

Childhood

. Markus Natten

Class 11 English (Hornbill) : Chapter 10

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

In the NCERT Hornbill book this short poem is printed along with Chapter 9, The Ailing Planet : the Green Movement's Role, as a companion piece. It is studied here as its own separate chapter.

→ poet : Markus Natten

→ form : free verse, four stanzas

→ voice : first person, the poet on himself

WHAT THE POEM IS ABOUT*

The poet keeps asking one question in different ways: when did my childhood go? Three stanzas offer three possible moments, and the last stanza gives the only answer he can find.

THE POEM AT A GLANCE

Title :-

Childhood. The title names the very thing the poet is searching for through the whole poem, the childhood that seems to have quietly slipped away without him noticing the exact moment.

The question :-

Three stanzas open with the same question, 'When did my childhood go?', and each one tests out a different possible answer. The poet is not sure, so he keeps asking again.

Setting :-

There is no outer scene here, no place or time. The whole poem happens inside the poet's own mind, as he looks back and questions himself.

Why repeat the question three times :

- shows the poet is unsure of the exact moment
- each attempt tests a different kind of loss
- voice : ~~third~~ first person throughout

THE POEM : STANZA 1

Read the first stanza slowly. It is the poet's first attempt to find the moment his childhood ended.

When did my childhood go?

Was it the day I ceased to be eleven,

Was it the time I realised that Hell and Heaven,

Could not be found in Geography,

And therefore could not be,

Was that the day?

LINE BY LINE : STANZA 1

The opening question :-

"When did my childhood go?"

The poet asks himself directly when his childhood ended. He does not know the answer, so the whole poem becomes a search for it.

Turning eleven :-

Was it the day I ceased to be eleven,

His first guess is a birthday, the day he stopped being eleven years old. It is the simplest kind of answer, a fixed date on a calendar.

Heaven and Hell not found in Geography :-

Was it the time I realised that Hell and Heaven, / Could not be found in Geography, / And therefore could not be,

His second guess is deeper. As a child he believed Heaven and Hell were real places he could find on a map. Once he studied Geography and could not locate them, he reasoned that they did not exist at all. This is a loss of childish, literal belief to grown-up, rational thinking.

The refrain :-

Was that the day?

He asks it as an exclamation, not a real answer, he is still guessing, not certain.

THE POEM : STANZA 2

The second stanza tries a different kind of moment, the moment he understood something about grown-ups.

When did my childhood go?

Was it the time I realised 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?

LINE BY LINE : STANZA 2

Adults were not what they seemed :-

Was it the time I realised that adults were not / all they seemed to be,

As a child he trusted adults completely. Growing up meant seeing through that trust, realising grown-ups were not as perfect or as simple as he once believed.

Talking of love, not living it :-

They talked of love and preached of love, / But did not act so lovingly,

Adults spoke about love often, and even preached it as a value to live by, but their own actions did not match their words. This is the moment the poet notices the gap between what people say and what people do.

Concept :-

This stanza is about discovering hypocrisy in the adult world, a very different and sadder kind of growing up than stanza 1.

Was that the day?

THE POEM : STANZA 3

The third stanza turns inward, to the poet's own mind and his own thoughts.

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?

LINE BY LINE : STANZA 3

Finding his own mind :-

Was it when I found my mind was really mine, / To use whichever way
I choose,

→ stanza 3 opens with the same refrain

Here the poet realises his mind is truly his own, free to be used exactly as he wishes.

Thoughts that are his alone :-

Producing thoughts that were not those of other people / But my own,
and mine alone

He begins to produce thoughts that belong only to him, not borrowed from parents, teachers or anyone else. This is the birth of an independent, individual mind.

Concept :-

Growing up here means gaining individuality, thinking for himself instead of simply repeating other people's ideas.

Was that the day?

THE POEM : STANZA 4

The final, short stanza changes the question and gives the only answer the poet can honestly offer.

Where did my childhood go?

It went to some forgotten place,

That's hidden in an infant's face,

That's all I know.

LINE BY LINE : STANZA 4

A changed question :-

"Where" did my childhood go?

Notice the question word changes from 'When' to 'Where'. After three failed attempts to date the moment, the poet stops asking for a time and asks for a place instead.

A forgotten place, hidden in an infant's face :-

It went to some forgotten place, / That's hidden in an infant's face,

His childhood has not vanished completely, it has gone to some place he cannot quite remember, a place that is hidden inside the face of every infant. Innocence, in other words, does not disappear from the world, it simply moves on to the next child.

Accepting the mystery :-

That's all I know.

