

2. The Laburnum Top

(Ted Hughes)

ABOUT THE POET

Ted Hughes (1930 – 98) was born in West Yorkshire and educated at Mexborough Grammar School and Pembroke College, Cambridge. As a boy he spent a lot of time on shooting and fishing and developed an obsession with birds and animals which is evident in "The Laburnum Top" as well as in many other works by him. This poem captures the beauty and silence of the natural world. Besides several volumes of poems, Ted also published plays for children. Many of Ted's poems constitute interesting examples of the topographical poetry. Ted stresses on the physical, animal and the subconscious. He was appointed poet Laureate in 1984 and breathed his last in 1998.

ABOUT THE POEM

Introduction

The poem, through picturesque images, portrays the moods of the various phenomena of nature in Autumn. Its four seasons are marked with their own hues, music and movements and each season fascinates us with its specific characteristics. The autumn season is marked with its silence and serenity, but it has its movements, motions, music, and thrill.

The Laburnum top is symbolic of the peace and silence that fills nature during the autumn season. But this calmness is disturbed with the arrival of the goldfinch who has built her nest there. As she laboriously feeds her young ones, there is a commotion, a veritable bedlam of their chirrupings. Having fed the young ones, the bird once again soars away into the infinity of the sky leaving the Laburnum tree silent and still again.

Summary

The 'Laburnum tree' stands silent and still. Its yellow flowers appear to be in harmony with the yellow sunlight in the afternoon of the September month. With the onset of the autumn season, its leaves start yellowing and its seeds are scattered.

This peace and silence give way to a stormy commotion when the goldfinch comes and perches at a branch end with a twitching chirrup. With a startled look on her face, she very cautiously enters the thickness of the tree. There is a sudden commotion as she feeds her young ones in the nest. The whole tree seems to tremble and resound with the twittering of the baby birds and the sound of their wings flapping as they grab food. Having fed her family to their fill, she again sneaks out to a branch-end. As if conscious of being the culprit behind the commotion, she makes delicate whistling sounds and soars away into the infinity of the sky. Silence and hollowness descend on the Laburnum tree again.

LITERARY DEVICES

Symbols:

A symbol is an object which represents or stands for another object.

Examples:

- *Laburnum top:*
symbol of peace and serenity which is an integral part of Nature.
- *Yellow September, leaves yellowing:*
symbolic of autumn and passing age which brings in its wake decay and loneliness.
- *Goldfinch:*
symbol of vivacity and liveliness.

Simile:

Simile is a comparison of two unlike objects using the word of comparison - 'like' or 'as'.

Example:

- *sleek as a lizard*

Having made sure that she is safe and secure, the goldfinch cautiously sneaks into the thickness of the tree just as a lizard nimbly passes through a narrow slit.

Metaphor:

A metaphor is a poetic device in which the poet compares two objects without using the word of comparison – 'like' or 'as'.

Example:

- *engine of her family*

The tree is the scene of the bird's family's activity. It 'trembles' and 'thrills' just like the whirring of an engine in motion creates vibrations. The poet does not say that tree is like an engine; he presents tree as an engine itself.

Transferred epithet:

Transferred epithet is an adjective which is not used with the noun it qualifies but with another noun.

Example:

- *barred face identity mask*

The stringed flower clusters of the Laburnum tree hang like bars and partially cover the bird. The goldfinch typically has yellow bands or bars on its face or wings which help in its identification.

COMMENTARY

- *leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen*

The expression creates an image of decay and deterioration. With the onset of the autumn season, leaves become yellow and the dried seeds of the Laburnum tree fall. The autumn season in man's life is marked with similar decay and deterioration.

- **A suddenness, a startlement, at a branch end**

The arrival of the mother bird with food in its beak creates a sudden and startling commotion in the tree. The mother sits on the branch end with a twitching chirrup, cautiously picking up her ears at any sudden or startling sound.

- **a machine starts up**

The expression refers to the commotion created in the silent tree when the goldfinch starts feeding its young ones. There is a blended noise of their chirruping and flapping of wings as the baby birds vie with one another to get their mother's attention and food. Often such a commotion is created by machines when they are operated.

- **she stokes it full**

The expression refers to the goldfinch feeding her young ones to their fill. Just as coal is fed into the fireplace of a steam engine, the goldfinch feeds her young ones till their hunger is satisfied.

- **identity mask**

The bird surfaces from the thick cover of Laburnum flowers. The characteristic bars on its face or wings are a mark of her identity.

- **eerie delicate whistle**

The expression refers to the gentle and soft sound made by the goldfinch. Having accomplished her task of feeding her young ones there is a feeling of motherly satisfaction as expressed by the soft whistle before she flies in the sky.

- **And the Laburnum subsides to empty**

The poet creates an image of lifelessness, emptiness, hollowness and seclusion. The Laburnum tree which is abuzz with activity with the arrival of the goldfinch returns to its silence once the bird, which is symbolic of life and liveliness, departs.

STANZAS FOR COMPREHENSION

Read the following extracts and answer the questions that follow.

