

**POETRY****1. A Photograph**  
(Shirley Toulson)**ABOUT THE POET**

Shirley Toulson, who lives in Somerset, was drawn into the spell of Celtic Christianity as she worked on her books dealing with the oldest roads and folklore of Britain and Ireland, and found herself following the routes taken on their journeys by the saints of the early church. Among her writings are: *The Celtic Alternative* (1987) and *The Celtic Year* (1993).

**ABOUT THE POEM****Introduction**

The poem "A Photograph" shows how time takes its toll on life. We try to capture moments from life which remain as pictures in our mind - some faint, some clear. What is finally left is the silence and death for the next generation to reflect upon. The title "A Photograph" is symbolic of such pleasurable moments in life which leave an indelible imprint on our mind and past memories keep flashing back into our mind when we look at the photograph years later.

Change is the harsh and bitter reality of life. Time and tide wait for none. Death comes as the greatest leveller. It is the inevitable end of all. Objects of nature like the sea, the river, the brooks, and the oceans are perennial and everlasting, but human life is too short in comparison. When death strikes we humans are expected to accept the loneliness, the vacuum it creates.

**Summary**

A look at the cardboard with the photograph of her mother and her two cousins shows the poet, how they once went paddling. Her mother, some twelve years of age then, was the eldest of the three.

Each one, holding one of the poet's mother's hand, stood still, smiling through their hair to pose for the photograph their uncle clicked with his camera. Her mother had a sweet face then. It was before the poet was born. The sea which seems to have changed little since that time washed the small, tender feet of these children.

Time passed, the mother grew older and some twenty or thirty years later she would laugh at the innocence of her own childhood. A look at the snapshot would remind her of that cherished moment and laughingly she would comment at the way they were dressed for the beach.

The poet reminisces that the sea holiday was the past of her mother and for her the laughter of her mother is past now. Both the moments of life have been permanently etched in the poet's mind with a feeling of eternal loss.

Death now has overpowered the innocence of those moments and the pleasure they treasured. The poet concludes the poem on a melancholy note with the comment that there is nothing to say or comment upon this sad event. The silence of the death seems to prevail and this silence seems to silence all other thoughts.

### LITERARY DEVICES

#### Alliteration

The use of alliteration is quite noticeable in the poem as is clear from the following examples:

- (i) All three stood still to smile through their hair.  
(repetition of 's' and 'th' sounds)
- (ii) their terribly transient feet (repetition of 't' sound)
- (iii) Its silence silences (repetition of 's' sound)

### COMMENTARY

- The cardboard shows me how it was



When the speaker looks at the cardboard with her mother's photograph, past memories sprout in her mind.

- **And the sea, which appears to have changed less**

The sea, where mother and her cousins enjoyed their holiday has not changed much ever since, whereas the mother and her cousins have grown physically. The unchanged sea contrasts with the changes that human life undergoes with the passage of time. As compared to nature, human life is woefully short.

- **Washed their terribly transient feet**

Just like the footprints on a wet beach are washed away by sea waves in no time, human life is short lived, too. The tide of time washes away its very existence. The girls' footprints were washed away into nothingness soon after they were formed. The girls themselves died with the passage of time. Transience of human life is tragic.

- **The sea holiday was her past, mine is her laughter**

The incident of the sea holiday and the laughter of the mother, which were revived by the look at the snapshot are now both the things of the past. Whenever the mother looked at the snapshot she was lost in her past and relived the memories of her childhood days. For the narrator, a look at the snapshot would remind her how her mother laughed innocently at the sight. She misses the joyful moments she enjoyed with her mother.

- **Both wry with the laboured ease of loss**

Change is the harsh and bitter truth of life. None can hold or capture time. With the passage of time everything gets distorted and man is compelled to accept this loss with ease, however harsh or painful it may be for him to accept it.

- **And of this circumstance**

There is nothing to say at all

The magnitude of the poet's sense of loss at her mother's death is too big for her to express it in words. It has left her stunned in disbelief. She is left to be constantly haunted by the vacuum her mother's death has created.

### Its silence silences

The eternal silence of death seems to silence everything else for only this silence now prevails over the thoughts of the narrator. This silence also expresses human helplessness in matters like death.

### STANZAS FOR COMPREHENSION

*Read the following extracts and answer the questions that follow.*

#### (I)

The cardboard shows me how it was  
When the two girl cousins went paddling,  
Each one holding one of my mother's hands,  
And she the big girl – some twelve years or so.

#### SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)

- (a) What does the word 'cardboard' suggest here?

