tight grip, like an anchor and it keeps it rooted. As a cave gives shelter, similarly, the earth gives shelter to the roots.

- 6 What does the poet mean by 'the strength of the tree exposed'?

Ans. The strength of the tree are its roots. They keep it anchored to the earth. They are the provider of nutrients for the tree. When the tree is pulled out of the earth's soil, these are exposed and tree becomes lifeless.

- 7 What finally kills the tree?

Ans. The tree is killed, when its roots are exposed to the outside. The burning heat of the sun and air choke it. It loses all its leaves and gets brown. Twisting, hardening and drying, it dies.

Exam Practice

Extract Based Questions

[4 Marks each]

Read the following extracts carefully and choose the correct option.

1 It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. It has grown
Slowly consuming the earth,
Rising out of it, feeding
Upon its crust, absorbing
Years of sunlight, air, water,
And out of its leprous hide
Sprouting leaves.

- Why is a job of knife not enough to kill a tree?
(a) Because it has grown to a size of abnormalcy
(b) Because the tree is no more
(c) The knife has been blunted
(d) Now the trees are out of bound for all
- How has the tree grown to its size ?
(a) By not allowing its cutting
(b) By exploiting resources from the Earth
(c) By consuming the share of mankind
(d) By fighting all hurdles bravely
- Find a word from the extract meaning 'surface'.
(a) Jab (b) Earth
(c) Crust (d) Leprous
- Which poetic device has been employed in the stanza?
(a) Hyperbole (b) Alliteration
(c) Simile (d) Metaphor

Ans. (i) (a) Because it has grown to a size of abnormalcy
(ii) (b) By exploiting resources from the Earth
(iii) (c) Crust
(iv) (d) Metaphor

2 So hack and chop
But this alone wont do it.
Not so much pain will do it.
The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground
Will rise curled green twigs,
Miniature boughs
Which if unchecked will expand again
To former size.

- What method did the poet mention for killing tree?
(a) Hack and chop (b) Hack
(c) Jab (d) Chop
- How can the tree get its former size?
(a) By nutrients
(b) By raising twigs close to roots

- (c) By weeding properly
(d) By proper care

(iii) Which word in the extract is opposite to 'restricted'?

- Hack (b) Bleeding
(c) Curled (d) Unchecked

(iv) Why is it not easy to cut down a tree ?

- Because it is huge
(b) Because many axes are required
(c) Because it can regrow if the roots are not unearthed
(d) Because soil and water support it

Ans. (i) (a) Hack and chop
(ii) (b) By raising twigs close to roots
(iii) (d) Unchecked
(iv) (c) Because it can regrow if the roots are not unearthed

3 No,
The root is to be pulled out—
Out of the anchoring earth;
It is to be roped, tied,
And pulled out—snapped out

- What treatment did the poet want with the roots?
(a) Roots to be pulled out of the Earth
(b) Roots to be burnt out
(c) Roots to be sanitised
(d) Roots to be provided with adequate nutrients
- Why did the poet want to pull the root out of a tree?
(a) To strengthen the tree
(b) To kill the tree
(c) To purify the tree
(d) To grow the tree
- Which word in the extract is similar to 'chopped'?
(a) Root (b) Pulled
(c) Snapped (d) Roped
- What does the word 'anchoring' mean in the extract?
(a) Breaking (b) Violent
(c) Firm (d) Holding securely

Ans. (i) (a) Roots to be pulled out of the Earth
(ii) (b) To kill the tree
(iii) (c) Snapped
(iv) (d) Holding securely

- 4 Or pulled out entirely,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed
The source, white and wet,
The most sensitive, hidden
For years inside the earth.
- (i) How can the strength of the tree be exposed?
(a) By taking the roots out of the Earth and leaving open in the surroundings
(b) By not providing them with the nutrients
(c) By irrigating them properly
(d) By cutting their rootlets regularly
- (ii) Why did the poet address 'root' as the most sensitive part of the tree?
(a) Because it is at the bottom
(b) Because it provides strength to the tree
(c) Because food preparation is carried out by roots in trees
(d) Because roots play an important role
- (iii) Which word in the extract is similar to 'completely'?
(a) Source (b) Hidden
(c) Entirely (d) Inside
- (iv) What does the word 'sensitive' mean in the extract?
(a) Precarious (b) Strong
(c) Numb (d) Delicate

- Ans.** (i) (a) By taking the roots out of the Earth and leaving open in the surroundings
(ii) (b) Because it provides strength to the tree
(iii) (c) Entirely
(iv) (d) Delicate