(I)

The Laburnum top is silent, quite still
In the afternoon yellow September sunlight,
A few leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen.

SET - I (Answer in one or two lines)

- (a) What does the Laburnum top symbolise?

The Laburnum top is the green cover of leaves. It is a symbol of peace and serenity pervading the nature.

- (b) What literary device has been used in these lines?

The poet has created a special sound effect with the help of alliteration created with the repetition of 's' sound.

- (c) What time of the year is referred to in these lines?

The lines suggest the onset of the autumn season when the sun is still warm and tree leaves begin to yellow and fall.

- (d) Explain: "leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen".

The expression creates an image of decay and deterioration. With the onset of the autumn season leaves become yellow and the dried seeds of the Laburnum tree fall. The autumn season in man's life is marked with similar deterioration.

SET - II (Choose the most appropriate option)

- (a) The 'Laburnum top is silent' means

- (i) the tree is unable to express itself
- (ii) the tree is in a state of peace and serenity
- (iii) the tree is proud and high-headed
- (iv) a shadow of gloom is cast over the tree
- (ii) the tree is in a state of peace and serenity

- (b) The images in the above extract are suggestive of
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|-------------|-------------|
| (i) silence | (iii) death |
| (ii) shade | (iv) decay |
| (iv) decay | |
- (c) The silence and stillness of the tree is shattered by
- the arrival of the goldfinch
 - the wind blowing hard
 - the noise of a machine
 - the lizard on the Laburnum tree
 - the arrival of the goldfinch

(II)

A suddenness, a startlement, at a branch end.

Then sleek as a lizard, and alert, and abrupt,

She enters the thickness, and a machine starts up

Of chitterings, and a tremor of wings, and trillings—

SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)

- (a) What causes the suddenness and startlement?

The suddenness and startlement is caused by the arrival of the goldfinch. It sits on the branch end with a twitching chirrup, cautiously picking up her ears at any sudden or startling sound.

- (b) Explain the literary device used in the second line.

The poetic device used in the second line is a simile. Having made sure that she is safe and secure, the goldfinch cautiously sneaks into the thickness of the tree in a quiet and quick manner. A lizard has a similar movement when it passes through a narrow slit.

- (c) What does the expression 'a machine starts up' mean?

The expression refers to the commotion created in the silent tree when the goldfinch starts feeding its young ones. There is a

blended noise of their chirruping and flapping of wings as the baby birds make a noise for their mother's attention and food. Often such a commotion is created by machines when they are operated.

SET-II (Choose the most appropriate option)

- (a) What causes a startlement in the tree?
- (i) the arrival of a snake
 - (ii) a draft of the wind
 - (iii) the flapping of wings by the baby birds
 - (iv) the arrival of the goldfinch
 - (iv) the arrival of the goldfinch
- (b) The goldfinch is compared to a lizard because of its
- (i) golden, greenish colour
 - (ii) silence and stillness
 - (iii) swiftiness and alertness
 - (iii) swiftiness and alertness
 - (iv) cruelty and ugliness
- (c) Who starts up a 'machine'?
- (i) the goldfinch
 - (ii) the clamouring of the baby birds
 - (iii) the yellowing leaves
 - (iv) the fallen seeds
 - (ii) the clamouring of the baby birds

(III)

It is the engine of her family.

She stokes it full, then flirts out to a branch-end

Showing her barred face identity mask

SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)

- (a) What image has the poet used in these lines?
- The poet has used the image of an engine to express the noise and commotion made by the young ones of the goldfinch.

- (b) Explain: "she stokes it full".

The expression refers to the goldfinch feeding her young ones to their fill. Just as the coal is fed into the fireplace of a steam engine, the goldfinch feeds her young ones till their hunger is satisfied.

- (c) Where does the goldfinch go after feeding her young ones?

After feeding its young ones, the goldfinch stealthily comes to the end of a hanging branch, all ready to fly.

- (d) Explain: "identity mask".

The characteristic bars on the face or wings of a goldfinch are a mark of her identity. One may recognize her because of these bars.

SET - II (Choose the most appropriate option)

- (a) The literary device used in the first line is a

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| (i) simile | (iii) personification |
| (ii) alliteration | (iv) metaphor |
| (v) metaphor | |

- (b) 'She stokes it full' means

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| (i) she feeds her little ones to their fill |
| (ii) she stores food for the little ones |
| (iii) she makes her little ones chirp loudly |
| (iv) she eats as much as she could |
| (i) she feeds her little ones to their fill |

- (c) The expression 'barred face' means

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|--|----------------------|
| (i) the bird seems to be behind the bars | (iii) a striped face |
| (ii) a face that is partially visible | (iv) a painted face |
| (iii) a striped face | |

(iv)

Then with eerie delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings
She launches away, towards the infinite
And the Laburnum subsides to empty.

SET-I (Answer in one or two lines)

- (a) Who does 'she' refer to and where is she sitting?

'She' is the goldfinch bird. She is sitting at the end of a branch of the Laburnum tree.

- (b) Explain: "eerie delicate whistle".

