

**English Literature**

**Class:IX**

**Part: 4**

# The Heart of the Tree

—Henry Cuyler Bunner

What does he plant who plants a tree?

He plants a friend of sun and sky;

He plants the flag of breezes free;

The shaft of beauty, towering high;

He plants a home to heaven anigh;

For song and mother-croon of bird

In hushed and happy twilight heard--

The treble of heaven's harmony--

These things he plants who plants a tree.

What does he plant who plants a tree?

He plants cool shade and tender rain,

And seed and bud of days to be,

And years that fade and flush again;

He plants the glory of the plain

He plants the forest's heritage;

The harvest of a coming age;

The joy that unborn eyes shall see--

These things he plants who plants a tree.

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 neighborhood  
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.

James Patrick Kinney

James Patrick Kinney is an American poet who wrote  
this poem in the 1930s. Although it was first reported as  
being too sentimental it gained popularity rapidly after it  
had been read out at a concert meeting of all neighbors.  
The poem describes the ways in which a group of six  
who stand around a fire - each holding an empty tin to a log in  
wood. Allowing their selfishness, prejudice, rivalry and  
ambitions to dictate their actions they strive to share the  
log to their own ends and keep each other warm.  
Eventually the fire dies out and in the morning all six are  
there are found lying in death each clutching a tin which  
holds a log that could have so easily saved them. It only  
that had someone the night before cut a hole in the tin and  
allowed the fire to burn down to the bottom.

The poem is a warning to the poet's contemporaries that they  
were living in a world of selfishness and rivalry and  
that unless they changed their ways they would be doomed  
of ruin, a warning which was not heeded at the time.



## ASSIGNMENTS

I. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

*What does he plant who plants a tree?*

*He plants a friend of sun and sky;*

*He plants the flag of breezes free;*

*The shaft of beauty, towering high;*

*He plants a home to heaven anigh;*

- (i) To whom is the poet asking the question in the first line of the extract? Mention any two things, according to the extract, that man will do by planting trees.

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- (ii) Give the meaning of the following lines:

*He plants a friend of sun and sky;*

*He plants the flag of breezes free;*

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- (iii) In what way are the trees friends of sun and sky? How can a man plant the flag of breezes free?

(iv) What is meant by "the shaft of beauty"? What is compared to the shaft?

(v) What is the impact of beginning the poem with a question? What is the figure of speech used here?

**II. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.**

*For song and mother-croon of bird  
In hushed and happy twilight heard—  
The treble of heaven's harmony—  
These things he plants who plants a tree.*

(i) What is known as mother-croon of bird? Why is the song sung in a hushed voice?

(ii) What is twilight? Why is it a *happy* twilight?

(iii) What is meant by (a) *treble* (b) *heaven's harmony*? What role does the treble play in heaven's harmony?

(iv) In this lesson, under the heading, *Style*, the meaning of metonymy is given. Give two examples of metonymy from the extract. How is it used in the context?

(v) Give four functions which a tree performs on this Earth.

III. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

He plants cool shade and tender rain  
And seed and bud of days to be,  
And years that fade and flush again,  
He plants the forest's heritage;  
The harvest of a coming age;  
The joy that unborn eyes shall see—

(i) Enumerate any three benefits of planting trees as suggested by the poet in this extract. What do the plants do to provide cool shade?

(ii) The water evaporates, condenses and falls as rain. What role do the trees play in this process of producing rain?



- (iii) How do the last two lines of the extract explain the process of regeneration?  
How does the man plant the forest's heritage?

- (iv) How do the trees provide for the harvest of the following years?

- (v) What does the expression *unborn eyes* indicate? What will they see that would bring them joy?

**IV. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:**

*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,  
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.*



- (i) The poet says: "*He plants, in sap and leaf and wood*". Which figure of speech is used here? Explain its usage with two other examples from the poem.

- (ii) What is meant by "far-cast thought of civic good"? In what way is the planter's work a blessing? State for whom it is a blessing.

- (iii) Give the meaning of the following lines:

*Who in the hollow of His hand  
Holds all the growth of all our land—*

- (iv) In what way a nation's growth depends on planting trees?

- (v) Comment on the appropriateness of the title of the poem *The Heart of the Tree*.

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To answer these questions you can take help from  
the following study material:



# 1 The Heart of the Tree

Henry Cuyler Bunner (1855–1896)

## INTRODUCTION

*The Heart of the Tree* is a poem written by American novelist and poet, Henry Cuyler Bunner. By asking the question in the first line of every stanza in the poem, "What does he plant who plants a tree?" he wants the readers to think about the answer and then he himself gives the answer. Bunner appreciates trees not only for their aesthetic value but also for their role in human welfare. For him, a tree proves to be a friend of the sun and the sky and contributes positively for the growth of a nation.

### The Poet

Henry Cuyler Bunner was born on August 3, 1855, in New York. He was educated in New York City. He turned to journalism, after working as a clerk in a business establishment house. In 1877, he became the assistant editor of the comic weekly, *Puck*.

*Puck* was a new periodical then, fighting for its survival, but Bunner's literary skills and hard work developed it into a powerful social and political media. It is believed that Bunner's prose style never attained literary perfection, but it has its charm in its simplicity. Bunner died on May 11, 1896, at a young age of forty one.

