

## 4. Childhood

(Markus Natten)

### ABOUT THE POEM

#### Introduction

The poem "Childhood" deals with the poet's curiosity to know when actually an individual ceases to be a child. He wonders whether it is the age or the stage when the young, unsullied mind learns to see through the adults' hypocrisy and identifies his own distinctiveness. Childhood disappears to hide itself in an infant's innocent expression.

#### Summary

The process of growing from a child to an adolescent and then to an adult is an impalpable one. However one fine day one realises that one has left behind the childhood and one has stepped into the world of adolescence and adulthood. There is no line of demarcation between the various stages. The poet wonders whether it is a span of years or the process of losing innocence and outgrowing gullibility, seeing through others' hypocrisy and craftiness or acquiring an individuality which spells the cessation of childhood. Somewhat satisfied with his analysis, the poet takes up the next question as to where his childhood has disappeared. He concludes that childhood resides in an infant's face *i.e.* childhood is the abode of innocence. The moment one loses innocence, one ceases to be a child.

### THEME

The poem deals with the theme of the loss of childhood because of psycho-physical growth, development of thought and the influence of the worldly ways. Disillusioned with the hypocritical ways of the adult world, the poet bemoans the loss of his childhood because it also resulted in the loss of innocence. However, one positive outcome of this loss is that the poet has discovered his ability to think new

thoughts independently and the individuality and uniqueness of his being

### COMMENTARY

- **I realized that Hell and Heaven,  
Could not be found in Geography**

According to a child's definition, geography is a study of places. Since there is no mention of Heaven and Hell in his geography text book, he rationally concludes that they do not exist anywhere.

- **I found my mind was really mine**

In the process of growing up the child discovers his individuality and finds himself to be unique. He comes to trust his ability to reason and think.

- **To use whichever way I choose**

As the child grows, he develops a bit of defiance and he becomes assertive. Apart from it he becomes aware of his distinctive character.

- **It went to some forgotten place**

The poet does not know where and when he lost his childhood but it was definitely within him once upon a time. He does not know where he has mislaid it. Even the recollection of it has faded away with passage of time.



**STANZAS FOR COMPREHENSION**

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

(I)

When did my childhood go?  
Was it the day I ceased to be eleven,  
Was it the time I realized that Hell and Heaven,  
Could not be found in Geography,  
And therefore could not be,  
Was that the day!

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

- (a) What different possibilities according to the poet are instrumental in the cessation of childhood?

There are various possibilities that might be responsible for the cessation of the poet's childhood – one, growth in terms of years; two, development of rational thought and spirit of enquiry; three, realization of the falsehood and hypocrisy of the adult world.

- (b) What specific point of time according to the poet's conjecture spells the end of childhood?

The poet wonders whether the waning of childhood is related to the number of years one has lived. He questions whether one leaves behind childhood when one turns twelve.

- (c) How does a scientific approach of the child transform his thinking?

Doubt starts creeping in the child's mind as he develops a scientific approach. He comes out of his make-believe world of imagination and hearsay and starts leaving behind his childhood.

- (d) **What makes the child doubt the existence of Hell and Heaven?**  
According to a child's definition geography is a study of places. Since there is no mention of Heaven and Hell in his geography text book, he rationally concludes that they do not exist anywhere.

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

- (a) **What intrigues the poet?**  
(i) Heaven and Hell  
(ii) the Geography books  
(iii) the pre-teenage period  
(iv) the question when one ceases to be a child  
(iv) **the question when one ceases to be a child**
- (b) **Why can't Heaven and Hell be found in Geography books?**  
(i) because of the enormous distance between them  
(ii) because of their enormous size  
(iii) because abstract ideas cannot be covered by Geography  
(iv) because they are not located on the earth  
(iii) **because abstract ideas cannot be covered by Geography**
- (c) **What does the mark of exclamation at the end of the stanza indicate in the poet's mind?**  
(i) surprise  
(ii) anger  
(iii) confusion  
(iv) confidence  
(iii) **confusion**
- (d) **When the child doesn't find Heaven and Hell in Geography books, what does he conclude?**  
(i) that Heaven and Hell don't exist  
(ii) that Geography books are not authentic  
(iii) that he is too young to look for them in his books  
(iv) that some pages were missing from his Geography books  
(i) **that Heaven and Hell don't exist**



## (II)

When did my childhood go?  
 Was it the time I realized that adults were not  
 all they seemed to be,  
 They talked of love and preached of love,  
 But did not act so lovingly,  
 Was that the day!