The poem ends without a clear date or place after all. The poet accepts that he cannot pin the loss of childhood down to one exact moment, only sense where it seems to live on.

COMPLETE POEM : CLEAN COPY

When did my childhood go?

Was it the day I ceased to be eleven,

Was it the time I realised that Hell and Heaven,

Could not be found in Geography,

And therefore could not be, Was that the day?

When did my childhood go? Was it the time I realised 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?

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?

Where did my childhood go? It went to some forgotten place, That's hidden in
an infant's face, That's all I know.

POETIC DEVICES (1)

Repetition / anaphora :-

'When did my childhood go?' opens three of the four stanzas, word for word, and 'Was that the day?' closes each of them. This repeated pattern is called anaphora.

→ not a ~~metaphor~~ but a repeated refrain

Rhetorical question :-

'When did my childhood go?', 'Was that the day?' and 'Where did my childhood go?' are all questions the poet does not truly expect anyone else to answer. He is thinking aloud, questioning himself.

First-person introspective voice :-

Every line uses 'I' or 'my': 'my childhood', 'I ceased', 'I realised', 'I found my mind', 'my own, and mine alone'. The whole poem is the poet looking inward at his own past.

POETIC DEVICES (2)

Enjambment :-

Lines often run on into the next without a full stop, for example 'Was it the time I realised that adults were not / all they seemed to be,'. The sentence spills over the line break, which keeps each stanza reading like one connected thought.

Contrast :-

'They talked of love and preached of love, / But did not act so lovingly' sets words against actions. This contrast is what reveals the adults' hypocrisy in stanza 2.

Personification / imagery :-

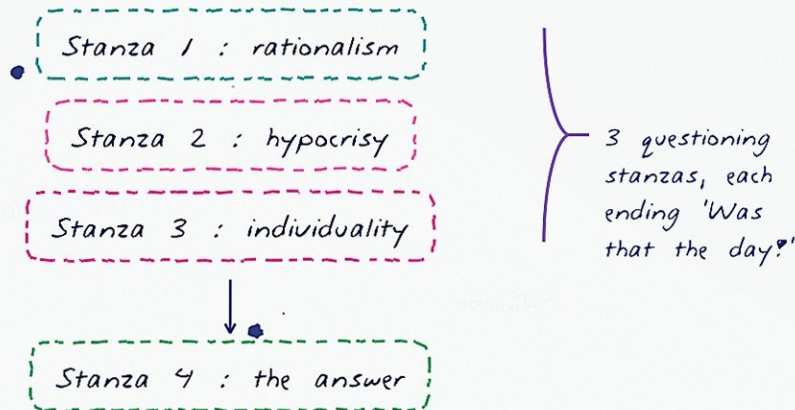
In the last stanza, childhood is spoken of as something that can 'go' somewhere and 'hide' in an infant's face, as if childhood were a living thing that moves on to someone else. The 'infant's face' is also a strong image of pure innocence.

Simple, conversational diction :-

The poet uses plain, everyday words, not difficult vocabulary, which makes the poem feel like an honest, private conversation with himself.

STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

The poem has four stanzas, built as three attempts at an answer followed by one final, honest admission.



Concept :-

Stanzas 1 to 3 each open with 'When did my childhood go?' and close with 'Was that the day?', a pattern of question and near answer. Stanza 4 breaks the pattern: it opens with 'Where', not 'When', and ends 'That's all I know', settling for a place instead of a date.

THEME & CENTRAL IDEA

Central idea :-

Childhood does not end on one single, nameable day. It slips away gradually, through the loss of childish belief, through discovering that adults do not always practise what they preach, and through gaining an independent mind of one's own.

Loss of innocence :-

Stanza 1 shows innocence lost through reason: Heaven and Hell cannot be found on a map, so, logically, they cannot exist.

Growing up as disillusionment :-

Stanza 2 shows innocence lost through disappointment in adults, who talk of love without living it.

Self-identity versus conformity :-

Stanza 3 shows growing up as gaining a mind of one's own, thinking independently instead of only repeating other people's thoughts.

Together these three losses add up to one larger theme: growing up is the slow trade of innocent belief for rational, independent, sometimes disappointed adult understanding.

THE POET'S TONE

Questioning and searching :-

The poem is built almost entirely out of questions. The tone throughout is one of genuine searching, not certainty, the poet is thinking his way through his own past as he writes.

Reflective and nostalgic :-

There is a quiet, looking-back quality to every stanza. The poet is not angry or bitter, he is simply trying to understand something he has already lost.

