

THE SINGING TREE

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This enquiry was written for the educational charity GROW.

<https://www.grow-up.co/> (<http://%E2%80%8Bhttps://www.grow-up.co/>)

The story is based on the Swiss tale The Singing Fir Tree, as told by Sheryl Ann Karas. <http://spiritoftrees.org/the-singing-fir-tree> (<http://spiritoftrees.org/the-singing-fir-tree>)

The text in brackets can be omitted or included depending on how open you'd like the comprehension questions to be. The Nested Questions in the comprehension might be best left out unless they emerge from answers to the Comprehension Questions.

THE STORY

There was once a master woodcarver who lived in a small town in the mountains. Many of the buildings in the town were decorated by her incredible handiwork. Her masterpiece was the town hall. It was adorned with statues of the town's heroes, delicate patterns and bold lettering telling the history of the town.

The woodcarver lived on the edge of town near the great forest. One evening when the town bell was ringing out the time, the woodcarver heard a strange, but beautiful singing that seemed to come from deep in the forest and drift to her ears through the tops of the trees. The seventh bell rang out, the singing rose up into the sky, and then all was silent again.

After that, the woodcarver would sit by her window every evening and listen for the singing. And every hour [as the town bell rang out the time] she heard the wonderful sound. She asked her neighbours if they could hear it too and they said, yes, they also heard the [hourly] music. Together they speculated about the bird, beast or person that might be making the divine tune.

Comprehension Question 1:

- ✓ Where do you think the singing was coming from?

Nested Qs - Epistemology. For example: How could the woodcarver find out? Could the woodcarver work out where the singing is coming from just by thinking? What would it be rational for the woodcarver to believe? What is the best explanation for X? What makes something the best explanation for X? Is the best explanation always the right answer?

The woodcarver became tired of speculating about who or what was singing, so one evening she set off into the woods to find out. Whilst it was quiet, she wandered among the huge trees of the ancient forest. When the singing started, she ran straight towards it, dodging branches and leaping over twisting roots. It went quiet again, but the woodcarver managed to stay on a straight path for the next hour. When the singing started once more, she realised she was very close to its source. She came into a clearing that bumped up into a small hill on the mountain side. Bursting out from the top of the hill was a giant fir tree that must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of years old. She climbed up to it and was astonished to find that the singing seemed to be coming from its trunk [vibrating out from the wrinkly bark]. Turning around to get her bearings, the woodcarver could see the top of the town hall tower peaking above the lower trees. That night, the woodcarver told her neighbours what she had discovered and every evening afterwards they all hiked through the forest to sit and listen to the wonderful signing tree.

Comprehension Question 2

- ✓ Why do you think the tree was singing? [or: How do you think the tree was singing?]

Nested Qs

Miracles, Magic, and Belief (depending on answers). For example: Is the singing tree a miracle? Is it magic? Can miracles (or magic) happen? When can we believe the unbelievable? Is it rational to believe in miracles (or magic)? (See 'The Talking Skull' in *40 lessons* (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/shop/63-40-lessons-to-get-children-thinking>) for more ideas).

After many visits to the singing tree, the woodcarver became obsessed with making a special carving for the town hall that would sing every hour for all the townspeople to hear. It would be her most impressive work. People would come for miles around to see it. She would become famous, maybe even rich. After careful persuasion, the town council agreed to cut down the tree for the woodcarver. Although everyone was excited to see the finished piece, the woodcutters felt a sadness come over them as they felled the tree and dragged it down the mountain to the edge of town.

The woodcarver worked around the clock for days, weeks, months. From the centre of the trunk, she was carving a new statue of the town founder. Her neighbours watched her work and they all agreed that the most lifelike, elegant statue they had ever seen was emerging from the tree. News spread to the nearest villages, then out to other towns and cities. People came from around the globe to watch the woodcarver work. The town became rich from tourism, famous for its

artistic talent and revered around the world. The singing from the forest had stopped, but everyone agreed that cutting down the tree had been a great idea. The hotels, cafés and restaurants were always full. The government was building a new railway station that would connect the town to the capital city. The carving school had more applicants than they could accept. There were jobs for everyone doing all kinds of things. And when the statue was finished and started to sing, their town would surely be the most unique town in the world.

