

Charlotte Mew: The Trees are Down

“ – and he cried with a loud voice:

Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees –“

Spring in a London house. A group of workmen are busy cutting down a cluster of plane trees at the end of the garden. Our speaker watches sadly from a window. The job has taken several days, but now they are on the last tree. They talk and laugh as they work, the sounds of crashing branches, the grate of saws and their coarse laughter dominating the site. The watcher is reminded of another spring, many years ago, in which she came across the body of a dead rat. She remembers feeling shocked – even though rats are low and dirty creatures, Spring is a time for new life. She thinks that even rats deserve their day in the sun. Today, that feeling returns, but magnified a hundred-fold. As the poem ends, we realise the speaker is sad to her core. She grew up in this house, with these trees; they shared the same seasons, endured the same storms and enjoyed the same sunny days. When the men carry off the trees, she feels as if they carry half her childhood away with them.

While it is often advisable to remember that the writer and the speaker of a poem are not always the same, in this case *The Trees are Down* can be read autobiographically. Mew lived in a house in Euston Square Gardens when, in 1922, workers cleared the south gardens of great plane trees in order to begin new construction. As well as being a reaction to this incident, the poem reflects broader concerns in Mew's life. Around the same time as the tree-felling, her mother passed away and she wrote this in 1928, just after her sister Anne died as well. Charlotte was distraught at the death of her sister, who was her lifelong companion, and the poem reveals both grief and a profound fear of inescapable death.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this poem?

1. What kind of trees are cut down in the poem?

- (a) Oak.
- (b) Ash.
- (c) Plane.
- (d) Sycamore.

2. From which book of the bible does Mew quote before the poem starts?

- (a) Romans.
- (b) Corinthians.
- (c) Jude.
- (d) Revelations.

3. What is the name of this type of quotation, that prefaces a poetic work?

- (a) Epithet.
- (b) Epigram.
- (c) Epilogue.
- (d) Episode.

4. With the 'whoops' and the _____

- (a) Whoas
- (b) Whys.
- (c) Whees.
- (d) Whahays.

5. Of what dead creature is the speaker reminded?

- (a) Dog.
- (b) Rat.
- (c) Bird.
- (d) Hamster.

6. My heart has been _____ with the hearts of the planes...

- (a) Blessed.
- (b) Struck.
- (c) Broken.
- (d) Filled.

7. The trunk or 'torso' of a tree is called what?

- (a) Bough.
- (b) Branch.
- (c) Stump.
- (d) Bole.

8. What does the speaker call the trees?

- (a) Rustling beauty.
- (b) Whispering loveliness.
- (c) Sighing majesty.
- (d) Weeping gracefulness.

9. It is not for a moment the Spring is _____ today...

- (a) Ruined.
- (b) Spoiled.
- (c) Un-made.
- (d) Ended.

10. Who cries: 'Hurt not the trees'?

- (a) An angel.
- (b) The speaker.
- (c) The workmen.
- (d) The sky.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Look carefully at the first verse. What does the speaker think of the men and their actions? How does she express her feelings?
2. How are the trees described throughout the poem? Are they humanised in any way?
3. What do you think is the significance of the rat remembered by the speaker in verses two and three?
4. What do you notice about the **shape** and form of verse three? Can you comment on the changes in the way this verse has been written?
5. What does the speaker mean when she says in line 20: *'Half the spring, for me, will have gone with them'*?
6. How does the final verse suggest that the trees are part of a larger web of life?

Poetry Study: *sensory imagery*

‘...the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall...’

The first line of the poem introduces the scene in a simple and straightforward way: a group of workmen are cutting down the plane trees which grow in the garden. Once this knowledge is established, however Mew doesn't show us the scene – instead she employs intense **sound imagery** so that we can hear, rather than see, and experience the destruction through our ears. The effect is akin to sitting in our houses and hearing the sudden noise of a construction site destroying the peace of the morning.