Mildly wistful, not despairing :-

Even the disappointment in stanza 2, about adult hypocrisy, is stated plainly, without harsh anger. By the final stanza the tone softens further, into a gentle acceptance: 'That's all I know.'

Concept :-

So the tone moves from puzzled questioning, through quiet disappointment, and settles on calm, honest acceptance.

NCERT : THINK IT OUT Q1

Question (as in the textbook) :-

Identify the stanza that talks of each of the following: individuality, rationalism, hypocrisy.

Answer :-

→ Rationalism : Stanza 1

Hell and Heaven could not be found in Geography, so reason said they could not exist.

→ Hypocrisy : Stanza 3

Adults talked of love and preached of love, but did not act so lovingly.

→ Individuality : Stanza 3

His mind was really his own, producing thoughts that were his own, and his alone.

NCERT : THINK IT OUT Q2

Question (as in the textbook) :-

What according to the poem is involved in the process of growing up?

Answer :-

According to the poem, growing up involves three things. First, giving up childish, literal beliefs once reason takes over, as with Heaven and Hell not being found in Geography. Second, discovering that adults do not always act on the values, like love, that they preach. Third, developing a mind of one's own, able to produce thoughts that belong only to oneself, and not simply borrowed from others.

NCERT : THINK IT OUT Q3

Question (as in the textbook) :-

What is the poet's feeling towards childhood?

Answer :-

The poet feels a gentle sense of loss and longing for his childhood. He does not know exactly when or how it left him, and the poem shows him searching for that moment across three stanzas without finding a firm answer. By the last stanza he accepts, without bitterness, that childhood has simply gone to 'some forgotten place', hidden in every infant's face, and that this is all he can honestly say he knows.

NCERT : THINK IT OUT Q4

Question (as in the textbook) :-

Which do you think are the most poetic lines? Why?

A model answer :-

This question is open-ended and asks for a personal response, but one strong choice is the closing lines of stanza 4:

It went to some forgotten place, / That's hidden in an infant's face,

These lines are poetic because they turn an abstract idea, the loss of childhood, into a concrete, tender image: innocence living on, hidden inside a baby's face. The soft rhyme of 'place' and 'face' also makes the lines memorable to hear.

WORD MEANINGS (FOR REVISION)

Simple glosses of words used in the poem :-

→ ceased : stopped

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→ realised : understood, became aware of

→ preached : spoke in favour of, as a moral lesson

→ lovingly : in a loving, affectionate way

→ producing : forming, creating

→ forgotten : no longer remembered

→ infant : a very young child, a baby

Note on spelling :-

The NCERT text uses the British spelling

→ 'realised', not 'realized', all through the poem.

SUMMARY

The poet keeps asking himself when his childhood went. In the first stanza he wonders if it was the day he turned twelve, or the day he realised Heaven and Hell could not be found on a map and therefore could not exist. In the second stanza he wonders if it was when he saw that adults talked of love and preached love, yet did not always act lovingly. In the third stanza he wonders if it was when he found his mind was truly his own, producing thoughts that were his alone.

None of these feels like a certain answer, so in the final, shorter stanza he changes the question from 'when' to 'where'. He decides his childhood went to some forgotten place, hidden in every infant's face, and admits, simply, that this is all he knows.

One-line gist :-

Childhood is not lost on one exact day, it slips away slowly through reason, disappointment and independent thought.

QUICK RECALL SHEET

Poet & Form :-

- poet : Markus Natten
- form : free verse, 4 stanzas

Refrain :-

- "When did my childhood go?" x 3
- last stanza asks "Where..." instead

Stanza-wise loss :-

- 1 : rationalism (Heaven/Hell not on the map)
- 2 : hypocrisy (adults preach love, don't act)
- 3 : individuality (own mind, own thoughts)

The answer :-

- stanza 4 : hidden in an infant's face

Key devices :-

- repetition / anaphora, rhetorical question
- first-person voice, enjambment, contrast

Theme :-

- loss of innocence, growing up, self-identity

Tone :-

- questioning → disappointed → accepting

COMMON MISTAKES & TIPS

Do not mix up the stanzas :-

Stanza 1 is about reason (Heaven and Hell), stanza 2 is about adult hypocrisy, stanza 3 is about an independent mind. Keep these three separate when answering.

Do not miss the change in stanza 4 :-

The last stanza asks 'Where', not 'When', and does not end with 'Was that the day?'. This shift is often asked about.

→ spelling : ~~realized~~ -> realised

Remember for the exam :-

→ poet : Markus Natten (not the Ailing Planet author)

→ quote the refrain exactly : "Was that the day?"

→ theme : innocence lost gradually, not in one day

All the best !