

## Heartwood

By Robert Macfarlane

### SUMMARY

The speaker is a tree speaking to a woodcutter, asking him why he is cutting it to the core, leaving it vulnerable. It asks him to see its leaves trembling and to put his ear to its bark to hear its sap muttering, perhaps in fear. It asks him why he wants to cut it down into logs for timber and brush to be burnt as kindling. To let the cutter know what he is destroying, it tells him that it makes life, absorbs rain water, breaks down rocks, provides shade and keeps us cool by providing shade from the Sun. It keeps the record of time in terms of eons, it helps us to breathe and to know we are interdependent. It is the whole world for creatures like butterflies and birds and takes much longer to grow than our cities and countries. And yet, the woodcutter can cut it down in a few seconds. It asks the woodcutter if he has heard it pleading its cause; if he or his employers have any feelings since they seem heartless in cutting it down.

### THEME

Trees have life too.

### Figures of Speech

1. Repetition

of 'utter'- cutter- cutter- mutter- flutter- cutter  
of 'er' – maker- breaker- keeper- giver  
of 'I am'  
of questions

2. Apostrophe

The tree addresses the cutter directly as if speaking to him.

3. Personification: The tree is shown as speaking like human beings.

4. Metaphor: The tree is indirectly compared to a world, cities and country etc.

### UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

Answer these questions.

**1. Who is the speaker of this poem? Who is being addressed?**

Ans:-The speaker of this poem is a tree. The tree is addressing a woodcutter who has come to cut down the tree. Which different features of the speaker do these characters emphasize? The speaker calls herself a maker of life. This is because trees are beneficial to life...Two of these characters, mentioned in

stanza-5, need to be imagined rather than observed. One of them is 'time-keeper'. What is other? Why does the speaker call herself by these names?

**2. The word 'open-hearted' means kind and honest. Read the third line of the poem. What could the word mean in this context?**

Ans:- In this context, the word 'open- hearted' means wounded , hurt and open to pain and damage.

**3. Put an ear to my bark, cutter**

**a. Why does the speaker ask the cutter to put his ear to the bark?**

Ans:- The speaker ask the cutter to put his ear to the bark so that he can try to hear the soft sound of the sap flowing inside the tree.

**b. What else does the speaker request the cutter to do?**

Ans:- The speaker also requests the cutter to listen to the flutter of the tree's leaves and try to imagine the heartbeat of the tree.

**c. Which other question does the speaker ask right after this, in the third stanza?**

Ans :- In the third stanza, the speaker asks the cutter whether he would turn the living tree into timber- if he would reduce the tree to heap of logs and a pile of brash.

**4. The speaker compares herself to places(stanza 4-5). Name the three places the speaker identifies with and explain why she identifies with them.**

Ans :- In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the speaker calls herself a world, a city of butterflies, and a country of creatures. She calls herself a world because as a big and strong tree, with her fruits, flowers, leaves, branches and the different creatures that live in the tree and depend on her; she is a world in herself. She is a city of butterflies as many butterflies must be visiting her, living near or in the tree. She is a country of creatures as different kinds of creatures live among her branches and roots, such as birds, squirrels and different kinds of insects.

**5. Read the sixth stanza. How does the speaker show herself to be both mighty and vulnerable (open to attack or harm) at the same time?**

Ans:- In this sixth stanza, the tree says that her world takes years to grow and seconds to destroy. She can be felled by an axe or a saw. The tree is mighty because she has grown big and strong over the years. At the same time ,she is vulnerable as in spite of her size and strength, a saw or an axe can break her down in a very short time.

**6. Do you hear these words I utter?**

**a. Why does the speaker ask this question? Why is it a very important question ?**

Ans:- The speaker asks this question because she is not sure whether, she has been able to communicate her thoughts and worries to the cutter. It is a very important question-it is important whether the cutter can or cannot hear the question-because only if he hears what the tree has to say can he decide to not cut it down.

**b. How can the listener hear the words of the speaker? Would he have to listen very carefully or would he need something else?**

Ans:- To really hear the words of the speaker(the tree), that is, to understand the concerns and fears of the speaker, the cutter needs patience, kindness and imagination. He needs to stop and think about how beneficial the tree is to different creatures; he needs to see and imagine how strong and beautiful and important it is. Then only can he realise the things that the tree is saying and decide to not cut the tree. He cannot actually hear the tree speak.

