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The Laburnum Top



–Ted Hughes

POETRY



The poem 'The Laburnum Top' presents a vivid description of how the visit of a goldfinch changes the laburnum tree. The poet, Ted Hughes, has used the laburnum tree and goldfinch as symbols of life and its instability. It describes how the goldfinch transforms the tree and makes it come alive as the chicks of the goldfinch start to rustle and chirp on seeing her. Once the goldfinch leaves the tree, it becomes quiet and still again. The laburnum tree symbolises the pattern of our lives in general, which are usually dull and inanimate. The goldfinch breaks the usual pattern and makes it lively. Without the goldfinch, the laburnum tree is just like any other tree. In other words, it is the attitude of a person towards life that makes life meaningful and worth living.

Topic Notes

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About the Poet

Ted Hughes was born in Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire, in 1930. Through his poetry, he desired to portray the aliveness of animals in their natural state: their wildness, their quiddity, the cleverness of the fox, and the smartness of the crow. He has also written fascinating children's books like 'The Iron Man'. He was considered one of the most significant and creative English poets. The poem 'The Laburnum Top' is an exquisite poem about changes in life and appreciating Mother Nature. He lost his life on October 28, 1998, after an 18-month struggle with liver cancer.



Poem in Detail

Stanza 1

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

Interpretation

The poet describes a beautiful, sunny autumn of September. The Laburnum tree is silent and still and is laden with yellow leaves and flowers. Its leaves have turned yellow and seeds have fallen because of the autumn season.



Poet's Mood

→ Admiring

Example 1. Extract Based:

Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

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

- (A) Which characteristic is associated with the Laburnum top?
 (a) Hideous (b) Quiet
 (c) Dying (d) Beautiful
- (B) Fill in the blanks with an appropriate answer.
 The yellow leaves describe the season of
- (C) The literary device used in the given lines is:
 (a) imagery (b) allusion
 (c) simile (d) alliteration
- (D) What do the words 'silent', 'quiet' and 'still' indicate in the extract?
- (E) State whether the given statement is TRUE or FALSE.

The poet is admiring in the given stanza.

Ans. (A) (b) Quiet

Explanation: In the poem, "The Laburnum Top", the poet, Ted Hughes has described the Laburnum tree as beautiful, calm and peaceful. Hence, (b) is correct.

(B) Autumn

Explanation: The yellow leaves describe the season, of autumn. With the onset of autumn season, leaves turn yellow, and the dried seeds of the Laburnum tree fall on the ground. Hence, (a) is correct.

(C) (d) alliteration

Explanation: The literary device used in the stanza is alliteration. An example of alliteration is 'September sunlight'. Alliteration refers to the repetition of the initial letter or sound of a word. Hence, (d) is correct.

(D) The words 'silent', 'quiet' and 'still' indicate that the Laburnum tree appears to be melancholic and dull.

(E) True

Explanation: The poet is admiring the beauty of the Laburnum tree in the month of September (autumn).

Stanza 2

*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.
It is the engine of her family.
She stokes it full, then flirts out to a branch-end
Showing her barred face identity mask.*

Interpretation

Then, a goldfinch arrives on the Laburnum tree, and makes short, high-pitched sounds. The goldfinch has built her nest in the tree, and her chicks are resting in the nest. On the return of the mother, a sudden movement stirs the tree. Her little ones get excited and start chirping on her arrival. The mother cautiously enters the tree with great care so that no predator can come to know that her babies are housed in the nest.

The alert, abrupt, and sleek movement of the goldfinch are compared with that of a lizard. The poet calls the goldfinch the engine of her family, as like the engine starts up the machine, similarly, on her arrival in the nest, the young ones have started chattering.

and making noise. She added fuel to the machine by feeding her young ones, as a result, the chicks now have become active and are making noise.

After feeding her chicks, the goldfinch flies high and rests on the end of a branch of the tree, concealing her identity behind the yellow flowers and leaves.



Poet's Mood

↳ *Observant; happy*

Example 2. When did the death-like laburnum tree become alive?

- (a) In the month of March.
- (b) By the arrival of the monsoon season.
- (c) By the arrival of the goldfinch bird.
- (d) By the arrival of sparrows.