After almost three years, the statue was finished. The woodcarver took it to the town hall, where a special place in the centre of the entrance had been cleared for it. There was a grand opening that evening. At half past six, all the townspeople, tourists and journalists gathered. The statue was unveiled and everyone gasped in awe at its magnificence. It surely was the greatest piece of art ever made from a tree. As seven o'clock approached, the excitement grew and grew. Just as nobody could wait any longer, the first chime of the bell rang out. But the statue stayed silent. The second chime rang out. Still the statue was silent. The third chime was accompanied only by the wind. There was nervous coughing alongside the fourth chime, but no singing. The fifth chime came and a chatter started amongst the crowd. Confusion and anger started to boil up as the sixth chime sounded above the hall. And as the seventh chime reverberated in the cold air, slowing fading into a ghostly silence, the woodcarver ran out of the hall in despair.

CQ3:

Why do you think the statue did not sing?

Task Question 1

Should the town have cut down the singing tree?

Nested Questions

- ✓ What can we use the natural world for?
- ✓ What do we need from the natural world and what do we want from it? Do humans decide what nature is for?
- ✓ Are humans part of the natural world or different from it?
- ✓ Are humans more important than the natural world?
- ✓ Does nature have a purpose?
- ✓ Are there limits to what we can take from the natural world?
- ✓ How can we live sustainably? What does 'sustainable' mean?
- ✓ Does the natural world have rights?
- ✓ What things have a right to exist?
- ✓ Do we have any duties towards the natural world?
- ✓ What is beauty?
- ✓ Is the natural world beautiful?
- ✓ What is art?
- ✓ What is the value of art?
- ✓ Are some types of art more valuable than others?
- ✓ Is the natural world an artist?
- ✓ Should there be laws about how we use nature? What should they be? Who should make them? When is it okay/not okay to cut down a tree?
- ✓ What value does the natural world have?
- ✓ What makes something valuable?
- ✓ What makes something more valuable than another thing?
- ✓ What is progress?
- ✓ What is success?

POTENTIAL EXTENSIONS: THE SINGING STATUE

Task Questions

- ✓ Would your answer to TQ1 change if the statue did sing?

Reverse the Story

Imagine that instead of cutting down the singing tree, the town decided to leave it exactly where it was. They told the woodcarver that the signing was just too special to risk not hearing it again. However, the town council still saw an opportunity to become rich and famous. Instead of cutting down the singing tree, they cut down the trees around it. They built an outdoor theatre around the tree, and a little ticket office. People started coming from all around to pay to listen to the tree, which still sang beautifully. Soon so many people were coming they had to cut down some more of the surrounding trees to make the theatre and ticket office bigger. They also cleared space for a forest café and information centre. But the crowds kept growing. More trees were cut down to build a road from the town to the Singing Tree Centre. Two restaurants were built. Then the grand and luxurious 'Singing Tree Hotel' opened up. More and more buildings of all kinds were built and the forest got smaller and smaller. After many years, the singing tree was the only tree left of that old mountain forest. It sang through the smoke and noise of Singing Tree City.

Task Question

- ✓ Was it a good decision to cut down the other trees instead of the singing tree?

IDENTITY & VAGUENESS

Two ways of exploring identity over time with this enquiry could be to discuss a) when the signing tree stops being a tree (if ever) and b) if all the trees in a forest are gradually cut down, but always replaced with new seeds, is it still the same forest once all the old trees have gone? Vagueness could also be explored by thinking about what counts as a forest, using the story reversal could be useful here. When does the forest stop being a forest?

Props

A piece of carved wood, a piece of dead wood and a living plant might be useful examples to aid an enquiry, especially an enquiry into aesthetics.