

Father to Son

Elizabeth Jennings - Hornbill, Class 11

ABOUT THE POEM

This poem stands on its own in our notes, even though the NCERT book prints it right after the Silk Road chapter. It is a short lyric poem, four stanzas of six lines each, twenty four lines in all.

NCERT's own note :-

The poem is autobiographical in nature and describes the relationship between a father and his son.

Poet :-

→ Elizabeth Jennings, English poet

Form :-

→ 4 stanzas x 6 lines, spoken by the father

Chapter (as struck below) :-

→ ~~Silk Road, Ch 6~~ Father to Son, Ch 11 (own deliverable)

BIG THEMES AT A GLANCE

→ generation gap between father and grown up son

→ love that is real but never spoken aloud

→ the need for communication before it is too late

Full Poem

Stanzas 1 and 2

I do not understand this child
Though we have lived together now
In the same house for years. I know
Nothing of him, so try to build
Up a relationship from how
6 He was when small. Yet have I killed

The seed I spent or sown it where
The land is his and none of mine?
We speak like strangers, there's no sign
Of understanding in the air.

This child is built to my design
12 Yet what he loves I cannot share.

Note :-

Read stanza 1 and 2 aloud once. Notice the father speaks in the first person, so we hear only his side of the story.

Rhyme spot :-

→ stanza 1 : child/build, now/how, know/killed

→ stanza 2 : where/air, mine/sign, design/share

Full Poem

Stanzas 3 and 4

Silence surrounds us. I would have
Him prodigal, returning to
His father's house, the home he knew,
Rather than see him make and move
His world. I would forgive him too,
18 Shaping from sorrow a new love.

Father and son, we both must live
On the same globe and the same land,
He speaks: I cannot understand
Myself, why anger grows from grief.
We each put out an empty hand,
24 Longing for something to forgive.

Note :-

Stanza 3 and 4 turn from guilt to hope. The father moves from confusion to a wish for forgiveness on both sides.

Rhyme spot :-

→ stanza 3 : have/move, to/too, knew/love

→ stanza 4 : live/grief, land/hand, understand/forgive

WORD MEANINGS - Part 1 (Stanzas 1-2)

build (a relationship) :-

to slowly create closeness, here starting almost from nothing.

the seed I spent :-

a metaphor for the effort and love the father once put into raising his son.

sown it :-

planted it, continues the same farming metaphor for bringing up a child.

design :-

a plan or blueprint, here the father's own shape or nature passed on to the son.

strangers :-

people who do not know each other, used as a simile for how father and son now talk.

for years :-

stresses how long this quiet distance has already lasted, not something sudden or new.

WORD MEANINGS - Part 2 (Stanzas 3-4)

prodigal :-

here it points to the Prodigal Son of the Bible, the son who left home and later returned.

shaping :-

forming or turning something into a new shape, used for turning sorrow into love.

globe :-

the earth, used to stress that father and son share the very same world.

grief :-

deep sorrow, here it is the hidden feeling behind the son's anger.

longing :-

a strong, aching wish for something not yet there, here for forgiveness.

make and move (his world) :-

build his own separate life, away from his father's known ways.

STANZA 1 - Line by Line

I do not understand this child

Though we have lived together now

In the same house for years. I know

Nothing of him, so try to build

Up a relationship from how

He was when small. Yet have I killed

Paraphrase :-

The father admits he does not truly know his own child, though they have shared one house for years. He barely remembers what his son was like as a boy, and asks himself if he wasted the love he once gave.

Key phrase :-

→ 'I know nothing of him' shows his honest confusion

STANZA 2 - Line by Line

The seed I spent or sown it where
The land is his and none of mine?
We speak like strangers, there's no sign
Of understanding in the air.

This child is built to my design

12 Yet what he loves I cannot share.

Paraphrase :-

He wonders if his years of effort were wasted, since his son's life now belongs fully to himself. They talk like strangers, with no understanding between them. The son looks like his father but does not share his father's likes.

Key phrase :-

→ 'We speak like strangers' is the poem's central simile

STANZA 3 - Line by Line

Silence surrounds us. I would have
Him prodigal, returning to
His father's house, the home he knew,
Rather than see him make and move
His world. I would forgive him too,
18 Shaping from sorrow a new love.

Paraphrase :-

A heavy silence sits between them. The father secretly wishes his son would return home like the Prodigal Son, instead of building his own separate world. Even so, he says he would forgive him and turn his sorrow into new love.

