

**Title of poem:** Tree

**Performer's name:** Paul Scott

**Date of Performance:** 19th September 2009

**Place of Performance:** Arnolfini, Bristol

**Length:** 02:41

### Summary of Features

Anthropomorphism					
Blending					
Eyegaze					
Handshape					
Neologism					
Symmetry					
Use of space					

### Notes:

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### Overview

A man plants a tree and the days pass and the rain falls. Then a seedling sprouts and from it a tree grows. The tree experiences a cat getting stuck up it, a dog cocking its leg against it and a blind person walking by. When the tree is fully mature, the man returns and fells the tree and drags it away. As the days pass, another seedling sprouts in its place and finally another tree stands where the first tree stood.

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### Translation

Across the land comes a man  
 He takes a look at the ground and walks away  
 The days pass

The man returns and looks again at the ground  
This time, he digs a hole  
From his pocket he takes a seed  
He places it in the soil and pats the earth down again  
He goes to collect a watering can and sprinkles water over the soil then walks away  
The days pass  
The man returns to look at the ground, but nothing is happening so he goes away  
Up pops a shoot, peering left and right  
It grows and grows - trunk branches twigs - into a tree  
The man returns and can't believe his eyes! He stares up at the tree in  
amazement, then walks away  
The days pass  
Along comes a cat "Miaow, miaow" and leaps up into the branches of the tree  
The man is walking along when he hears the cat, "Miaow, miaow" - where is it  
coming from? He looks about then up at the cat. Hmmm  
He quickly fetches a ladder, climbs up and rescues the cat, stroking it once it  
is safe on the ground once more  
The days pass  
A dog walks up to the tree and cocks it leg and goes on its way  
The days pass  
A blind man, stick tapping, approaches  
His stick reaches the tree - confused, he holds out his hands and feels the  
tree in front of him. He tries to walk forwards and his stick touches the tree  
again  
With his stick as guide he feels his way around the trunk and goes on his way  
The days pass  
The man comes along again and the tree looks down at him  
The tree is suddenly filled with horror, "No, no!" it cries  
The man is looking up at the tree with particular intent. He taps its trunk,  
nods to himself and walks off  
The tree is worried. It looks down at the man and cries again, "No! No!"  
The man returns carrying an axe  
He takes a swing at the tree. "Ow!" the tree cries out in agony. "OW!" ...  
"Oooww"

The tree falls to the ground and dies  
It is dragged away  
The days pass. The rain falls. The days pass  
A shoot pops up and peers left and right  
It grows and grows - trunk branches twigs - into a tree  
Here is the tree

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### Theme

Trees are a popular topic in sign language poetry (see also Richard Carter's poem *Deaf Tree* in this anthology, as well as many other poems, including those by June Smith, and John Wilson with Paula Garfield in BSL and Clayton Valli in ASL).

The poem is one of resilience and continuity. In this poem the tree and its replacement by another tree in the next generation stands for the Deaf community and its continued survival in a hostile world. In Paul's poem here the tree is cut down to serve the man's needs, as the Deaf community has often been 'cut down' by forces in the Hearing World, but the tree re-grows, as the Deaf community survives against apparently impossible odds.

The theme of regeneration carried in the vehicle of plants re-seeding themselves is not just limited to trees, as we see in Clayton Valli's ASL poem *Dandelions* and Ted Hughes' English poem *Thistles*.

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### Poetic Features

#### Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is central to this poem as the tree is given human emotions and feelings. These are expressed on the face. The tree is not given language and does not seem to have the power of communication at all. It cannot sign. The poetic option to use the similarity of form between a signer's hands and a tree's branches and twigs is not exercised here (unlike, for example in Richard Carter's *Deaf Tree*). In fact, for much of the poem there is no sign TREE and the signer's hands are busy signing other characters or the ground, so there is no option for the tree to sign. At one stage, realising what the man has in mind, the tree mouths "no!" but this is just as an expression of its feelings and not a genuine attempt to communicate with the man. The man does not hear it. The tree can also shake its head – and it does when it sees the man approaching with the axe – but again this is not really to communicate with the man. When the tree is cut down it cries out in pain, but there is no indication that it is screaming for the man to stop, nor that the man hears it.

The tree is able to use its eyes and see everything around it – even though there is no physical correlate to map the tree's eyes on to human eyes. The tree has become personified in Paul as he signs. When the seedling emerges from the ground (00:50) it is accorded eyes so that it can look around and the facial expression is one of furtive caution.

