

The Laburnum Top

Ted Hughes

(poem)

• About the chapter

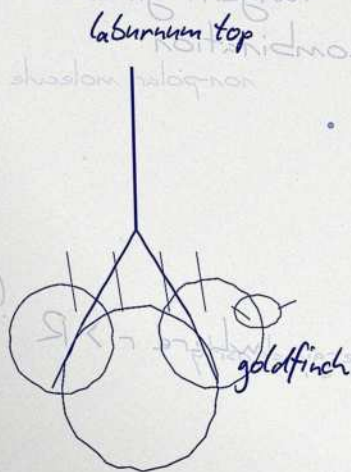
Class 11 English Hornbill, Chapter 8. This short poem is printed in the book right after Discovering Tut: the Saga Continues, and NCERT notes say it is placed there because that prose piece also refers to names of plants. On our list it is studied as its own poem, not mixed with the Tut chapter.

About the poet

Ted Hughes was an English poet well known for writing closely observed nature and animal poems. This poem watches a laburnum tree and a goldfinch for a few quiet seconds.

What the poem is about

A laburnum tree stands still in the afternoon sun. A goldfinch flies in with a burst of sound and movement, feeds her family inside the tree, then flies off again, and the tree goes back to being still and empty.



How to Study This Poem

NCERT's own teaching note for this poem lists what a reader should pay attention to. Use these five points as a checklist while revising.

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① Word meanings:
know what laburnum and goldfinch mean, glossed on the poem page itself.
- ② Factual reading:
who does what, in what order, in the poem.
- ③ Movement of thought:
how the poem is structured, from stillness to sudden activity and back to stillness.
- ④ Figures of speech:
simile, metaphor, personification, visual and sound imagery.
- ⑤ Sound and word choice:
onomatopoeia and repeated sounds like ch and tr.

Note

The poem sits after Discovering Tut only because that chapter also names plants, the two pieces are not linked in meaning.

The Laburnum Top

- Ted Hughes -

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

*
Till the goldfinch comes, with a twitching chirrup
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 —
The whole tree trembles and thrills.

Stanza 1-2 (part)

Continued on the next page. Read these lines slowly and picture the still tree, then the sudden burst of the bird arriving.

The Laburnum Top (contd.)

It is the engine of her family.

She stokes it full, then flirts out to a branch-end :
showing her barred face identity mask

Then with eerie delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings
she launches away, towards the infinite

And the laburnum subsides to empty.

Glossary (from NCERT)

~~laburnum~~ laburnum : a short tree with hanging branches, yellow flowers and poisonous seeds.

goldfinch : a small singing bird with yellow feathers on its wings.

Line by Line - Stanza 1

Lines 1-3

"The Laburnum top is silent, quite still"

The poem opens on a calm image, the top of the laburnum tree is not moving at all. Repeating silent and still stresses how complete the stillness is.

"In the afternoon yellow September sunlight,"

Sets the time and season, an autumn afternoon, and the dominant colour of the poem, yellow, appears here for the first time.

"A few leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen."

The tree is past its flowering season, a few leaves are turning yellow and it has already dropped its seeds. It looks tired and quiet, almost done for the year.

Effect

These three lines build a picture of a tree with nothing happening on it, so the arrival of the bird will feel sudden by contrast.

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Line by Line - Lines 4-6

"Till the goldfinch comes, with a twitching chirrup"

Till marks the turning point of the poem. The goldfinch arrives, and twitching chirrup is the first sound and movement word, it imitates the bird's quick call.

"A suddenness, a startlement, at a branch end."

Two abstract nouns, suddenness and startlement, stand in place of verbs. The poet is describing the shock of the moment itself, not just the bird.

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

A simile compares the goldfinch to a lizard, sleek, quick and watchful. Three short adjectives, sleek, alert, abrupt, copy the bird's quick, darting behaviour.

Word note

Sleek as a lizard is a ~~metaphor~~ simile (uses as).

Line by Line - Lines 7-9

"She enters the thickness, and a machine starts up"

The goldfinch goes into the thick leaves of the tree. A machine starts up is a metaphor, the sudden burst of activity inside the tree is compared to a machine switching on.

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

Chitterings and trillings are onomatopoeic words, they sound like the noise they describe. A tremor of wings adds a shaking, fluttering movement to the sound.

"The whole tree trembles and thrills."

Personification, the tree is made to feel and shake as if it were alive. Trembles and thrills, sound and feel of shaking, the two words echo each other.

Line by Line - Lines 10-12

"It is the engine of her family."

A second metaphor. The tree, full of noisy activity now, is called an engine because it is powering and feeding her whole family of chicks inside it.

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

Stokes it full keeps up the engine idea, she is feeding the engine, that is, feeding her chicks. Flirts out is a light, playful word for how she darts back out to a branch tip.

"Showing her barred face identity mask"

The striped, barred pattern on the goldfinch's face is called her identity mask, the natural markings that tell her apart, the way a mask identifies a face.

Word note

Engine, machine and stokes all belong to one connected metaphor about the bird bringing energy to the still tree.