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Ans. (c) *By the arrival of the goldfinch bird.*

Explanation: Before the arrival of the bird, the Laburnum tree looked dull and lifeless. However, the energy is restored and the tree appears to be lively when the goldfinch arrives to feed her young ones.

Stanza 3

Then with eerie delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings

She launches away, towards the infinite

And the Laburnum subsides to empty.

Interpretation

After some time, the goldfinch makes a sweet chirping sound like a whisper and flies away towards the infinite sky. The Laburnum tree becomes silent again after the departure of the goldfinch, and everything seems to be the same as it was before her arrival.



Poet's Mood

↳ *Sorrowful*

Example 3. The goldfinch has been compared to a lizard because:

- (a) it is yellow in colour.
- (b) it is hideous to look at.
- (c) its movement is quick and alert.
- (d) it looks like it(the lizard).

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. (c) *its movement is quick and alert.*

Explanation: The movement of the goldfinch is compared to that of a lizard because, just like a lizard moves in an alert manner, the goldfinch also entered the tree in a slow and sudden manner. She wanted to ensure that her young ones were safe from the predators. Hence, (c) is correct.



Poetic Devices

- (1) **Simile:** In this figure of speech, one thing is compared to another by using 'as' or 'like'. An example of a simile in this poem is 'sleek as a lizard'.
- (2) **Metaphor:** In this figure of speech, a word or phrase denotes something else. Examples in this poem are 'engine of her family', where 'engine' represents the mother goldfinch, and 'machine', which represents the nest of the bird.
- (3) **Alliteration:** In this figure of speech, the same letter or sound at the beginning of words are written together. Examples of alliteration in this poem are 'September sunlight', 'a suddenness, a startlement', 'alert and abrupt' and 'tree trembles and thrills'.
- (4) **Onomatopoeia:** In this figure of speech, a word is formed from a sound similar to it. In this poem, examples of onomatopoeia are 'twitching chirrup', 'chitterings', 'trillings' and 'whistle-chirrup'.
- (5) **Transferred Epithet:** It is a figure of speech in which an adjective is used to describe one thing is transferred to the other. In this poem, 'her barred face identity mask' is an example of transferred epithet. The flowers of the laburnum tree fall like bars and, when the bird sits behind the flowers, the shadow of the flowers on her face looks like she is wearing a mask that has bars on it.
- (6) **Personification:** In this figure of speech, a thing or inanimate object is given human qualities. An example of personification in this poem is 'The whole tree trembles and thrills.'



Significant Morals

- (1) Life is full of changes and transformation.
- (2) People are alive because they undergo exchange of energies.
- (3) The goldfinches transform the tree and make it alive. Without the goldfinch and the chicks, the Laburnum is just like any other tree.

- (4) We should live with each other. If we try to lend a helping hand to others, they will also help us in the times of crisis.
- (5) One should always respect nature and admire its beauty.
- (6) A mother can do anything to protect its young ones.

Dictionary

Word	Meaning	Synonym	Antonym
<i>Abrupt</i>	rapid	blunt	calm
<i>Eerie</i>	weird and strange	unusual	usual
<i>Twitching</i>	sudden jerk movement	bouncy	smooth
<i>Trembles</i>	to shake	shiver	steady
<i>Thrills</i>	a sudden feeling of excitement	excitement	sadness
<i>Subsides</i>	diminishes	abate	develop
<i>Startlement</i>	feeling or showing sudden shock	surprise	calm

OBJECTIVE Type Questions

[1 mark]

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Why has the poet used yellow colour prominently to describe the tree?
- (a) To symbolise its condition as silent yet beautiful.
- (b) To show how weather changes the tree.
- (c) To indicate that the tree needs a kind of rejuvenation.
- (d) To show the tree's purpose for a bird.

Ans. (a) To symbolise its condition as silent yet beautiful

Explanation: The yellow colour symbolises silence, death, and beauty. The poet has used this colour to describe the whole scene perfectly. The goldfinch's feathers are also yellow. The colour helps in camouflaging the babies. In the poem, a goldfinch comes to end the death-like silence of the tree and gives life to it. Hence, (a) is correct.

