

Hornbill

Textbook in English for Class XI
(Core Course)



POEM 1

A PHOTOGRAPH

BY SHIRLEY
TOULSON

TITLE

- a picture made using a camera, in which an image is focused
- Capture moments from life
- Symbolic of pleasurable moments

ABOUT THE POEM

- Total number of stanzas: Three
- No rhyme scheme followed: Free Verse
- Time take its toll on life
- Change is the harsh and bitter reality of life
- Death comes as the greatest leveler.
- Experience of loss and pain in an attempt to recover the past
- Provides solace as loss is final and brings a long lasting silence

STANZA 1

- a tribute to the poet's mother
- walking bare feet in shallow water
- sense of security
- feelings of love, togetherness, care and innocent pleasures of the childhood days
- Camera- interesting tool of nostalgia
- sea here symbolizes eternity, against the infinite vastness of which human lives appear
- 'terribly transient' and 'transient feet' exemplify the literary device of alliteration and transferred epithet respectively
- transient nature of human life in contrast to the intransient and eternal nature of the sea
- helplessness of human beings in the face of omnipotent time which incurs loss and slips by has not changed

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

STANZA 2

- Laugh- revisiting the innocent phase of life with a feeling of nostalgia and realising the intensity of the loss with a sense of experience and retrospection
- attempt on the part of the poet's mother to conceal her feelings of loss and pain from her daughter
- oxymoron in the expression 'laboured ease' that represents the difficulty and struggles one has to go through to arrive at the point where accepting loss and death becomes possible
- The mother has lost her childlike innocence and joyful spirit that the photograph captured years ago. For the poet, her mother's being is located in the past and is thus lost to the poet

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.

STANZA 3

- Poet's mother- dead for about twelve years
- 'this circumstance'- death of the poet's mother and the subsequent inability of human beings to revisit their past
- the poet has nothing to say at all
- She accepts her helplessness in the face of an overarching universe and acknowledges her resignation without protest
- finality and stillness in the life of the poet
- past can be cherished through a photograph but cannot be relived
- Use of Alliteration in 'Its silence silences'

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.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Tone of the poem:** first, the tone is both nostalgic and joyful; A tone of sadness creeps in when the poet compares the unchanging sea with the brevity of human life; at the end silent as she cannot vocalize
- **Connection between 'A Photograph' and 'The Portrait of a Lady':** thematic connection - old age, death, retrospection, silence and phases of life
- **Depiction of three different phases:** The 1st stanza is located in the past of the poet's mother, 2nd stanza describes the middle aged mother laughing at her snapshot. The final stanza is located about twelve years after the mother's death

QUESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

- List the poetic devices used in the poem.
- What is the role of a photograph in one's life?
- "A Photograph" is an 'embodiment of time and timelessness'. Explain.
- "A Photograph" is a melancholic poem. Comment.
- 'Each photograph is a memory'. Justify the statement in the light of the poem.
- How has the mortality of human beings being brought out in the poem?
- 'The cardboard shows me how it was.' Comment on the state of mind of the speaker.
- Explain: 'The sea holiday was her past, mine is her laughter.'