

A Photograph

POEM

Shirley Toulson

Class 11 Hornbill : Ch 7

ABOUT THIS POEM

This is a lyric poem by Shirley Toulson. It looks at an old family photograph and reflects on time, memory and loss.

Quick facts :-

- Poet : Shirley Toulson
- Form : free verse, no fixed rhyme
- Length : 3 stanzas, 19 lines in all
- Speaker : the poet, looking back in time

What these notes cover :-

- full poem text, stanza by stanza
- line by line meaning of every line
- poetic devices used in the poem
- theme, central idea and the poet's tone
- NCERT's own Think it out questions
- a quick recall page for last revision

STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

The poem has three stanzas. Each one moves the reader to a different point in time, from a childhood photograph to the poet's grief after her mother's death.

Stanza-wise time frame :-

- Stanza 1 : the photograph, mother as a girl
- Stanza 2 : years later, mother laughs at it
- Stanza 3 : present day, the mother is dead

Form and style :-

The poem is written in free verse. It has no fixed rhyme scheme and no regular metre, so it reads like natural, reflective speech.

- written in the first person, the poet's own voice
- moves from past to present in a straight line
- plain, conversational language, almost like talk

FULL TEXT OF THE POEM

Stanza 1 :-

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.
All three stood still to smile through their hair
At the uncle with the camera. 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.

Spot the key phrase :-

"terribly transient feet"

This phrase sets up the poem's big contrast. The sea barely changes, but the girls' feet, their whole childhood, will not last.

Stanza 2 :-

Some twenty — thirty — years later
She'd laugh at the snapshot. "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. Both wry
With the laboured ease of loss.

Notice the quotation marks. The mother's own words are quoted directly here, as if she is speaking to the poet in the room.

Spot the key phrase :-

"laboured ease of loss"

This phrase shows laughter that looks easy but actually took effort, a mother quietly coping with the loss of her own past.

Stanza 3 :-

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.

Glossary (from NCERT) :-

→ paddling : walking bare-foot in shallow water

→ transient : lasting only a short time, passing

NCERT asks students to first guess these meanings from the poem, then check them in a dictionary.

Spot the key phrase :-

"Its silence silences."

This closing line is the most quoted line of the whole poem. Remember it exactly, word for word, for exams.

LINE BY LINE MEANING : STANZA 1

"The cardboard shows me how it was"

The photograph, printed on stiff cardboard, shows the poet exactly how the scene looked long ago.

"When the two girl cousins went paddling,"

Two girl cousins are seen walking bare-foot in the shallow sea water.

"Each one holding one of my mother's hands,"

Each cousin holds one of the poet's mother's hands. The mother stands in the middle.

"And she the big girl, some twelve years or so."

The poet's mother was the eldest of the three, about twelve years old at the time.

→ note : she was the ~~youngest~~ eldest of the three girls

"All three stood still to smile through their hair"

All three girls stopped moving and smiled, their wind-blown hair falling across their faces.

LINE BY LINE MEANING : STANZA 1 (contd.)

"At the uncle with the camera. A sweet face,"

They smiled at an uncle who was taking their photograph. The mother's own face looked sweet and innocent.

"My mother's, that was before I was born."

This sweet young face belonged to the poet's own mother, long before the poet herself was born.

"And the sea, which appears to have changed less,"

The sea in the background looks almost the same now as it did back then.

"Washed their terribly transient feet."

The waves washed over the girls' feet, feet that, unlike the sea, would not stay young for long.

Key idea :-

Stanza 1 ends on a contrast: the sea stays almost the same, but the girls' childhood is fleeting and will not last.

LINE BY LINE MEANING : STANZA 2

"Some twenty, thirty years later"

Roughly twenty or thirty years after the photograph was taken.

"She'd laugh at the snapshot. 'See Betty'"

The mother would laugh while looking at the old snapshot, pointing out her cousin Betty.

"And Dolly," she'd say, "and look how they"

She would also name her other cousin Dolly, and joke about how the two of them looked.

LINE BY LINE MEANING : STANZA 2 (contd.)

"Dressed us for the beach." The sea holiday"

She laughed at how they had been dressed for that old beach holiday.

"Was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry"

For the mother, the holiday itself was a memory. For the poet, it is her mother's laughter that is now a memory. Both memories feel bittersweet.

"With the laboured ease of loss."

The laughter looked easy and light, but it took real effort. It was a quiet way of coping with loss.

Key idea :-

The word 'wry' shows the laughter is not pure joy, it also carries a trace of sadness for time that cannot come back.

LINE BY LINE MEANING : STANZA 3

"Now she's been dead nearly as many years"

By now, the poet's mother has been dead for almost as many years.

"As that girl lived. And of this circumstance"

As the number of years that young girl in the photograph had once lived. About this fact,

"There is nothing to say at all."

there is simply nothing left to say. Words cannot hold this kind of grief.

"Its silence silences."