Key phrase :-

→ 'Silence surrounds us' personifies the silence between them

STANZA 4 - Line by Line

Father and son, we both must live
On the same globe and the same land,
He speaks: I cannot understand
Myself, why anger grows from grief.
We each put out an empty hand,

24 Longing for something to forgive.

Paraphrase :-

Father and son share the same world and the same blood, yet cannot understand one another. The son too admits he cannot explain why his grief turns into anger. Both reach out an empty hand, each hoping the other still has something to forgive.

Key phrase :-

→ 'an empty hand' symbolises an offer with nothing sure in it

POETIC DEVICES - Part 1

Simile :-

'We speak like strangers' compares the father and son's talk to that of two people who do not know each other at all.

Metaphor :-

'The seed I spent or sown it' and 'built to my design' use sowing and building as metaphors for raising and shaping a child.

Personification :-

'Silence surrounds us' gives silence the power to close in on the father and son like a wall.

Symbol :-

→ 'an empty hand' stands for an unfinished offer of peace

Repetition :-

'The same house', 'the same globe and the same land' repeat 'the same' again and again, stressing how physically close father and son really are.

POETIC DEVICES - Part 2

Biblical allusion :-

'Him prodigal, returning to His father's house' recalls the Bible's parable of the Prodigal Son, who leaves and then returns home.

Contrast / juxtaposition :-

Closeness and distance sit side by side, 'the same globe and the same land' against 'I cannot understand', showing love without real understanding.

Enjambment :-

Many lines run on without a pause, for example 'so try to build / Up a relationship from how / He was when small', mirroring how the son's story keeps slipping past the father.

Rhetorical question :-

→ 'Yet have I killed... where the land is his and none of mine?'

Alliteration :-

'Shaping from sorrow a new love' repeats the soft 's' sound in 'shaping' and 'sorrow', slowing the line down like a sigh.

RHYME SCHEME AND FORM

Structure :-

The poem has 4 stanzas of 6 lines each, called sestets, and is spoken throughout in the father's own first person voice.

Rhyme pattern :-

Each stanza loosely follows an ABCABC pattern, lines 1 and 4, 2 and 5, 3 and 6 echo each other in sound.

Not fully consistent :-

Many of these echoes are half rhymes, not perfect ones, for example 'child / build' and 'know / killed' in stanza 1. So the rhyme is close but not a strict, textbook scheme.

Why it matters :-

→ imperfect rhyme quietly echoes the imperfect bond •

THEME AND CENTRAL IDEA

Central idea :-

A father who lives under one roof with his grown son still feels he barely knows him, and longs to close that gap before it grows any wider.

Main themes :-

- generation gap between a father and his adult son
- ~~no love at all~~ really: love that is real but unspoken
- the need for honest communication, and for forgiveness

Universal appeal :-

Though the poem is autobiographical, this quiet distance between parent and grown child is something many families feel, which is why the poem reads as universal too.

TONE AND MOOD

Tone :-

→ reflective, ~~angry and bitter~~ truly: regretful and tender

The father is not blaming his son. He is questioning himself, confessing his own confusion, and hoping quietly for a way back to closeness.

Shift in mood :-

Stanza 1 and 2 sit with guilt and confusion. Stanza 3 and 4 move towards hope, forgiveness and a shared, if uncertain, longing.

Overall feeling :-

→ aching but not hopeless, a father still reaching out

TITLE AND THE FATHER'S CHARACTER

Why 'Father to Son' :-

The title names the direction of the poem's voice, a father speaking about, and almost to, his son, though the son barely answers back.

The father, as a character :-

- ~~cold and uncaring~~ truly: guilt ridden, wants closeness
- honest about his own failure to understand his son
- hopeful, ready to forgive and start a new kind of love

How the son is shown :-

We never hear the son directly, except the one line 'He speaks: I cannot understand Myself'. He too feels the same confusion as his father.

NCERT'S OWN NOTES ON THIS POEM

Notes (as given in the book) :-

The poem is autobiographical in nature and describes the relationship between a father and his son.

Understanding the poem, questions are based on :-

→ the universality of the experience described

→ phrases in the poem

→ rhyme scheme in the poem

Why this matters for exams :-

These three points are the exact areas from which questions on this poem are set, so the next pages answer each one in turn.

Where it sits in the book :-

In the printed Hornbill book this poem comes right after the Silk Road chapter, but on our list it counts as its own, separate chapter.

THINK IT OUT - Q1 and Q2

Q1. Does the poem talk of an exclusively personal experience or is it fairly universal?