Therefore, much of the first stanza is a list of the sounds that create an auditory picture of the chaotic scene. These sounds include: the grate of the saw the workmen use to strip the trees of their branches; the crashes as they throw each branch to the ground; the rustle of leaves as they pile up on the floor; and the shouts and jeers of the workmen as they enjoy their work. In some ways, this last sound is most troubling as it suggests the careless and nonchalant attitude of other people towards the destruction of the natural world. From the speaker's perspective, the noise is painful and hard to bear. Yet the workmen show no such empathy for the great trees that they are so callously destroying.

Accordingly, the first stanza is a masterclass in the use of sound techniques in poetry. The effects employed are given in this table, along with an example of their use. Study this table, find the given example in the first stanza – and see if you can identify and annotate further examples in stanza one (reprinted below):

Auditory Technique	Definition	Example from <i>The Trees are Down</i>
Consonance: dental	Made with the letters D and T, dental is created by pushing the tongue against the upper teeth. It can be short and sharp, evoking ideas of pain, violence, or sudden movement. Classed as a hard sound, it often, but not always, creates negative effects.	<i>They are <u>cut</u>ting <u>d</u>own the <u>gr</u>eat <u>pl</u>ane- <u>t</u>rees <u>a</u>t the <u>e</u>nd of the <u>g</u>ard<u>e</u>ns.</i>
Consonance: guttural	Made at the back of the mouth and top of the throat, guttural is another hard sound. It can create unpleasant, 'rough' effects linked to danger (such as the sound of a growl) or other negative feelings.	<i>They are <u>cut</u>ting down the <u>gr</u>eat <u>pl</u>ane- <u>t</u>rees at the end of the <u>g</u>arden</i>
Consonance: sibilance	The repetition of S, Z or Sh, sibilance is a softer sound. It can create effects linked to the wind, water, and other natural sounds. Symbolically, sibilance can be linked to evil and danger by creating the hissing sound of a snake.	<i>The <u>s</u>wish of the <u>br</u>anch<u>e</u>s <u>a</u>s they <u>f</u>all</i>
Cacophony	A mixture of different hard or sharp consonant sounds (normally three or more) that do not blend or harmonise is cacophony. Cacophony is harsh and unpleasant to listen to.	<i>For <u>d</u>ays there has <u>b</u>een the <u>gr</u>ate of the <u>s</u>aw</i>
Assonance	The repetition of vowel sounds in a line or line of poetry. These sounds can be at the beginning of or within words that are relatively close together.	<i>For <u>a</u>ys there has been the <u>a</u>te of the <u>a</u>w</i>
Onomatopoeia	Words that evoke the sound they describe are called onomatopoeia. Examples are words like 'bang', 'snap', and 'crackle'.	<i>Swish</i>

Activity

Annotate the first verse of *The Trees are Down* in as much detail as you can with the sound techniques you can identify and the effects you think they create:

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the end of the gardens.

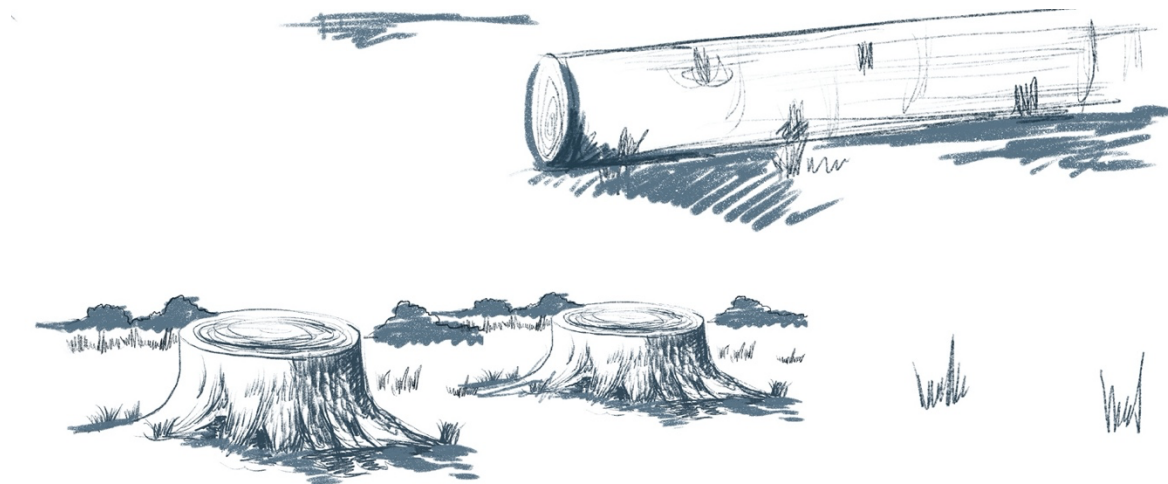
For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall,