- 5 Then the matter
Of scorching and choking
In sun and air,
Browning, hardening,
Twisting, withering,
And then it is done.
- (i) How are the roots choked and scorched?
(a) By flooding with water
(b) By cutting into many fine pieces
(c) By burning gradually
(d) By exposing to sun and air
- (ii) What does the exposure to the Sun do to the roots?
(a) The roots become strong
(b) The roots need more water
(c) The roots are withered after getting hardened
(d) The roots are refreshed
- (iii) Which word in the extract is opposite to 'softening'?
(a) Scorching (b) Hardening
(c) Choking (d) Withering
- (iv) Which rhyme scheme has been used in the extract?
(a) Free Verse (No rhyme scheme)
(b) ab ab
(c) ab cd
(d) aa bb

- Ans.** (i) (d) By exposing to sun and air
(ii) (c) The roots are withered after getting hardened
(iii) (b) Hardening
(iv) (a) Free verse (No rhyme scheme)

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

[2 Marks each]

- 1 Why does it take much time to kill a tree?
Ans. A tree will take much time to be killed because it has got strength its roots are safe under the earth, and simple blows from the tools won't do any harm to it.

- 2 How has the tree grown to its present size?
Ans. The tree has grown to its present size by absorbing the resources from earth and from its surrounding like air, water and sunlight.

- 3 What has been compared with 'Leprous hide'?
Ans. 'Leprous hide' has been compared with the bark, which has got discoloured over a period of time. It looks like that of someone, who has leprosy and the skin of the body has got discoloured.

- 4 A simple jab of knife was not enough to kill a tree. What did the poet suggest to do after that?

- Ans.** A simple jab of knife was not enough to kill a tree. The poet, therefore, suggested that it should be uprooted hacked and chopped to implement severe blows.

- 5 What will be the effect of hacking and the chopping on the tree?

- Ans.** The hacking and chopping of the tree would make the tree bleed i.e. secrete a liquid but this pain will be relieved soon and the bleeding bark will heal itself.

6 How can the tree get back to its former size?

Ans. The bleeding bark will be healed and from the place closer to the ground, there will be new twigs arising out of it, new boughs will take place which will make the plant grow to its former size.

7 Explain the usage of 'anchoring earth'.

Ans. 'Anchoring' is used to show a condition or a situation which is compulsory to a process to take place. The earth is such as compulsory and important factor to the tree. So, 'anchoring earth' has been used.

8 Why did the poet want the tree to be snapped out?

Ans. The earlier methods of killing the tree were not successful. Therefore, the poet used the way to pull out the roots and then to be snapped out to kill the tree for sure.

9 What is the source of the tree as used in the poem? How does it look like?

Ans. The source of the tree is its roots and it looks like a white sensitive matter, which is wet and hidden inside the earth for years.

10 How is the tree killed finally?

Ans. When a tree is exposed of its strength i.e. its roots then the sun and air burn it. They choke it and the roots are exhausted. Thus, the tree is killed finally.

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

[8 Marks each]

1 What is the underlying message of the poem?

Ans. The poem describes the process of cutting or killing a tree. It seems contrary to our established belief that we generally tend to plant more and more trees. The poet, here, mentions how to implement the effective killing. The underlying message of the poem is that the poet wants us to do a job completely when we start it once. We should not drop it in the mid. It may seem to us that we have done it perfectly, but at times, it is just an illusion. Therefore, we should finish the job completely just like the complete killing of the tree. Also, the poet reminds us of the fact that the efforts must be optimum and should be put whole-heartedly.

2 The poem is about killing a tree. Do you think it is justified to cut trees? Why does the poet say so then?

Ans. The poem is all about killing a tree. The poet has mentioned the various ways through which a tree can be killed. But, it is not justified to

kill a tree for our selfish motives. Still, the poet used the theme of the killing. He wanted to convey the message that despite the clinical methods of killing a tree, there always remains a contemptible act. The poet used this way to comment in a contrasting way and it was of the nature in which someone taunts. He knew that people are aware of the fact that it is a great harm to cut trees but they do it more often. Hence, he used this way.

3 The poet has described the ways of killing a tree which is against the corollary. What did the poet want to convey with this?

Ans. The poet has conveyed the strongest message to the readers. He has used a different method which is opposite to the corollary (outcome). But, this has something to do with the poem. The poet is highlighting the evils all around us which have its deep-roots inside us. We are prone to its devastating (harmful) effect. He wants us to alleviate (remove) ourselves from these evils, which is an obstacle to our growth. Evils will take time in getting out but it needs to be eliminated. We need strong will power, perseverance (determination) and complete dedication to root them out. It is never so easy as these have got inside completely and we are required to put our utmost efforts.