The expression refers to the low, gentle and soft sound made by the goldfinch. Having accomplished her task of feeding her young ones, she experiences motherly satisfaction. As an expression of this feeling, she whistles softly and flies up into the sky.

- (c) What does 'infinite' refer to?

'Infinite' refers to the vast expanse of the sky where the goldfinch disappears once again after feeding her young ones.

- (d) What image is created in the last line?

The poet creates an image of emptiness, hollowness and seclusion. The Laburnum tree which was abuzz with activity with the arrival of the goldfinch returns to its silence once the bird, a symbol of life, departs.

SET-II (Choose the most appropriate option)

- (a) The bird's chirruping changes into whispering because

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|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| (i) she senses some danger | (iii) she feels sleepy |
| (ii) she feels satisfied | (iv) she is tired |
| (ii) she feels satisfied | |

- (b) "The Laburnum subsides to empty" means

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| (i) quietness descends on the tree again |
| (ii) the nest of the goldfinch becomes empty |
| (iii) the tree is rendered leafless and seedless |
| (iv) the goldfinch family goes off to sleep |
| (i) quietness descends on the tree again |

- (c) What does the word 'empty' signify?
- (i) with no leaves
 - (ii) with no other company
 - (iii) being without life
 - (iv) being without food

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

(to be answered in about 40 words each)

- Q1. What do you notice about the beginning and the ending of the poem?** (Textual)

The beginning and the ending of the poem are beautifully worded, invoking images of silence, seclusion and hollowness, which are integral part of life. The Laburnum tree, which is symbolic of silence and stillness as well as decay and deterioration is passing through the autumn season.

- Q2. What is the bird's movement compared with? What is the basis for the comparison?** (Textual)

The bird's movement has been compared with the sleek and stealthy movement of the lizard. The comparison has been drawn because the goldfinch makes her moves cautiously as she enters the thickness of the tree where she has built her nest. She stretches herself like a lizard and then in a very alert and abrupt manner she enters its thickness because she wants to protect her young ones from any danger. The comparison is odd but quite graphic.

- Q3. Why is the image of the engine evoked by the poet?** (Textual)

The poet has evoked the image of the engine to compare the hasty movements of the young ones and the commotion they create as they coax their mother for food. In great commotion they trail behind their mother who satisfies their hunger by

feeding them one by one. The image of the engine captures the flutter, commotion and noise created by the birds.

Q4. What do you like most about the poem? (Textual)

The poem is captivating because of a vivid presentation of the sights, sounds, and colours around the Laburnum tree. The poem also is remarkable for a close observation of the varying moods of nature. The chirpings of the young ones of the goldfinch beautifully balance the silence of the Laburnum tree. The maternal care of the mother goldfinch is really touching and fascinating.

Q5. What does the phrase "her barred face identity mask" mean?

(Textual)

The Laburnum tree has stringed clusters of flowers called which hang like bars. Thus, the goldfinch hidden behind these bunches looks as if standing behind bars. Another plausible explanation can be that the goldfinch has characteristic yellow bars on its face and wings which act as its peculiar mark of identification. Each goldfinch, I believe, has a unique pattern of bars. Yet another explanation can be that the goldfinch is perfectly camouflaged in the yellow flowers and yellowing leaves of the Laburnum tree.

Q6. What message does the poem give?

The poem does not appear to give any significant message. The poet seems to be interested in merely describing the scene of the Laburnum in a graphic manner both when the goldfinch comes to it and when she leaves. However, the parental instinct and care which is powerfully depicted in the poem, can be considered as the message of the poem. The impatience of the hungry young ones, the alert, cautious and protective mother

with food in her beak, the commotion during feeding and a very satisfied mother bird – all these images reinforce the message.

Q7. Briefly describe the scene at the Laburnum tree after the mother bird has fed her little ones.

After the mother bird has fed her little ones, a calm and stillness descends on the tree. The mother bird expresses her happiness and satisfaction with strange sounding, delicate, whisper-like chirrups and then flies away into the infinite sky. The Laburnum is silent, still and empty now.

Q8. Why does the poet call the whisperings of the bird 'eerie'?

The word 'eerie' implies strange or weird. The delicate and whistle-like whisperings of the mother bird express her immeasurable happiness at the satisfaction of maternal instinct in feeding her little ones. So her sound conveys the strange thrill of pleasure she has just experienced. It is 'eerie' also in the sense that it is in sharp contrast to the loud commotion heard a little while ago.

Q9. What makes the Laburnum tree "tremble" and "thrill"?

When the mother bird brings food for her little ones, they make restless and impatient noise expressing their joy at seeing their mother and the prospect of getting food. Each of them fights with others to be the first to receive the food. Thus the chirping and fluttering of wings start up a commotion in the nest that makes the Laburnum tremble and thrill.

Q10. What happens to the Laburnum tree in September?

The Laburnum tree is usually very quiet and still during September perhaps because of the onset of autumn. Its leaves begin to yellow and fall; even the seeds fall, too. This eerie stillness, however, is shattered by birds nesting in the dense tree.