

Title	<i>The Giving Tree</i>				
Author (Text & Illustration)	Shel Silverstein				
Publication Year	1964		Publisher	HarperCollins	
Translated Versions	"The Big Tree," Kiichiro Honda (Translated) (1976), Shinozaki Shorin "The Big Tree," Haruki Murakami (Translated) (2010), Asunaro Shobo				
Words	620	Pages	64	YL Level	2.4
Synopsis					
<p>This is a story about a little boy and his friend, an apple tree. The little boy played peacefully by the tree and it always watched over him. As the boy grew, his interests shifted to things other than his good friend, the tree. He wanted quality time with his lover, money, a house, and a boat. Although the tree felt lonely, it continued to offer its fruit, branches, and trunk to the boy. During the boy’s final visit, the tree had become a stump and it lamented that it had nothing left to give him. However, by that time, the boy had already become a tired old man who no longer wanted anything. The tree invited him to sit on its stump and rest, and the now-old man peacefully sat down on the stump.</p>					
Introduction					
<p>This is the most well-known children’s picture book by American writer Shel Silverstein. The title itself, <i>The Giving Tree</i>, points to how the tree continues to offer its fruits, branches, and trunk to the boy. The act of giving is a big theme in this work, and it has multiple interpretations. Generally speaking, since the tree is referred to as a “she,” the relationship between the tree and the boy is regarded as a mother and child relationship. In fact, numerous interpretations suggest that the tree's actions represent a mother's selfless love. A study on children from Japan, Korea, the UK, and Sweden who had read this story found that more Japanese children than those from other countries—almost 80% of them—interpreted the tree as a mother (Moriya, 1994). This demonstrates how the social environment can influence an individual’s interpretation; however, Haruki Murakami, who translated this work, said "the story is like a natural mirror that reflects the human mind."</p> <p>In my opinion, rather than a mother's selfless love, the tree resembles a woman who remains devoted to a cheating lover who only seeks her out when he needs money. Was the tree happy to offer her "selfless love?" The tree trembled with joy every time the boy visited, but one cannot say for certain that the tree was happy after the boy took her trunk. However, the tree was happy again when the boy eventually returned as an old man.</p>					

Who can continue to give selfless love in the first place? It is doubtful that the boy, who was given selfless love, appreciates it. Rather, it could be seen as overprotective love that prevented the boy from becoming independent. For one, giving without expecting anything in return may seem unfavorable for the giver, but it could also be seen as an act of recognition that shows the tree's reason for existing.

Indeed, the meaning of giving and of happiness is dependent on one's understanding of what the tree symbolizes. It is a picture book with various interpretations that even adults can reflect on. This is why it has been translated into 30 languages and is loved all over the world.

In Japan, there are translations of this book by Kiichiro Honda (1976) and Haruki Murakami (2010). These two translations were done at quite different times; the former uses informal (*da-/de-ar* style) language while the latter is more polite (*desu/masu* style), and they both evoke very different moods. In particular, let us look at a sentence that highlights the difference between the two translations.

Original text: And the tree was happy...but not really

Honda translation: And so, the tree was glad...was it true?

Murakami translation: And so, the tree became happy...no, how could it be happy?

Merely looking at these two lines shows the difference.

In addition, the Honda translation does not specify the tree's gender, but it is clearly indicated in the Murakami translation. Murakami's translation is also truer to the English version, but personally, I feel that the Honda translation is more appropriate. Incidentally, the original title of the work, *The Giving Tree*, is difficult to translate into Japanese in itself, so Honda translated it as "The Big Tree." Does the tree's continued generosity toward the boy equate to it having a big heart? Notably, Murakami retained this Japanese title.

Furthermore, the version of the picture book published during its 50th anniversary comes with a CD, which allows you to listen to a narration by Silverstein himself. It takes him around six minutes to read the story, with a harmonica as the background music; however, he inserts ad-libs, leaves out certain sections, and does not read it exactly as it was originally written. Specifically, he omits the words "but not really" from the sentence "And the tree was happy...but not really" referenced above. This further deepens the "mystery" of whether the tree was really happy.

Lastly, it should be noted that the text is in black and white, but the cover is green and only the boy's clothes and the apples are colored red.

(Text: Megumi Kobayashi)