The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,

With the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas,' the loud common talk, the loud common laughs
of the men, above it all.

Additional Effects:

- What do you notice about the use of rhyme in the first verse? Identify the rhyme scheme. How does rhyme contribute to the effects of the scene?
- Scan this verse to find the rhythm and meter. How does this contribute to your ideas?
- Can you see examples of structural features such as repetition, anaphora, parallelism and the like? How do these techniques add to the impact of the scene?
- Add a comment about punctuation, in particular asyndeton (the use of commas in a list of actions).



Poetry Study: *symbolism*

'I remember one evening of a long past spring... finding a large dead rat in the mud...'

Symbolism is a device seen in all genres of literature and beyond: prose, poetry, drama, even visual texts such as adverts and graphic novels make extensive use of symbolism. A **symbol** is a concrete thing – often an object, person, action, sound or similar phenomenon – that represents something abstract: an idea, concept, thought or emotion. In this way symbols are similar to metaphors or similes, except the comparison is left unstated. The reader must find the second half of the comparison for themselves, making symbols a little more mysterious or ambiguous.

The Trees are Down is a highly **symbolic** poem. Below are five symbols from the poem alongside the abstract ideas they represent. Can you match each symbol to the correct idea?



Hearts

Representing all the stages and experiences of life that the speaker has shared with the trees and also a way to symbolise the passing of times – both good and bad.



Spring

A traditional symbol of emotion, but here it is also a symbol used to connect the speaker and the trees. Therefore, this symbol suggests that all living things have emotion and deserve to be allowed to live in their own way.



Rat

A symbol of Christian morality suggesting that the preservation of the natural world is a religious duty. Also an ominous symbol warning of dire consequences should mankind stray from their religious and moral responsibilities.



Wind, rain and sun

A traditional symbol of life and rebirth, often associated with feelings of joy and renewed optimism.



Angel

Representing the shock and fear of death, in particular the injustice of an undeserved and untimely death. A stand-in for any living creature – plant or animal – who's death is deemed unimportant.

- Now create your own explanation for the symbol of the great plane-trees:



Plane-trees

Study Questions

Practice writing analytical paragraphs by including embedded quotation and comment on the effect of words, images, or poetic and literary devices.

1. Why does the poem begin and end with a religious **allusion**? How do the **epigram** and final line frame the major themes of the poem?
2. How are the men in the poem presented? In what ways does Mew establish the opposition of the human and natural world?
3. Discuss the use of **sound imagery** in the first stanza, including **consonance**, **assonance** and **onomatopoeia**? What is the cumulative effect of all these techniques?
4. Explain the **symbolism** of the dead rat? How does the rat convey wider ideas about the fear of death?
5. Explore the way trees are presented. What is the effect of **personification** in the descriptions of the trees?
6. How does Mew end her poem in an effective and moving way? Comment on the methods she uses in the last verse.

Did You Know?

Living through the Second Industrial Revolution, Mew witnessed the precipitous growth of manufacturing, industry – and the attendant pollution and destruction of the natural world. Her small circle of friends included natural scientists who would contribute to the emerging scientific field of ecology. Mew was greatly influenced by these people and developed strong environmental concerns. In 1913 she published an essay called ‘*Men and Trees*,’ describing the essential contribution of trees to the health – including the mental and emotional health – of people, and protesting the felling of trees.