

**Survival****Gillian Bickley**

Thank you trees for being there, for staying  
 when many of the friends you knew—  
 birds and butterflies — have gone;  
 for flourishing, even; growing old  
 5 where concrete buildings  
 are constantly knocked down.

How brave you are to survive  
 in a place where the air is foul  
 and the noise unnatural;  
 10 you who should normally expect  
 to stabilise your roots  
 in humid humming forests,  
 alive with the smells of  
 animal and vegetable life  
 15 (not the smells of mineral death, as here).

It is good to look down a street  
 and, amazed, to see you there,  
 solid and green and cool, uncompromised  
 by the advertising posters on your boles;  
 20 a promise

that, since there was a past,  
 there may quite possibly be a future too.

1982

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## Discussion Questions

1. Who are “you” in the poem? Why does the poet / speaker address them this way?
  
2. According to the poem, do the trees live in a pleasant environment? Support your answers with descriptions from the poem.
  
3. What is the speaker’s attitude towards the trees? Explain why she feels so.
  
4. How is contrast used in the following part of the poem to highlight the qualities of the trees? One has been done for you as an example.

Part of the poem	Contrast Used	Quality of the Trees
1 <sup>st</sup> stanza		
2 <sup>nd</sup> stanza		
Last stanza	“a past” is contrasted with “a future”	the long history of the trees – how they witness the transformation of the city and accompany the city to the

		unknown future
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5. Comment on the tone of the last three lines. Explain your answer with reference to the diction of the lines.
6. The speaker expresses her gratitude to the trees in the city. Think of another object in Hong Kong that you would like thank. Complete the thank-you note below.

:

Dear _____,
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
Yours
_____

## Suggested Answers

1. Who are “you” in the poem? Why does the poet / speaker address them this way?

“You” refers to the trees in the poem. The poet / speaker uses the second-person pronoun to address them to personify and animate the trees, thereby emphasising their “human” qualities, such as their indomitable spirits and tenacity to survive in a tough environment. Addressing the trees as “you” also establishes a personal touch and closeness between the poet / speaker and the trees, allowing her to express her affection for the trees more openly and directly in the poem.

2. According to the poem, do the trees live in a pleasant environment? Support your answers with descriptions from the poem.

No. In the poem, the trees are shown to be staying in a place where concrete buildings are knocked down, and living with foul air, unnatural noise and smells of mineral death. This is not a pleasant and wholesome environment.

3. What is the speaker’s attitude towards the trees? Explain why she feels so.

The speaker is grateful to the trees, as incisively expressed in the opening lines “Thank you trees for being there.” She also has great admiration and respect for the trees because she finds them:

- loyal – the trees stay under the changing environment when most of the friends (e.g. birds and butterflies) have gone;
- brave – they take roots, survive and even flourish under an unpleasant living condition (e.g. foul air, unnatural noise); and
- indomitable and uncompromising – they remain solid, cool and green despite human mistreatment (e.g. sticking advertising posters on their bodies).

4. How is contrast used in the following part of the poem to highlight the qualities of the trees? One has been done for you as an example.

Part of the poem	Contrast Used	Quality of the Trees
1 <sup>st</sup> stanza	the long-staying trees are contrasted with the changing cityscape and flown-away birds and butterflies	loyalty and permanence of the trees – they never abandon the city and stay where they are through thick and thin

2 <sup>nd</sup> stanza	the unpleasant living condition in the city is contrasted with the ideal and natural forest where the trees should be living	the trees' tough and indomitable spirit – how they survive and flourish in harsh condition
Last stanza	“a past” is contrasted with “a future”	the long history of the trees – how they witness the transformation of the city and accompany the city to the unknown future

5. Comment on the tone of the last three lines. Explain your answer with reference to the diction of the lines.

There is a mixture of hope and uncertainty in the tone of the last three lines. It is promising to see the trees surviving against all odds in this city and the sight of their green and solid presence offers the speaker hope. However, the use of three hedging words together (i.e. “may quite possibly”) in the last line suggests doubt, showing the speaker is uncertain as to what the future would hold.

6. The speaker expresses her gratitude to the trees in the city. Think of another object in Hong Kong that you would like thank. Complete the thank-you note below.

(free answer)

For example:

Dear Trams,

Thanks for your long service on Hong Kong Island for so many years. You are the oldest transport in Hong Kong and a witness of the growth and changes of the city. Thanks for working so hard to offer Hong Kong people affordable and relaxing rides. You remind us to slow down during our hectic life to appreciate the view on the way and find beauty around us.

Yours

\_\_\_\_\_