



ST. LAWRENCE HIGH SCHOOL

A JESUIT CHRISTIAN MINORITY INSTITUTION



STUDY MATERIAL 1

Sub: ENGLISH 'B'

Class: XII

Topic : ON KILLING A TREE

Date: 06.05. 2020

About the poet: Gieve Patel is an Indian poet, playwright, painter, as well as a practising physician. He is an active member of the 'Green Movement' which is involved in an effort to protect the environment. His poems speak of deep concerns for nature and expose man's cruelty to it. He is popularly called 'the poet of the body' because most of his poems deal with the human body. He also shows a deep concern for the poor and marginalised sections of the society in his poetry. In his poems, Patel also raises questions about the human existence. He keenly analyses the problems that modern society faces. As a poet of the 'Green Movement', he expresses his anxiety and bitterness at man's cruelty to nature. His poetry shows his sympathy for nature and a powerful plea for a greener earth.

Summary of the poem: "On Killing a Tree" is a sensitive poem. The poet persuades the reader not to destroy trees and equates it with "killing" a human being. He says that a plant takes sunlight, water, air and nutrients from the soil to gradually become a huge tree. It develops a strong trunk and gets numerous leaves.

Merely cutting the trunk of the tree does not kill it. When a tree is cut, the sap flows out just like a wounded man bleeds. Once the wound heals, new branches and tiny leaves grow from there which over time will once again develop into a new tree. In order to destroy a tree, it has to be uprooted. The roots which are white in colour and are damp due to the moisture that they get from the soil are hidden in a pit in the Earth. These roots are the most sensitive part of the tree as they bind it to the earth. In order to kill the tree, these roots have to be detached from the soil. Once the roots are detached, the tree starts dying. It withers and dries up with the action of heat and wind, twists, hardens and finally, dies.

Form and Structure of the poem: The poem has no particular structure as such. It is written in an easy, free flowing style and reads as if the poet is having a conversation with us. Such a poem is what we call 'Free Verse'. In other words this verse or poem is free from the limitations of rhyme, rhythm and metre and hence is known as free verse.

Tone and Setting of the poem: The poem is set on a very visual plane. The poet gives us a very detailed process of how a tree is to be killed. The images are vivid and the mood is sad. A sense of darkness hangs upon the poem. The pain felt by the trees, as imagined by Patel, dominates the mood of the poem. The mood of the poem is therefore both tragic and sombre. However, the poet chooses sarcasm to convey the message of the poem. He takes an ironic stance to propose his actual view on cutting down trees, which according to him, is nothing short of committing an act of murder.

Theme or Central Idea of the poem: The poem is a moving description of man's insensible destruction of trees. Trees are our good friends. But, out of selfish greed, man kills trees for temporary gain. Man

does not care for its contribution to the growth of human civilization. Nor does man think about his own existence on earth. He ignores its aesthetic and environmental value. He adopts violent methods for killing a tree. This insensible act of killing a tree may bring about a serious environmental problem and puts entire human civilization at risk. Therefore, it is our duty to love and protect trees for the continuity of our own existence. The poet presents a conflict between man and nature. Trees are generous helpers and nature is the best healer. But man's greed and selfish interests knows no bounds. Man kills trees thoughtlessly. A woodcutter hacks and chops the tree down with his axe. The tree bleeds but heals itself. It even has the quality to forgive man because despite the endless torture, it rises again to protect mankind. However, despite its resilience, it ultimately surrenders itself to the evil desires and selfish greed of man. The poet presents the theme of extreme violence, pain and death by upholding the philosophy of non violence. The poet depicts man's cruelty and inhuman actions in order to arouse our love and sympathy for nature. He makes us aware against the rampant and reckless felling of trees and urges us to save nature for our own sake.

Critical Analysis of the poem: This poem works on several levels. On the literal level, the poem talks about the act of cutting down trees. The poet here hints towards rampant deforestation and through this very visual representation wishes to communicate to the readers the dangers of deforestation. He never directly advises the readers to stop cutting down trees. Instead, he goes on explaining with painstaking details as to how a tree should be cut down. He uses the trick of reverse psychology to make the readers realize the pain inflicted on trees. On another level, it is a social critique. It not only puts deforestation in a negative light, but it also exposes the violent nature of humans. What starts with a painful jab of the knife quickly moves on to brutal hacking and chopping with an axe. But soon realising that the tree is not going to buckle under this amount of pain, but that more agony and torture needs to be inflicted, human beings uproot the tree with terrible force. However, man is still not satisfied with such ghastly acts of violence. He will not stop till his goal of completely destroying the tree is achieved. So, man exposes the roots till they scorch and choke to death. If the tree is looked upon as another human being, then imagine the agony and suffering that a tree undergoes when it is killed. The poet clearly sympathises with the tree as a victim of man's cruelty and paints man as a serial killer who endlessly and senselessly kills trees for his own selfish greed and profit. However, this ruthless killing of trees comes at a terrible cost because by harming the environment, he actually harms himself and his own existence. In fact, the alarming results of deforestation and the terrible effects of global warming are now being felt by mankind. Hence, this poem is an apt one in the context of what is happening around us today.

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