The cardboard here refers to the mounted photograph of the mother and her cousins. The enlarged photograph was fixed on the cardboard for purpose of framing.

- (b) Where had the girls gone? When?

The three cousins had gone for a sea holiday during their childhood when they were around ten or twelve years of age.

- (c) Why were the two cousins holding on to the poet's mother's hand?

The two cousins were holding on to the poet's mother's hand as she was the eldest one and the two wished to have a sense of security as they were paddling in the sea.



- (d) What feelings are aroused in these lines?

Triggering the past memories, these lines arouse the feelings of love, togetherness, care and innocent pleasures of the childhood days.

**SET-II (Choose the most appropriate option)**

- (a) 'It' in the above extract refers to  
 (i) cardboard with the photograph (iii) time of the photograph  
 (ii) one of mother's hands (iv) scene in the photograph  
 (iv) scene in the photograph
- (b) When had the three cousins gone for a holiday?  
 (i) during infancy (iii) during middle age  
 (ii) during their pre-teenage years (iv) when they were old  
 (ii) during their pre-teenage years
- (c) Where had the photograph of the three cousins been taken?  
 (i) at their uncle's house (iii) at the beach  
 (ii) at the poet's home (iv) at a small island  
 (iii) at the beach

**(II)**

A sweet face,  
 My mother's, that was before I was born.  
 And the sea, which appears to have changed less,  
 Washed their terribly transient feet.

**SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)**

- (a) Whose 'sweet face' is referred to and why?

The 'sweet face' referred to here is that of the poet's mother. Since the mother was a twelve year-old girl when the photograph was clicked there is an innocence and sweetness of childhood on her face.

- (b) What does the poet mean by 'the sea, which appears to have changed less'?

Through the expression the poet highlights the perennial and eternal aspect of nature. Whereas the children have grown older and changed in physical appearance, the sea hasn't changed much.

(c) Explain: "terribly transient feet".

The poet has used alliteration here to comment upon the small and tender feet of the children. These feet are soon going to outgrow their present size.

**SET-II (Choose the most appropriate option)**

- (a) The sea appears to have changed less as compared to
- (i) mother's sweet face
  - (ii) the shore
  - (iii) the transient feet
  - (iv) the photograph
- (b) The expression 'transient feet' is an example of
- (i) metaphor
  - (ii) simile
  - (iii) transferred epithet
  - (iv) alliteration
- (c) The extract describes a scene from
- (i) the poet's college days
  - (ii) the pre-teenage days of the poet's mother
  - (iii) the poet's mother's memory
  - (iv) the poet's infancy
- (ii) the pre-teenage days of the poet's mother

(III)

"See Betty

And Dolly," she'd say, "and look how they  
Dressed us for the beach." The sea holiday  
Was her past, mine is her laughter.



**SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)**

- (a) Who were Betty and Dolly?  
Betty and Dolly were the poet's mother's cousins who had accompanied her for the sea holiday.
- (b) How did she respond whenever she looked at the snapshot?  
The sight of the photograph used to throw the mother into peals of laughter as it revived the past memories of the sea holiday when they all looked so funny and so different.
- (c) Explain: "The sea holiday/Was her past"  
The mother has now grown older. She has left behind the innocence and pleasures of her childhood days when she went for a sea holiday with her cousins.
- (d) Why is the mother's laughter 'past' for the narrator?  
The narrator has now lost her mother. The cruel hands of death have parted the two. Her mother's laughter, which she treasured so much is also a thing of the past for her.

**SET-II (Choose the most appropriate option)**

- (a) "See Betty/ And Dolly." Who speaks these words to whom?
- (i) Betty and Dolly's mother to their cousin
  - (ii) the poet's mother to her
  - (iii) Uncle to poet's mother
  - (iv) the poet to her mother
  - (ii) the poet's mother to her
- (b) The poet's mother's beach dress now appeared to be
- (i) awkward
  - (ii) dirty
  - (iii) beautiful
  - (iv) fashionable
  - (i) awkward

- (c) The last line expresses a sense of
- (i) past
  - (ii) celebration
  - (iii) joy
  - (iv) loss
  - (iv) loss

**(IV)**

Now she's been dead nearly as many years  
As that girl lived. And of this circumstance  
There is nothing to say at all.  
Its silence silences.

**SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)**

- (a) Who is 'she' referred to here?

'She' is the poet's mother who has been snatched away by the cruel hands of death.

- (b) Who is the 'girl' in this context?

The 'girl' here refers to the mother in her childhood. This childhood is also a thing of past now.

- (c) Which 'circumstance' is referred to here?