Line by Line - Lines 13-15

"Then with eerie delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings"

Eerie, delicate, whistle-chirrup, whisperings, all soft, hushed sound words. The noise of the visit is fading now, becoming quieter before she leaves.

"She launches away, towards the infinite"

The goldfinch flies off, launches away suggests speed and force, and towards the infinite makes her flight feel vast, into open endless space.

"And the laburnum subsides to empty."

Subsides means to settle back down, the tree returns to stillness, and empty tells us the whole family has flown, nothing is left inside.

Beginning and ending

The poem begins with the tree silent, quite still and ends with it subsides to empty. It closes the way it opened, on stillness, the bird's visit is a short episode inside a longer calm.

Poetic Devices - Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia means a word whose sound copies the sound it names. This poem is well known for using it to bring the goldfinch's noise to life

chirrup - the bird's quick call (twitching chirrup)

chitterings - small rapid chattering sounds inside the tree

trillings - high, quick, repeated bird notes

whistle-chirrup - a soft whistling call *

whisperings - faint, hushed sound as she leaves

Why it matters

These words let the reader almost hear the goldfinch's family inside the tree, instead of just being told it is noisy.

Poetic Devices - Imagery

Visual imagery

afternoon yellow September sunlight, a few leaves yellowing, sleek as a lizard, her barred face identity mask. These lines let us see the colour and the bird's markings clearly.

Auditory (sound) imagery

twitching chirrup, chitterings, trillings, whistle-chirrup whisperings. These let us hear the goldfinch's arrival and departure.

Kinetic (movement) imagery

a tremor of wings, the whole tree trembles and thrills, flirts out to a branch-end, launches away. These give us a feeling of quick, shaking movement.

Point to remember

The poem^{*} uses all three kinds of imagery together, so the reader can see, hear and almost feel the bird's short visit.

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Simile and Metaphor

Simile

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

A simile is a direct comparison using as or like. Here the goldfinch's quick, smooth movement is compared to a lizard's.

Metaphor

"a machine starts up"

"It is the engine of her family."

A metaphor calls one thing another thing directly, with no as or like. The tree full of chattering, moving birds is called a machine, and then an engine, without saying it is like one.

Extended metaphor

Machine, engine and stokes it full all build on the same idea across several lines. This is called an extended metaphor, one comparison carried through the poem.

Personification and Sound Patterns

Personification

The tree is given feelings ^{*}and actions as if it were alive. The whole tree trembles and thrills, and the laburnum subsides to empty, both describe the tree the way we might describe a person's body or mood.

Alliteration

"delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings"

The wh sound repeats in whistle and whisperings, right at the point where the poem is turning quiet again.

Repeated sounds (ch, tr)

ch sound: chirrup, chitterings, whistle-chirrup. tr sound: tremor, trembles, trillings. These repeated sounds tie the goldfinch's noise together across the poem.

Form

The poem is written in free verse, no fixed rhyme scheme and no regular metre. Lines often run on into the next without a pause, which is called enjambment.

Structure of the Poem

The poem is shaped like a circle, it starts and ends on the same note of stillness, with a burst of sound and movement in between.

① STILL → ② ARRIVAL → ③ PEAK ACTIVITY → ④ DEPARTURE → ⑤ STILL / EMPTY

Stage 1, tree silent and still. Stage 2, goldfinch arrives with a startlement. Stage 3, chitterings, tremor, tree trembles and thrills, the busiest point. Stage 4, she launches away. Stage 5, the laburnum subsides to empty, back to stillness.

Why this matters

The frame structure shows that the goldfinch's visit is only a brief, passing event inside the ongoing quiet life of the tree.

Theme and Central Idea

Stillness and sudden movement

The poem sets up a sharp contrast between the tree's long, quiet stillness and the goldfinch's short, sudden burst of sound and motion. Both states are shown as part of the same natural scene.

Nature observed closely

Hughes is known for watching nature very closely. Here he records a small, ordinary moment, a bird feeding its family in a tree, in careful, exact detail.

A life force entering the tree

The goldfinch briefly fills the silent tree with energy, sound and life, then takes that energy away with her, leaving the tree empty again.

Theme (contd.) - Tree and Bird

The tree, passive and patient

The laburnum does nothing on its own, it is silent at the start and simply subsides to empty at the end. It only comes alive through what happens to it, the goldfinch's visit.

The goldfinch, quick and full of life

She is sleek, alert, abrupt, always in motion, entering, stoking, flirting out, launching away. She is the opposite of the still tree.

Central idea (one line)

A still tree briefly comes alive when a goldfinch feeds her family in it, then falls quiet again.

Tone of the Poem

Calm and observant at the start

The opening lines are quiet and unhurried, silent, quite still, the poet is simply watching, not commenting or judging.

Excited and admiring in the middle

The tone quickens with the goldfinch's arrival, short phrases and busy sound words, suddenness, startlement, trembles and thrills, show the poet's delight at the sudden burst of life.

Gentle and settled at the end

The eerie, delicate whisperings and subsides to empty bring the tone back down to calm, but with a slightly wistful, quiet note as the life leaves the tree.

Overall

The poet's tone is that of a careful, ~~bored~~ admiring observer of nature.

