

# The Ball Poem

## Introduction

This poem has been written by John Berryman. It is about a young boy who has lost his ball.

## Summary

The boy was playing with the ball when it bounced down the street into the sea. The poet says that the ball was very dear to the boy. He never considered the possibility that he might lose his ball. Now that he has lost it, he is grief-stricken. He realises that it was his responsibility to keep the ball safe and he has failed in his duty. He also realises that things will get lost from time-to-time and money simply cannot replace them. As the little boy learns these lessons, he is growing up. The poet says that the boy is learning the harsh realities of life and in the process he is losing his innocence.

The poem has a deeper meaning also. The boy's ball personifies his young and happy days and his innocence. In this world, people will take away our innocence and force us to grow up. And once we lose this innocence, we can never get it back. This poem goes to show how, all throughout our life, we will be forced to do things that we don't want to do; and we will lose or have to give up the things that we love.

## Message

The poem conveys the message that as we grow up we lose our innocence. The poet says that this innocence is quite precious as we can never get it back after we have lost it. However, we have to learn to accept it and get on with life.



## Extract Based Questions ↘

Read the following extracts carefully and answer the questions that follow:

1. What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,  
What, what is he to do? I saw it go  
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then  
Merrily over — there it is in the water!  
No use to say 'O there are other balls': (CBSE 2023)

(a) What does the expression 'what, what is he to do' denote?

- (i) Loss of the ball
- (ii) Ask the poet for another ball
- (iii) The boy's grief over the loss of the ball
- (iv) Go down the street

(b) State whether the following statement is True or False:

The poet was delighted to watch the ball bouncing down the street into the water.

- (c) The poet repeats the word 'what' in order to .....
- (d) There is no use to say 'O there are other balls' indicates that the poet feels that it would be ..... to console the boy.
  - (i) helpful
  - (ii) futile
  - (iii) easy
  - (iv) shameful
- (e) 'What is the boy now, who has lost his ball.' Which feeling is expressed in this line?
  - (i) Regret
  - (ii) Cheer
  - (iii) Despair
  - (iv) Thrill

## Answers

- (a) (iii) The boy's grief over the loss of the ball.
- (b) False
- (c) express the boy's grief
- (d) (ii) futile
- (e) (iii) Despair





2. An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy  
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down  
All his young days into the harbour where  
His ball went. I would not intrude on him;  
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now

(a) Fill the blank with one word.

The boy was playing with his ball near the .....

(b) Explain the last line of the extract.

(c) The boy stands:

- (i) trembling (ii) rigid  
(iii) staring down (iv) All of these

(d) Why is the boy sad?

### Answers

- (a) harbour  
(b) The poet says that it is worthless to give another ball to the boy as it may also be lost, moreover, the boy realises his responsibility and holds himself responsible for the loss of the ball.  
(c) (iv) All of these  
(d) The boy is sad because he has lost his ball.
3. Money is external.  
He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,  
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up  
Knowing what every man must one day know  
And most know many days, how to stand up.

(CBSE SQP 2021 Term-1, Modified)

(a) The poet says money is external. What does it mean in this extract?

(b) Fill the blank with one word.

The boy is learning to be resilient in the face of .....

(c) Which option lists who is speaking these lines?

- (i) An observer (ii) The boy's parent  
(iii) The ball salesman (iv) A friend

(d) What does the boy learn by losing the ball?

### Answers

- (a) It means that money buys materialistic things and can be earned again, when lost.  
(b) difficulties/losses/troubles  
(c) (i) An observer  
(d) By losing the ball the boy learns that:  
(i) loss is the unavoidable truth of life.  
(ii) material objects can be replaced.  
(iii) life continues despite losses.



## Short Answer Type Questions

Q 1. Why was the boy upset on losing his ball?

(CBSE 2019)

Ans. The boy had been playing with the ball since his childhood. The ball carries many sweet memories for him. It also appears that the boy has not lost anything earlier. Therefore, he is upset on losing his ball.

Q 2. "... staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went ..." Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?

Ans. Yes, I think the boy had that ball for a long time. The expression—'all his young days into the harbour' suggests this. The expression suggests that the boy had been playing with the ball all through his childhood. It is also definitely linked with old memories when he used to play with it.

Q 3. What does 'in the world of possessions' mean?

Ans. It implies that this world is full of such people who want to possess more and more worldly things. The poet wants to convey the fact that people aspire to possess more and more worldly things in spite of knowing the fact that they will lose it one day.

