

HEART OF A TREE

The Heart of the Tree: About the poem

The Heart of the Tree by the American poet and novelist Henry Cuyler Bunner is a fine piece of poetry with a simple theme and a simpler structure. The poem was originally published in 1912.

Planting a tree is always a great work for the mankind. But, the poet has found out new ways to look at the plants and plantation. In his poem *The Heart of the Tree* he glorifies the act further, shows how a tree helps life on earth and says that it has a direct connection to a nation's growth.

All the three stanzas of the poem *The Heart of the Tree* starts with a refrain with the poet asking what the man actually plants who plants a tree. Then he chooses to reply it by himself and shows what a tree means to the humankind and to the nature, thus proving how great that man is.

The rhythm is amazing. The rhyme scheme is ABABBCCAA for each stanza. This is a deviation from the celebrated Spenserian stanza, a nine line stanza with the scheme ABABBCBCC. Though the language is

simple, careful wordings makes the poem more expressive and obviously musical and attractive.

The Heart of the Tree: Line by line Explanation

First Stanza

What does he plant who plants a tree?
He plants a friend of sun and sky;

The poem opens with the refrain which asks “What does he plant who plants a tree?” and that sets the tone for the entire poem. We instantly realize that the poet is going to explain the usefulness of planting a tree. However, the poet himself answers by stating that the man plants a friend of sun and sky by planting a tree.

A plant grows upwards and aims to reach the sun and the sky. So it is as if the sun and the sky get a new friend in a tree. Secondly, the tree needs sunlight and air to survive. And finally, the trees seem to absorb the heat and save the earth from the scorching sun, giving an implication that the sun becomes friendly in the presence of the trees.

He plants the flag of breezes free;
The shaft of beauty towering high;

The speaker now adds that the man plants a flag that flies freely in the mild breeze. The poet here compares the leafy branches of the tree to a flag and the stem to the beautiful shaft (pole) of the flag that stands tall.

He plants a home to heaven anigh;
For song and mother-croon of bird

By planting a tree the man plants a home for the sweet singing birds high in the sky, near the heaven. So, he keeps the earth habitable for birds and helps in maintaining the eco-system.

In hushed and happy twilight heard—
The treble of heaven's harmony—
These things he plants who plants a tree.

In quiet and happy twilight we can hear those birds chirping which is harmonious to heaven's own tunes.

In the entire first stanza of *The Heart of the Tree*, the poet accentuates the importance of trees in maintaining the holistic beauty of nature. Moreover, the use of words like 'heaven anigh', 'heaven's harmony' and 'towering high' is aimed at giving an impression that the work of planting a tree is indeed a heavenly and glorious deed.

The finishing line of the stanza forms a logical whole with the opening line, one asking a question and the other completing the answer.

Second Stanza

What does he plant who plants a tree?
He plants cool shade and tender rain,

So, the poet repeats the question to begin a new stanza and attempts to answer again in the subsequent lines. The tree he plants provides us with cool shade and helps in bringing rain.

And seed and bud of days to be,
And years that fade and flush again;

A tree will produce seed and bud in future. Years will pass silently but the tree will remain there through its seeds producing new trees.

He plants the glory of the plain;
He plants the forest's heritage;

Trees are the main elements that make a plain area green and beautiful. So the poet describes trees as 'the glory of the plain'. Moreover, today's single tree may turn into a

forest someday. So by planting a tree now the man plants a 'forest's heritage'.

The harvest of a coming age;
The joy that unborn eyes shall see—
These things he plants who plants a tree.

The speaker mentions that planting a tree today would give fruits in coming days. Our next generations would be delighted seeing so much vegetation and reap its benefits. So all the credit goes to the man who plants a tree.

In this stanza of the poem *The Heart of the Tree* the poet stresses on the importance of planting a tree for making this earth a better living place for future generations.

Third stanza

What does he plant who plants a tree?
He plants in sap and leaf and wood,
In love of home and loyalty
And far-cast thought of civic good—
His blessings on the neighbourhood,

By planting a tree the man shows his love and loyalty for this earth (his home), his sense of civic duty and his

blessings on the neighbourhood. All these are reflected in the ‘sap and leaf and wood’, in every cell of the tree.

Who in the hollow of His hand
Holds all the growth of all our land—
A nation’s growth from sea to sea
Stirs in his heart who plants a tree.

By planting a tree the man directly or indirectly contributes to the nation’s growth. When a tree is planted, it sets in motion the progress of a nation from sea to sea. And all these start from the progressive thought in the man’s heart who plants a tree.

The capitalization in ‘His’ indicates that the man who plants a tree is all-powerful and the destiny-maker of a nation.

This last line is very important as it talks about the man’s heart, his feelings, dreams and wishes behind planting the tree. This also leads to the poem’s **title** ‘The Heart of the Tree’.

Thus the poet Henry Cuyler Bunner ends up composing an uncommon piece of poetry in ‘The Heart of the Tree’ out of a common and cliché topic – the usefulness of planting a tree.

FIGURE OF SPEECH

Alliteration

The poet has deployed **alliteration** in many places to add to the rhythm of the poem. Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning or stressed syllables of words. Some examples are:

What does he **p**lant who **p**lants a tree?
He plants a friend of **s**un and **s**ky;
He plants a **h**ome to **h**eaven anigh;
In **h**ushed and **h**appy twilight **h**eard —
The treble of **h**eaven's **h**armony —

Personification

The poet **personifies** the tree when he calls it ‘a friend of sun and sky’.

Metaphor

Metaphor is an implied comparison between two different things where there is a point of similarity.

“the flag of breezes free” and “the shaft of beauty towering high” are examples of metaphors in the poem. Here the leafy branches of a tree are compared to a flag and the stem is compared to a beautiful shaft standing high.

Circumlocution

In a circumlocution something is referred to in a roundabout way, using different words rather than stating it directly.

Using “days to be” for “future” and “unborn eyes” for “next generations” are examples of circumlocution in the poem.

Metonymy

Metonymy is a figure of speech where one word or phrase is substituted by another one closely associated with it.

In the first stanza of this poem, there are two metonyms.

| He plants a home to **heaven** anigh; (near the heaven).

Here, ‘heaven’ represents the sky, as we normally think that the heaven is situated somewhere up in the sky. The poet actually means that the man who plants a tree also plants a home for bird high in the sky.

| The **treble** of heaven’s harmony —

Here, ‘treble’ (the pitch range of highest female voice) is used to mean the song or simply the sound which birds make.

| The joy that unborn **eyes** shall see —

‘Eyes’ here means the child, a part of body representing the whole. Thus it can also be classified as a **synecdoche**, a class of metonymy.

| He plants in **sap and leaf and wood**,

This is another instance of metonymy (and synecdoche) where ‘sap and leaf and wood’ refers to a tree. Parts refer to the whole once again.

Hypallage / Transferred Epithet

Transferred epithet (adjective) is a figure of speech where an adjective grammatically qualifies a noun other than the person or thing it is actually describing.

| In hushed and **happy** twilight heard

Here, the adjective ‘happy’ is used with twilight, though it means people’s happiness in that hour.

Enumeration

Enumeration is the act of listing things one by one. It is “a type of amplification or division in which a subject is further distributed into components or parts”.

In the poem, the poet has conveyed three different benefits of plantation in three different stanzas: maintaining the beauty of nature, duties to future generations and contribution to nation’s growth.

Polysyndeton

Polysyndeton is close repetition of conjunctions

| He plants in sap **and** leaf **and** wood,