The silence around her mother's death is so total that it silences the poet completely.

POETIC DEVICES : PART 1

CONTRAST

Imagery :-

The poem paints a clear picture: the two cousins paddling, the mother's hair blowing, the sea washing their feet. This visual imagery makes the old photograph come alive.

Symbol :-

The cardboard photograph is a symbol. It stands for a memory frozen forever, even after the people in it have grown old or died.

Contrast :-

The poem sets the unchanging sea against the girls' transient feet. Nature stays the same while human life passes quickly.

→ this contrast is between nature and ~~emotion~~ human transience

POETIC DEVICES : PART 2

Repetition :-

The last line, 'Its silence silences,' repeats the word silence as a noun and then as a verb. This shows how deep the grief is.

"Its silence silences."

Enjambment :-

Many lines run on into the next without a pause, for example 'went paddling, / Each one holding.' This flow copies the way memory keeps moving forward.

Free verse :-

The poem has no fixed rhyme scheme and no regular metre. This free verse form gives it a natural, reflective voice.

Dialogue :-

The mother's own words are quoted directly, 'See Betty and Dolly,' she'd say. This colloquial dialogue makes her voice feel real and personal.

THEME AND CENTRAL IDEA

TRANSCIENCE

Central idea :-

An old photograph leads the poet to think about time. The sea stays the same, but the mother's life, and later her memory, passes and ends.

Main themes :-

- time and mortality
- nature's permanence vs human transience
- the mother-daughter bond across two lives
- memory captured, and lost, in a photograph
- grief that goes beyond words
- the poem is mainly about ~~happiness~~ loss and time

THE POET'S TONE

Stanza 1 : nostalgic :-

The tone is warm and gentle, almost cheerful, as the poet fondly recalls a bright childhood scene by the sea.

Stanza 2 : wry :-

The tone turns wry and softly ironic. The mother's laughter is real, but it also hides a quiet sadness for lost time.

Stanza 3 : sombre :-

The tone becomes sombre and elegiac. Grief is so strong that words fail, and the poem ends in silence.

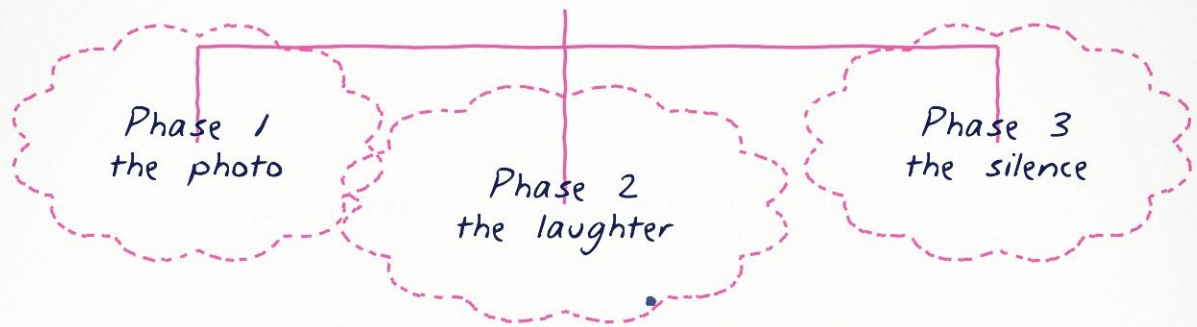
→ stanza 3's tone is ~~angry~~ grief-stricken and silent

Overall tone shift :-

The tone moves in one direction only: nostalgic, to wry, to sombre. It never goes back to lightness once stanza 3 begins.

THE THREE PHASES OF THE POEM

NCERT asks : the three stanzas depict three different phases. What are they ?



Phase 1 : Stanza 1

The photograph itself : mother as a twelve year old girl, paddling with her cousins.

Phase 2 : Stanza 2

Years later : mother, now grown up, laughs with the poet while looking at the snapshot.

Phase 3 : Stanza 3

Present day : mother is dead, and the poet has nothing to say, only silence remains.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

The poem quietly traces the bond between the poet and her mother across three points in time.

→ stanza 1 : the mother is a child in an old photo

→ stanza 2 : mother and daughter share one laugh

→ stanza 3 : the daughter is left alone with loss

A shared memory :-

The sea holiday belonged to the mother's own past. Her laughter about it later becomes the daughter's memory too, passed from one generation to the next.

Roles reverse over time :-

In stanza 1, the mother is the young one in the picture. By stanza 3, the daughter is the one left to remember and grieve.

NCERT THINK IT OUT : Q 1-4

Q1 :-

What does the word 'cardboard' denote in the poem ? Why has this word been used ?

Hint : Cardboard means the photograph itself, printed on a stiff card. It shows how old photographs were mounted, and hints at something that has lasted while the people have not.

Q2 :-

What has the camera captured ?

→ Hint : the ~~poet~~ three girls, frozen

The photo has frozen the mother and her two cousins paddling at the beach, a moment kept forever though the girls grew old.