**His works:** Bunner was known primarily as the editor of the humour magazine, *Puck*. Besides, he published several other works. His published works include: *A Woman of Honor* (1883), *Airs from Arcady* (1884), *The Midge* (1886), and *In Partnership* (1889). Bunner's fiction, particularly *Made in France*, reflects the influence of Guy de Maupassant and other French writers. As a playwright, he is known mainly for *Tower of Babel*.

## THE POEM

### Signposts

- The title 'The Heart of the Tree' suggests the most important quality of the tree.
- The poet asks a simple question at the beginning of every stanza and suggests the answer to the question.
- The poet in a simple way describes the importance of planting trees.
- Plants are our true friends; they provide us with cool breeze.
- Plants are the embodiment of beauty.
- The man who plants trees provides joy to all — to birds, to animals and to human beings.
- Plants cause rain and thus are a source of regeneration.
- They enrich our forests and provide food to man and animals.
- The man who plants a tree serves his neighbourhood in many ways.
- He helps the country in its progress.
- His heart is overjoyed because by planting a tree he helps his country to grow from sea to sea.

**1. Importance of Trees for our Survival:** The poet knows the crucial importance of trees for our survival. Trees cool the atmosphere and cause gentle rain. They are the source of "breezes free", i.e., the trees take in carbon dioxide and give out oxygen for human beings to inhale. Also transpiration from plants is an important process in Earth's water cycle, which is essential for rain. Trees bear flowers and fruits. The seeds that fall from the plants sprout again, and give birth to many new plants. In this way, they create dense forests. These forests will prove as a boon for the future generations.

The plants provide us with all essential nutrients for our body. They are the main source of medicine and wood. Wood is a very important trade product and thus its import and export within countries enriches the economy of a nation. Therefore, the poet indirectly requests all human beings to plant trees



for the well being of society. He becomes more anxious and firmly says that the growth of the nation depends on plants. Tree plantation, thus indeed is a "blessing on the neighbourhood."

2. **Concern for the Future of the Earth:** The poem brings forward the poet's concern about the future of the Earth. It seems as if the poet could see the impending destruction and thus indirectly appeals to the readers to plant trees, not only for themselves but also for the future generations. According to the poet, our survival is greatly dependent on forests. Trees not only beautify environment, but purify the air, cause rain and provide us with wood, timber, fruits and medicines. The one who plants a tree, plants the entire forest. This forest is thus the "harvest", the "coming age" can enjoy. Without trees the world will become a deserted barren land and all the living beings would face hunger. Thus, it is the tree which is responsible for the growth of mankind. The poet seems to be anxious about "unborn eyes" and thus for their survival, growth and development, he suggests a simple solution, i.e., to plant trees.

## STYLE

1. **Form and Structure:** The general pattern followed in the poem is that of the raising a question and then immediately providing an answer to that question. Literally this technique is known as **Hypophora** or **Antipophora**. The poet begins each stanza of the poem with the question, "What does he plant who plants a tree?" The answer given each time delineates the importance of trees in different spheres of human life. This repetition of the same question at the beginning of each stanza is intentionally done to create curiosity or anxiety in the readers to know more about the poem.
2. **Rhyming Scheme:** The poem does not have a particular rhyme scheme but the poet has used rhyme to add life to the poem. With the use of rhyme, the worth of trees comes out vividly. The rhyming words add to the poem's lyrical quality. These words are 'tree', 'free'; 'sky', 'high'; 'rain', 'again'; 'heritage', 'age'; 'wood', 'good'; etc.



**3. Alliteration:** It is the close repetition of consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words. For example:

- (i) He plants a friend of sun and sky;
- (ii) He plants the flag of breezes free;
- (iii) He plants a home to heaven anigh;
- (iv) In hushed and happy twilight hear---
- (v) And years that fade and flush again;

**4. Metonymy:** Metonymy is a figure of speech in which a thing or concept is called not by its own name but rather by a metonym, that is, by the name of something associated in meaning with that thing or concept. As we can see, whole of the poem runs on a series of metonymic associations of a tree with its qualities. According to the poet, the one who plants a tree, plants: "cool shade", "tender rain", "a friend of sun and sky", "the forest's heritage", "sap and leaf and wood", etc. These phrases here are thus metonyms, as they bear direct association with a tree.

## CRITICAL REMARKS

**Title:** "The Heart of the Tree" is an appropriate title. The heart is one of the most important organs in the entire human body. The human heart pumps the blood, which carries all the vital materials and nutrients. Only when the heart pumps the blood, it is able to transport oxygen from one part of the body to another. Likewise, a tree has certain qualities, which are as essential as human heart, for survival. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and give out life-giving oxygen for us to inhale; trees cause rainfall; trees are essential for "the harvest of a coming age"; trees like human heart provide us with "sap and leaf and wood", i.e., all the required minerals, nutrients and material things. According to the poet, the one who plants trees, plants "seed and bud of days to be", i.e., the tree, in itself can be compared to a heart. Heart maintains human life; so does the tree maintain the plant and animal life on the Earth. *The Heart* here thus signifies the most important quality of the tree. It can be concluded that the title is appropriate as the poem is about trees and their importance for the survival of mankind.