Colour and Sound in the Poem.

Dominant colour

Yellow is the dominant colour, afternoon yellow September sunlight, a few leaves yellowing, and the goldfinch itself has yellow feathers on its wings (see glossary).

Sound words

chirrup, chitterings, trillings, whistle-chirrup, whisperings. All copy the goldfinch's calls and chatter. *

Movement words

twitching, suddenness, startlement, sleek, alert, abrupt, enters, tremor, trembles, thrills, stokes, flirts out, launches away, subsides. *

Repeated sounds

ch as in chirrup, chitterings. tr as in tremor, trembles, trillings. Both repeat often through the middle of the poem.

NCEERT Exercise - Find Out

- ① What laburnum is called in your language.

This is a research activity, the answer depends on your own language. Ask an elder or look it up and write it down. In Hindi it is commonly called amaltas.

- ② Which local bird is like the goldfinch?

Another research activity, answers will vary by region. Look for a small, colourful, singing bird found near you and compare it with the goldfinch in the poem.

Note

Both questions ask you to find out on your own, there is no single fixed answer in the book.

NCERT Exercise - Think it Out (1)

Q1. What do you notice about the beginning and the ending of the poem?

Ans. Both the beginning and the ending describe the tree as still and empty. It begins silent, quite still and ends subsides to empty, the poem comes back to where it started.

Q2. To what is the bird's movement compared? What is the basis for the comparison?

Ans. Her movement is compared to a lizard, sleek as a lizard.

The basis is quickness, smoothness and alertness, both the lizard and the goldfinch move in quick, darting bursts.

Q3. Why is the image of the engine evoked by the poet?

Ans. The engine image shows the sudden burst of noisy, busy energy inside the once still tree, chitterings and tremor of wings feel mechanical, like an engine switching on.

NCERT Exercise - Think it Out (2)

Q4. What do you like most about the poem?

Ans. This is a personal opinion question, answers will vary. A sample answer: the sound words, chitterings and trillings, which make the goldfinch's arrival feel real and lively.

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

Ans. It refers to the striped, barred pattern on the goldfinch's face. The poet calls it an identity mask because these natural markings are what mark her out and identify her.

Tip for exams

For opinion questions like Q4, always support your answer with a line or word from the poem, do not just state a liking.

NCERT Exercise - Note Down / List

Note down

1. Sound words: chirrup, chitterings, trillings, whistle-chirrup, whisperings.
2. Movement words: twitching, suddenness, startlement, sleek, alert, abrupt, tremor, trembles, thrills, flirts out, launches, subsides.
3. Dominant colour: yellow (yellow sunlight, leaves yellowing, goldfinch's yellow feathers).

List the following

1. Words describing sleek, alert, abrupt: these describe the goldfinch's quick, watchful, sudden way of moving.
2. ch sound: chirrup, chitterings, whistle-chirrup. tr sound: tremor, trembles, trillings.
3. Other repeated sounds: the sh/s sounds in sleek, silent, still, startlement also recur through the poem.

Extract-Based Practice - A

Read the extract and answer

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

(a) Name the poem and the poet.

Ans. The Laburnum Top, by Ted Hughes.

(b) What season is described here?

Ans. September, autumn shown by yellowing leaves and fallen seeds.

(c) What is the state of the tree in these lines?

Ans. Completely silent and still, with nothing moving on it.

Extract-Based Practice - B

Read the extract and answer

"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 —"

(a) Who is she in this extract?

Ans. The goldfinch.

(b) Identify one simile in these lines.

Ans. Sleek as a lizard, comparing the bird's movement to a lizard's.

(c) What does a machine starts up suggest?

Ans. The sudden burst of busy, noisy activity inside the tree once the goldfinch enters it.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

① Tree and bird mix-up:

The laburnum is passive and still, only the goldfinch moves.

② Simile vs metaphor:

Sleek as a lizard uses as, so it is a simile, not a metaphor.

③ Missing the frame:

Always mention that the poem begins and ends on stillness.

④ Opinion with no support:

For QT-style questions, quote a word or line from the poem.

⑤ Spelling:

The correct spelling is laburnum, as glossed by NCERT, not laburnam or labernum.

Quick check

Goldfinch feathers are ~~blue~~ yellow (see glossary).

Quick Recall - The Laburnum Top

Poet: Ted Hughes. Form: short free-verse nature poem.

- Setting: a laburnum tree, one September afternoon.
- Structure: still, then sudden activity, then still again.
- Main figure: goldfinch feeding her family in the tree.
- Simile: sleek as a lizard.
- Metaphor: a machine starts up / the engine of her family.
- Personification: the whole tree trembles and thrills.
- Onomatopoeia: chirrup, chitterings, trillings, whisperings.
- Dominant colour: yellow.
- Repeated sounds: ch (chirrup, chitterings), tr (tremor, trembles, trillings).
- Theme: nature's stillness briefly broken by a burst of life.
- Tone: calm, then excited and admiring, then quietly settled.

Mnemonic

Remember STILL: Sound words, Tree passive, Imagery (visual + auditory), Lizard simile, Life force (goldfinch), Loop back to stillness.