The 'circumstance' referred to here is the incident of the death of the mother. The incident so overwhelms the poet with emotions that she finds no words to express her sense of pain and loss.

- (d) Explain: "Its silence silences".

The thought of her mother's death robs the poet of her ability to express her grief.

**SET-II (Choose the most appropriate option)**

- (a) "This circumstance" here refers to

- (i) the death of Dolly and Betty
- (ii) the beach holiday
- (iii) the pain and void due to mother's death



- (iv) the loss of time
- (iii) the pain and void due to mother's death
- (b) "There is nothing to say at all." Which of the following best explain the meaning of this line?
- (i) the poet's sense of loss is too deep to express
- (ii) there is no one the poet can share her grief with
- (iii) the poet does not want to talk about her sense of loss
- (iv) it is futile to discuss one's grief
- (i) the poet's sense of loss is too deep to express
- (c) The expression "Its silence silences" is an example of which of the following?
- (i) paradox
- (ii) alliteration
- (iii) assonance
- (iv) onomatopoeia
- (d) The last line brings out
- (i) the inevitability of death
- (ii) the silent and still atmosphere on the sea shore
- (iii) the futility of life
- (iv) the poet's sense of loss and helplessness
- (iv) the poet's sense of loss and helplessness

**SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

*(to be answered in about 40 words each)*

- Q1.** What does the word 'cardboard' denote in the poem? Why has this word been used?

*(Textual)*

The word 'cardboard' denotes the mounted photograph of the mother and her two cousins. The poet has used this word because the photograph being old is now worn out and faint. Moreover it is surrounded by moulding or frame.

- Q2.** What has the camera captured?

*(Textual)*

The camera has captured the childhood memory of the mother and her two cousins when they had gone for a sea holiday during their childhood days. Their uncle had taken the photograph as the three stood still clutching their hands and looking innocently through their hair.

- Q3.** What has not changed over the years? Does this suggest something to you?

*(Textual)*

The sea has not changed over the years. The expression suggests that Nature is perennial and everlasting. Whereas we humans change with our growth, the objects of Nature like sea, river, brooks etc. do not change or perish.

- Q4.** The poet's mother laughed at the snapshot. What did this laugh indicate?

*(Textual)*

The mother laughed whenever she looked at the snapshot. The sight reminded her of the pleasures of her childhood days. She also feels amused at the way their parents had dressed them up for the paddling. With the passage of time, they begin to look funny and out of place.

- Q5.** What is the meaning of the line "Both wry with the laboured ease of loss"?

*(Textual)*

The statement implies that with the passage of time various



incidents of our life become things of the past. For instance the sea holiday in the poet's childhood days was the 'past' for the mother and with the death of the mother, her laughter is 'past' for the poet. Everything in life is thus transitory and gets distorted with time and we accept this distortion with ease, without being much troubled.

**Q6. What does "this circumstance" refer to?**

(Textual)

"This circumstance" refers to the instance of her mother's death. This circumstance has created a vacuum in her life, a strange silence for there is none with whom she can share her feelings.

**Q7. The three stanzas depict three different phases. What are they?**

(Textual)

The three stanzas depict three different phases of life - the childhood; the youth and old age accompanied with death which brings a final end to life. The childhood days are rapt with innocence; the youth is marked with gaiety and laughter which is the essence of youthful energy. Then comes the loneliness created by death.

**Q8. Quote two instances from the poem to show that the poet loved and liked her mother very much and misses her?**

One, she finds her mother in the photograph sweet and feels proud that the latter was 'big'. Two, the mother's death has left her silent and stunned. It has created a vacuum in her life.

**Q9. What moment does the photograph depict?**

The photograph taken by an uncle of the poet's mother depicts a family picnic at a beach. The poet's mother and her two cousins are all smiles in their now odd looking beach dresses. The three were in their early teens.

**Q10. How does the poet's past differ from her mother's?**

The mother's past as depicted in the photograph was one filled

with hilarity and fun. She enjoyed outings with her cousins and uncles. The memory of this past would make the mother laugh heartily. The poet's past is her mother who is no more. The poet misses her mother and her laughter. Her absence has created a huge void in the poet's life.

**Q11. Briefly comment on the title "A Photograph".**

The whole poem is woven around a photograph depicting the poet's mother and her cousins enjoying themselves at beach side family picnic. When she was alive, the mother would often look at the photograph and laugh. She is now no more. However the photograph has survived. Now it makes the poet nostalgic about her mother whose death has left a deep void in her life. Thus the photograph plays a significant role in the poem.

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