Q 4. Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.

Ans. I think the boy has not lost anything earlier. The first loss is shocking and full of grief. The line, 'An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy' reflects it.

Q 5. What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words.

Ans. The poet says that the boy is understanding that everything that is held dear would be lost one day. He is understanding the fact that it is our responsibility to keep our things safe. The boy is also learning to deal with his loss.

Q 6. 'He senses first responsibility'. What responsibility is referred here?

Ans. In 'The Ball Poem', a young boy loses his ball. He has lost something dear for the first time. The poet says that on losing the ball the boy is grief-stricken. He then realises, for the first time, that it was his responsibility to keep the ball safe and that he had failed in his duty. The loss of ball has a symbolic meaning also. The poet equates the loss of ball to the loss of a loved one. He wants to say that when we lose someone we cannot bring him back. So, we should be responsible in our behaviour towards them.

Q 7. Why does the poet not offer another ball to the boy?

Ans. The poet does not offer another ball to the boy because he knows that a new ball cannot replace the old one. The poet wants to imply that what is lost is lost forever. Money cannot bring it back. It can merely try to replace it. Our feelings are attached to the lost article. A new article will not garner such feelings.



**Q 8. Why do you think the loss of the ball is important for the boy?**

**Ans.** The loss of the ball is important for the boy because through this loss he understands that loss is inevitable. He learns to overcome his grief. He also understands that it is his responsibility to keep his things safe. Now, he will be able to face the difficulties of life courageously.

**Q 9. What does the poet describe in 'The Ball Poem'?**

**Ans.** 'The Ball Poem' is a soulful picture of a little boy growing up and learning to deal with the loss of the first thing dear to him. The poet describes the boy's feelings upon losing the ball and evokes feelings of sympathy in his readers towards the boy. In the poem, the ball is a metaphor for everything that we think is important and irreplaceable in our lives. The poem describes how in the course of growing up, we experience loss and learn to deal with it and in the course lose our innocence.

**Q 10. Explain briefly the central idea of 'The Ball Poem'.**

**Ans.** In the poem, 'The Ball Poem', ball symbolises our family and friends and the loss of ball symbolises their death. As we grow older we become more and more exposed to the reality that we will one day lose them. This makes us responsible. When we lose them, we grieve but then we find ways and means to overcome our grief and then start leading our normal lives. The poet wants to say that as we are exposed to the harsh realities of life, we lose our innocence.

## Long Answer Type Questions

**Q 1. Why does the poet say, 'I would not intrude on him'? Why doesn't he offer him money to buy another ball?** (CBSE 2020)

**Ans.** The boy has lost his ball. It is the first time in his life that he has lost something that was dear to him. He is overcome with grief. However, in his hour of grief, the poet does not want to intrude and disturb him. He wants the boy to be strong and face his

grief alone. Perhaps it is also because he knows that no amount of sympathy is of any consequence when one faces a loss of something held dear. A person learns to deal with such a loss only on his own accord. So, the poet wants to maintain a distance with the boy in his hour of grief. He also does not want to offer him money to buy a new ball because he knows that a new ball will not be able to erase the memories that the boy has of his old ball.

**Q 2. "Not from weeping nor from grieving will anyone obtain peace of mind".**

**If you had to use the message of the given quote from the Buddha's sermon (*The Sermon at Benares*) to help the boy cope with the loss of his ball and what it signifies (*The Ball Poem*), what would you include in your advice?**

**Also, evaluate why it might be difficult for him to understand the notion.** (CBSE SQP 2022-23)

**Ans.** The boy in the poem 'The Ball Poem' has lost his ball. He is very upset at his loss. There are other balls which can be bought easily but he is grieved at the loss of ball and is thinking nothing but about the lost ball. He knows that the ball has gone forever and he will never get to play with it. This feeling has increased his pain of losing it. Though he is prone to suffer the pain of losing something because of being very young, he should not adhere to this pain for long. It may mar his peace of mind and he may have to go through much pain, if not controlled. Weeping and grieving for a lost thing, are not going to prove of any help rather they may increase the pain. To cope with such feelings, he will have to learn to stay calm and understand perishable nature of things. Loss is an important part of life and everybody has to experience losses at some point or the other and has to adopt to the circumstances and move on. It might be difficult for him to understand the notion as he is too young to understand the depth of these words. He is alone in his loss and has no one to explain it to him. It is easy to feel disheartened at that age.