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

- (a) What did the child observe about the adults?

The child finds the adults to be double-faced. He observes a wide gap between what they preach and what they practice. Hypocrisy has taken the place of innocence in their life.

- (b) What idea do you get about the child who learns to see through hypocrisy of the adult?

The child is heading towards worldly maturity. The gullibility which made him accept things at their face value is giving way to a keen and a crisp perception.

- (c) Who is 'I' in the stanza?

'I' is the poet who represents the children whose childhood is giving way to adolescence.

- (d) Which 'day' is the poet talking about?

The poet is talking about the day that spelt the end of his childhood.

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

- (a) "Adults were not all they seemed to be" means

- (i) they were as innocent as children are
- (ii) they were as fun loving as children are
- (iii) they were double-faced
- (iv) they hated Geography as much as children did
- (iii) they were double-faced

- (b) The child initially failed to see through the adults' behaviour because of his
- (i) preoccupations (iii) carelessness
  - (ii) gullibility (iv) foolishness
  - (ii) gullibility
- (c) Which 'day' is the poet talking about?
- (i) the day he lost his childhood
  - (ii) the day he discovered Heaven and Hell
  - (iii) the day he discovered that his mind was really his own
  - (iv) the day he forgot everything
  - (i) the day he lost his childhood

## (III)

When did my childhood go?

Was it when I found my mind was really mine,

To use whichever way I choose,

Producing thoughts that were not those of other people

But my own, and mine alone

Was that the day!

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

- (a) Explain: 'I found my mind was really mine'.

In the process of growing up the child discovers his individuality and finds himself to be unique. He comes to trust his ability to reason and think.

- (b) 'To use whichever way I choose'. How does the line indicate a change in the child's attitude and behaviour?

As the child grows, he develops a bit of defiance and he becomes assertive. Apart from it he becomes aware of his distinctive character.

- (c) Bring out the sense of relief, pride and confidence that the child experiences in the process of growing up.



Shaking off the yoke of restrictions imposed on him by the adults the child gets a sense of relief at being able to use his mind according to his choice. His capacity to have individual thoughts enhances his confidence and gives him a sense of pride.

- (d) Why has the poet repeated the line 'When did my childhood go' in each stanza?

'When did my childhood go' being the central theme of the poem has been used as a refrain by the poet. Hence it occurs in the first three stanzas of poem.

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

- (a) "I found my mind was really mine" means

- (i) that the child didn't borrow others' ideas
- (ii) that he was bright and intelligent
- (iii) that he has his own individuality
- (iv) that he was not a fool

- (iii) that he has his own individuality

- (b) The stanza brings out the child's

- (i) high-headedness
- (ii) self-confidence
- (iii) inconfidence
- (iv) frustration

- (ii) self-confidence

- (c) "To use whichever way I choose" shows that the child has now grown more

- (i) stubborn
- (ii) meek
- (iii) assertive
- (iv) defiant

- (d) The poet has repeated the line 'When did my childhood go' in each stanza to

- (i) express the child's sense of dilemma
- (ii) express the child's sense of loss of innocence

- (iii) give the poem a structural uniformity
- (iv) add music to the poem
- (i) express the child's sense of dilemma

## (IV)

Where did my childhood go?

It went to some forgotten place,

That's hidden in an infant's face,

That's all I know.

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

- (a) How does the speaker feel about the loss of his childhood?

The speaker regrets the loss of childhood which was a period of innocence where make-believe world was considered to be a reality.