### **APPRECIATING THE POEM**

- 1. a) Look at the meaning of the word 'heartwood'. Then, read the poem. Does the poem suggest any other meaning of the word? How would that meaning be similar to or different from the usual meaning of the word?**

Ans:- Yes, the poem suggests another meaning of the word 'heartwood'- the very heart or life centre of the tree. This meaning is similar to the usual meaning as both these meaning refer to the inner part of the tree. It is different from the usual meaning as it suggests that the tree actually has a beating heart and not just a hard, dense inside.

- 1 b) Now ,read the last but one line of the poem. How can the cutter have heartwood?**

Ans:- If the cutter has a kind and big heart, then he might have heartwood. If he is sensitive and patient and soft- hearted, he might see the cruelty in cutting down the tree and decide to not fell it, thus showing that he has heartwood, like the tree.

- 2. The speaker identifies herself as eight characters(stanzas,4-5).What are these eight characters?**

Ans:- The speaker calls herself a maker of life . This is because trees are beneficial to life. Trees attract rainfall and roots help to break down big rocks. The roots of trees help the soil to absorb rain water, a caster of shade because the tree provides shade; an eater of sun because a tree needs sunlight to grow . She is breath- giver because she provides us with oxygen which we breathe in.

Apart from time- keeper, the other character mentioned in stanza 5 that needs to be imagined rather than observed is deep- thinker. The speaker calls herself a time- keeper because an old tree is witness to many changes over a long period of time and thus keeps record of the time that has passed. She is a deep- thinker because she can silently watch and think about and understand many things.

- 3. I am a world, cutter**

**This is a metaphor as it indirectly compares one thing to another, without ,using words such as 'like' or 'as'. The line does not say, 'I am as vast as a world'. Find two more metaphors in the fifth stanza of the poem.**

Ans:- Two metaphors mentioned in the fifth stanza of the poem are 'I am city of butterflies' and (I am)a country of creatures.

**4. Read the last line of the poem . From a speech addressed to one person, this line raises the poem to a different, more universal level. How does it do that?**

Ans:-Till the last line, the poem reads like a speech addressed by the speaker – the tree- to a single person- the cutter. The tree describes herself to the cutter and asks him to consider whether he really wants to cut her down . In the last line, however, the speaker asks, ‘ Have those who sent you?’ , meaning, ‘Do the people who sent you to cut me have heartwood- or,a heart?’ This reminds us that often, woodcutters are sent by other people to cut down trees for wood or to clear an area. So, the decision to fell trees may not lie with the woodcutter himself, but with others, who do not come themselves to cut down the trees, but who are actually responsible for the felling. These decisions are taken for various reasons . In fact, many of us may use different products that require the felling of trees, without even being aware of it. Thus the speaker’s appeal is a universal appeal to everyone who, in some way or the other , encourages , supports or accepts the felling of trees.

**LONG QUESTION ANSWER :-**

**1. What is the message conveyed in the poem ‘Heartwood’?**

Ans:- The poem "heartwood" has been written by Robert Macfarlane. In this poem, the poet is trying to convey a message about saving the trees. It is a known fact that trees are being cut indiscriminately, giving rise to global warming. The poet is concerned about the importance of nature and protection of our environment. In the poem the poet stresses on this aspect by personifying the tree. The tree sadly asks the cutter if he would cause it a grievous injury by heartlessly cutting it down. The tree reminds the cutter that it acts as a provider in many respects and that it takes years to grow. The tree pleads with the cutter to listen to its pleas and wonders whether the cutter and the people who have sent him to cut it down have a heart at all. The poet stresses the fact that we need more and more trees to survive on earth.

**2. What are the feelings of tree in the poem ‘Heartwood’?**

Ans:- The personified tree in the poem speaks to a wood cutter, expressing its anguish for cutting it to the core, leaving it wounded and damaged. The speaker in distress asks the cutter to put his ear on the bark and listen to the soft sap flowing inside the tree to understand its traumatic feelings and to listen his heartbeat and trembling of leaves to reveal it’s fear and anxiety. The speaker enquires the wood cutter whether he would turn the living tree into lifeless timber , and reduce it to the heaps of logs for buildings and kindling. The tree (speaker) wanted the cutter to realize the destruction. The tree describes its beneficial aspects and declares itself as the maker of life and cutter as the destroyer of life . It proclaims itself as the giver of life – as it attracts rainfall ,absorbs rain ,grow branches and leaves that provide shade from the sun and breaks the rocks by spreading its roots .It

regards itself as time keeper as the old tree witness all the changes over a long period of time and thus keeps a record of everything .