

Elms in Literature



Elm wood was often chosen to make coffins, and in British culture too, elm trees have had a strange association with ghostly events. In the 1800s a French soldier imprisoned near a village in Devon started up an orchestra that played on a stage built into an elm tree. He died the day before he was to be released, but locals say that some nights they can still hear him playing his violin...

Others say elms are the cause of death, with one English writer noting that he has known elms “*fall down altogether when there was not a breath of wind nor any lightning, just to kill a cow or a sheep out of sheer bad temper*”! **Rudyard Kipling** also mentions this when he talks about elms in his poem *A Tree Song*:

*Ellum she hateth mankind, and waiteth
Till every gust be laid,
To drop a limb on the head of him
That anyway trusts her shade*

But other poets seem to love elms. **William Wordsworth** spoke of a group of elms he came across when in fact they were oak trees because it helped his poem rhyme. At other times elms were added because they made the poem sound more interesting due to elm trees’ grand appearance and association with death. Because of this they were sometimes added in to paintings too.

The famous 19th century painter **John Constable** sometimes dreamt elms into existence, and in his painting *The Lock* he changed the willow trees which were really there to elms. Constable loved elms so much he even dedicated an entire painting to an elm’s bark! The strange texture and grain of elm wood has meant it was also used a lot by the famous sculptor **Henry Moore** to emphasise shapes.

Activity (Art): When John Constable painted an elms bark he was focusing on the changing colours and textures of a specific part of a tree and found that when you looked closely a new world is revealed of ridges and ravines. If you have an elm or another tree nearby, try this yourself on a part of the tree. You could use different shades to show textures, mixing colours to recreate the exact shades. You could also use different materials to produce a collage.

Activity (Literature): Elms have been used in literature because of their association with ghosts and their mighty appearance. Write a short story or poem about an elm using adjectives, similes and maybe pictures to help explain.