It begins as a personal, autobiographical experience, the poet's own family. But the gap it describes, love without understanding between generations, is a feeling many families share, so it becomes universal as well.

Q2. How is the father's helplessness brought out?

He can only confess, question and hope, not force closeness. Lines like 'I know nothing of him' and 'what he loves I cannot share' show he feels shut out of his own son's life.

THINK IT OUT - Q3 and Q4

Q3. Identify phrases and lines showing distance between father and son.

→ 'I do not understand this child'

→ 'We speak like strangers, there's no sign'

→ 'Yet what he loves I cannot share'

→ 'Silence surrounds us'

Q4. Does the poem have a consistent rhyme scheme ?

Not fully. Each stanza loosely follows an ABCABC pattern, but many rhymes are half rhymes, not perfect ones, so it is close to a scheme rather than a strict, consistent one.

PRACTICE : EXTRACT BASED (1)

I do not understand this child

Though we have lived together now

In the same house for years. I know

Nothing of him, so try to build

Q(a) Who is the speaker of these lines ?

→ the father, speaking about his own grown up son

Q(b) What does 'this child' really mean here ?

→ his son, now grown, still called 'child' out of habit

Q(c) Name one device used in these lines.

→ enjambment, the sense runs on past the line breaks

Q(d) What does 'so try to build' show about him ?

→ he is making a real, conscious effort, not giving up

PRACTICE : EXTRACT BASED (2)

Silence surrounds us. I would have
Him prodigal, returning to
His father's house, the home he knew,

Q(a) Explain 'prodigal' in your own words.

→ it recalls the Bible's son who left, then returned home

Q(b) What does 'Silence surrounds us' suggest ?

→ silence is personified, closing in like a wall

Q(c) What does the father secretly wish for ?

→ that his son would come back to his old, known ways

Q(d) What feeling lies under this silence ?

→ regret mixed with hope, not real anger at his son

COMMON MISTAKES / EXAM TIPS

Mistake 1 :-

→ do not call the tone only 'angry', it is mainly regret

Mistake 2 :-

→ 'prodigal' does not just mean rich, it is a Bible echo

Mistake 3 :-

→ don't say the rhyme scheme is perfect, it is a half rhyme

Mistake 4 :-

→ remember NCERT calls the poem autobiographical, quote it

Mistake 5 :-

→ ~~just one family~~ personal AND universal

Tip :-

Always link every device you name back to the actual line, examiners reward evidence, not just the name of the device.

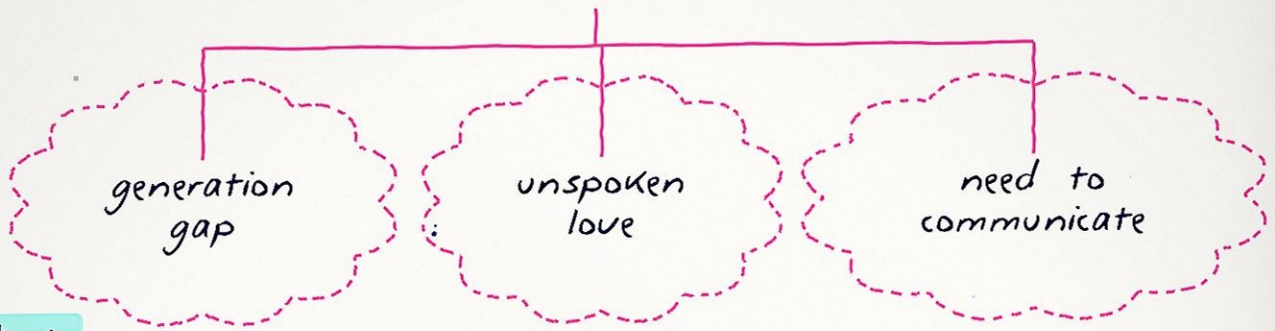
SUMMARY

'Father to Son' is Elizabeth Jennings's autobiographical poem about a father who lives with his grown son yet feels he barely knows him. He questions whether his years of care were wasted, since father and son now speak 'like strangers'.

Silence and distance surround them, but the father still hopes for his son's return, or failing that, for forgiveness on both sides. The poem closes on two empty, outstretched hands, each longing for something to forgive.

It works both as one family's private story and as a picture of the generation gap that many parents and children quietly live with.

QUICK RECALL



Poet :-

→ Elizabeth Jennings

Form :-

→ 4 stanzas x 6 lines, father's first person voice

Key images :-

→ strangers, silence, seed, empty hand

Key device :-

→ biblical allusion to the Prodigal Son

All the best !