Q3 :-

What has not changed over the years ? Does this suggest something to you ?

Hint : The sea has not changed. It shows that nature is timeless while human life is transient, this is the poem's key contrast.

Q4 :-

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

Hint : Her laugh was easy on the surface but 'laboured' beneath it, a quiet, controlled way of covering the sadness of lost time.

NCERT THINK IT OUT : Q 5-7

Q5 :-

What is the meaning of the line 'Both wry with the laboured ease of loss.' ?

Hint : The laugh looked natural and easy, wry and gently ironic, but it took real effort to laugh instead of feeling the loss of the past.

Q6 :-

What does 'this circumstance' refer to ?

Hint : It refers to the fact that the poet's mother is now dead, for nearly as many years as that girl in the photo had lived.

Q7 :-

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

Hint : Phase 1, the photograph and the mother as a girl.
Phase 2, years later, the mother laughing at the snapshot.
Phase 3, the present, after the mother's death, only silence.

EXTRACT BASED PRACTICE

Read each extract below carefully, then answer the questions that follow it. These are NCERT's own questions on the poem.

Extract A (Stanza 2, last two lines) :-

Was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry
With the laboured ease of loss.

Q :-

What is the meaning of the line 'Both wry with the laboured ease of loss.' ?

Extract B (Stanza 3) :-

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.

Q :-

What does 'this circumstance' refer to, and what does the last line 'Its silence silences' tell us about the poet's grief ?

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- 'cardboard' is not a wish, it means the photo
- always link 'transient' to the sea's permanence
- quote 'Its silence silences' exactly, do not paraphrase
- name all three stanzas as three separate time phases
- never call this poem a sonnet, it is free verse

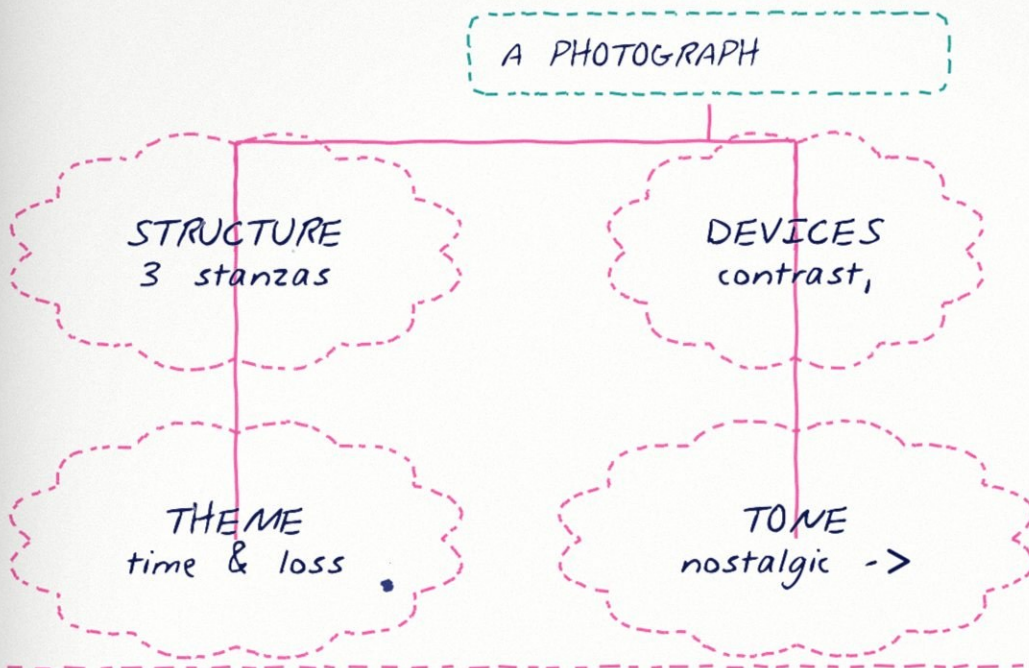
Exam tip :-

For a long answer, always support your point with the exact line from the poem, then explain it in your own words.

Exam tip :-

Keep your paraphrase simple. Examiners reward a clear meaning over a fancy one that drifts from the actual line.

MIND MAP : A PHOTOGRAPH



STRUCTURE : photo (S1) -> laughter (S2) -> silence (S3).

DEVICES : imagery, symbol, contrast, repetition, enjambment, free verse.

THEME : nature's permanence vs human transience ; mother-daughter bond ; grief.

TONE : nostalgic -> wry -> sombre.

QUICK RECALL

- poet : Shirley Toulson, form : free verse
- 3 stanzas = 3 phases : photo, laughter, silence
- key contrast : the sea vs the girls' feet
- key device : repetition in 'silence silences'
- theme : time, memory, loss, mother-daughter bond
- tone moves : nostalgic, wry, then sombre
- glossary : paddling, transient

Last line to remember :-

"Its silence silences."

Grief so deep that there are no words left, only quiet.