- (b) Explain: "some forgotten place".

The poet does not know where and when he lost his childhood but it was definitely within him once upon a time. He does not know where he has mislaid it. Even the recollection of it has faded away with passage of time.

- (c) Is the poet still a child or a grown up? Which line gives a clue to the answer?

No, the poet is no more a child. He has already lost his childhood. He is grown up now. The line "Where did my childhood go?" Is the best clue to the answer.

- (d) Explain: "That's hidden in an infant's face".

The line means that though the childhood is nowhere to be seen, it has not disappeared totally as it can be seen in an infant's face.



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

- (a) The speaker's tone in the first line here is one of
- |                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| (i) conclusion | (iii) indecision |
| (ii) confusion | (iv) illusion    |
- (b) 'It' here refers to
- |                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| (i) the mind   | (iii) innocence |
| (ii) childhood | (iv) adulthood  |
- (c) 'Some forgotten place' here refers to
- |                                    |                        |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| (i) subconscious memory            | (iii) conscious memory |
| (ii) an unknown place on the earth | (iv) past life         |
- (d) "That's all I know" suggests that the speaker
- |  |
|--|
| (i) has forgotten most of the things     |
| (ii) does not want to know anything more |
| (iii) has limited knowledge              |
| (iv) has matured                         |

**SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

(to be answered in about 40 words each)

**Q1. What according to the poet is involved in the process of growing up?** (Textual)

Rationalism, ability to see through hypocrisy and craftiness and discovery of one's individuality are the factors involved in the process of growing up.

**Q2. What is the poet's feeling towards childhood?** (Textual)

Poet feels passage of time, maturity of mind and discovery of one's individuality take away one's childhood. Childhood, once

lost cannot be retrieved. One can only see its reflection hidden in an infant's innocent expressions.

- Q3. Which do you think are the most poetic lines? Why? (Textual)

In my opinion the line "*Was it when I found my mind was really mine*" to be the most poetic line for there is great music and rhythm in it created by the repetition of "w" and "m" sounds.

(Note : there can be other valid answers too)

- Q4. What made the child express his disbelief in the well-established concept of Heaven and Hell?

A little is often told that Heaven and Hell exist in the sky or on the earth somewhere. When the child grows up he becomes inquisitive and tries to find out everything with reason and logic. Since the child finds no mention of the Heaven and Hell in the geography book, he feels they do not exist at all.

- Q5. What impression does the child form about the double-faced nature of adults?

Or

How is the poet convinced that adults are hypocrites in the poem "Childhood"?

The child feels that appearances are deceptive. The adults, who appear to be warm and loving, in fact, just talked about 'love'. They don't have any such feelings in their hearts.

- Q6. Is it an adult or a child's voice in the poem reflecting upon childhood? Support your answer.

The reflections on childhood are that of an adult. Firstly, the question "When did my childhood go?" is framed in past tense. Secondly, it is a retrospective recollection of mind experiencing doubt, seeing through hypocrisy and discovering individuality which supports that it is an adult's voice.



**Q7. What gap did the child find in preaching and practice of the adults?**

The child found the adults professing love and affection but in their dealings they showed no such emotions.

**Q8. What according to you is the most appropriate suggestion put forward by the poet regarding the cessation of childhood?**

The childhood vanishes when the mind attains maturity. The child's discovery of his thinking faculty speaks of the maturity of his mind. Hence it seems to be the most appropriate suggestion that he is no more a child.

**Q9. Why do you think the poet feels that his childhood had hidden itself in an infant's face?**

The childhood once gone cannot be retrieved. So, initially the poet feels that it has gone to some forgotten place. Then looking at the face of an infant he feels guileless childhood resides in the innocence of an infant.

**Q10. How has adult hypocrisy shattered the innocence of the childlike behaviour?**

As a child grows up he becomes aware of the hypocrisy, pretence and falsehood of the adults around him. Ironically, he falls a victim to this vicious circle and thus loses the child-like innocence. This "loss" signals the end of childhood.

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