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### Blending

There is consistent use of spatial blending. While the hands offer a defocused view of the scene (right hand is used as a classifier for various characters, left hand representing the ground), the face provides the focused view of the face of each character. This enables the poet to simultaneously show the panoptic view of the scene and detailed facial expressions of each character.

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### Eyegaze

While classifiers provide basic topographical information about characters (showing who moves from where to where), non-manual features, especially eyes and the mouth, add multi-layered information to the poetic scene. This results in a variety of gaze behaviours in this poem.

For example, the presence of the tree, despite of its physical absence in the signing space, is maintained by the gaze of characters. They acknowledge the tree by 'looking' at it.

The emotions of the characters, including the personified tree, are expressed through the poet's gaze as well. The tree's furtive look to left and right when it comes out of the ground is especially notable.

The gaze to the audience can be observed when the poet uses the established signs BLIND PERSON and in the last sign where he proudly shows the reemergence of the tree. But it can also be seen when the man plants a seed into the ground, which creates a sense of conspiracy between the man and the audience.

In the sequence of the sun's rising and setting, the poet's gaze follows his hands (gaze on hands) to highlight their movement and the passing of time.

None of these gaze behaviours is striking by itself, but the poet makes use of different gaze patterns to provide the necessary information at each scene.

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### Handshape

There are no notable uses of symbolic handshape in this poem

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## Neologism

Neologism is central to this poem, which uses almost entirely productive classifier signs, many of them highly original whole entity classifiers. There are two established lexical signs in this entire poem (BLIND and MAN) and everything else is either an entity or handling classifier. The four-finger handshape to show the four legs of the cat is unusual in a classifier, normally made using two fingers for an animal (as it is when the cat jumps into the tree). We know it is a cat from the highly marked (and humorously deviant) use of the mouth pattern “meow” (01:09) but we are not given the established lexical sign. The entity classifier for the dog is also highly marked, with the middle finger extended to show the dog’s head, while the other three fingers and the thumb form the legs (01:34). Again, we know it is a dog from the mouth pattern “woof”, and because it cocks its leg against the tree (signed by twisting the entity classifier to lift the thumb for the hind leg – at 01:36) but we are not told explicitly through the lexicalised sign that it is a dog. Neither animal is anthropomorphised. The blind man’s approach builds on the normal entity classifier for a moving human with the index finger extended (the classifier that is used for the other man in the poem) but the white stick is unusually and creatively incorporated into the classifier by forward extension of the middle finger (01:45). Even the ladder placed against the tree is expressed unusually in the use of classifier. There is no specification that this is a ladder, but its shape and position fits our world knowledge for what we expect when a cat is stuck up a tree, so we interpret it as a ladder.

Other productive signs include the entity classifier for the sun which is shown repeatedly rising and setting against the horizon to show the passing of time.

Perhaps most significant in this poem of entity classifiers is the absence of the tree for much of the action. One might expect the entity classifier for a tree to be present throughout the poem. It is, after all, a poem about a tree, so the tree’s absence is striking. We do see at the first introduction of the tree (0:55) – and see again towards the end when the man returns to fell it – but the rest of the time we have to imagine it. The most dominant figure of the poem is thus made salient by its absence, while the other characters interact with its invisible presence. Perhaps audiences might view this as being symbolic of the idea that many Deaf people are “invisible” to the rest of the world and the Deaf community is ignored until it is the focus of attack.

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## Symmetry

There is temporal symmetry in this poem, so that first signing of the seedling emerging and growing into a tree is repeated at the end of the poem. This symmetry reinforces the continuation of the deaf community.

Throughout the poem, both hands are used, creating a pleasant visual aesthetic. For almost the entire poem the left hand remains as the horizontal ground surface against which all the other action occurs. The exceptions are human actions – when the blind man touches the tree with

both outstretched hands, and when the man returns to the tree carrying an axe over his shoulder and chops into the tree – and these are all shown with two hands.

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### Use of Space

The circular movement of the sun that is repeated through the sign delineates the signing space, taking in left and right and up and down. The man is the only character to cross repeatedly right to left and back to the right again (i.e. boustrophedonically). All the other characters – the cat, the dog and the blind man – move in from the right and out to the left. At the end, the tree is dragged off to the right, with the man.

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### Any Other Comment

The poem uses the device of threefold repetition. The sun circles round three times between each event. The man comes and goes three times before the tree grows. He digs three shovels of earth out before planting the seed. Three other characters visit the tree. The tree cries out three times before it falls. The rain falls three times before the new seedling grows.