2. Which figure of speech is used in 'It is the engine of her family' ?
- (a) Simile (b) Personification
- (c) Metaphor (d) Onomatopoeia

Ans. (c) Metaphor

Explanation: Metaphor is a type of figurative language in which a word or phrase represents something else. The goldfinch has been described as the engine of her family. Just like an engine is used to make a machine function, her arrival in the nest suddenly starts up the machine (the nest). The young ones start chirping out of happiness. Hence, (c) is correct.

3. Identify the figure of speech in 'sleek as a lizard'.

- (a) Metaphor (b) Simile
- (c) Personification (d) Onomatopoeia

Ans. (b) Simile

Explanation: In simile, one thing is compared to another using 'as' or 'like'. Here, the goldfinch is compared to a lizard.

4. Which of the following changes is seen with the arrival of the goldfinch?

- (a) It becomes active.
- (b) It becomes lively.
- (c) It becomes a source of life.
- (d) All of the above.

Ans. (d) All of the above.

Explanation: After the goldfinch arrives on the tree, the still and silent laburnum tree suddenly starts trembling and moving. The whole tree comes to life as the chicks of the goldfinch make a lot of noise. They chitter and trill upon seeing their mother. Hence, (d) is correct.

5. The goldfinch has perhaps brought food to feed its young ones which has filled her family with excitement and energy.

Which phrase of the poem supports this claim?

- (a) Tree trembles and thrills.
- (b) Engine of her family.
- (c) She launches away.
- (d) She stokes it full.

Ans. (a) *Tree trembles and thrills.*

Explanation: The joy, excitement, and energy of the chicks of the goldfinch make the Laburnum tree tremble and thrill from its usual state of silence and stillness. Hence, (a) is correct.

Extract Based Questions

6. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

*Then sleek as a lizard, and alert, and abrupt,
She enters the thickness, and a machine starts
up*

*Of chitterings, a tremor of wings, and trillings-
The whole tree trembles and thrills.*

(A) Who is 'She' in the given lines?

- (a) A snake (b) A parrot
(c) A goldfinch (d) A sparrow

(B) State whether the given statement is TRUE or FALSE.

The tree becomes lively when the mother bird pays a visit to her young ones.

(C) Fill in the blank with an appropriate answer.

In the given extract, the word 'chitterings' refers to

Ans. (A) (c) *A goldfinch*

Explanation: 'She' is the goldfinch in the given lines. Hence, (c) is correct.

(B) True.

Explanation: In the poem, the poet describes how the visit of the goldfinch changes the Laburnum tree. The mother bird transforms the tree and makes it come alive as the chicks of the goldfinch start to rustle and chirp upon seeing her. Once the goldfinch leaves the tree, it becomes quiet and still again.

(C) sound made by the young ones of goldfinch.

Explanation: In the given extract, the word 'chitterings' refers to the sound made by the young ones upon seeing the goldfinch. Before the arrival of the mother bird, the tree was silent, appearing as if no bird lives in it.

7. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

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.

(A) The phrase, 'showing her barred face identity mask' shows that the tree:

- (a) protects the goldfinch and her family.
(b) hides the goldfinch and her family.
(c) provides shelter to goldfinch and her family.
(d) gives the goldfinch her identity.

(B) Fill in the blank with an appropriate answer.

In the given extract, the phrase 'She stokes it full' means that the goldfinch

(C) Where does the goldfinch leave again?

Ans. (A) (d) *gives the goldfinch her identity.*

Explanation: After the bird leaves tree, the laburnum tree becomes silent and death-like once again. The phrase refers to the bird's barred or covered face acting as an identity mask. Her striped face makes her distinctive, and this face becomes her identifying mark as she remains hidden in thickness. Hence, (d) is correct.

(B) has fed the young ones.

Explanation: The expression 'She stokes it full' means that the mother bird has fed the young ones, who now have the energy to become active and make noise.

(C) After feeding her young ones and making the tree full of life, the goldfinch flies towards the infinite sky in a mysterious way. With the departure of the bird, the tree again transforms to silence and emptiness.

SHORT ANSWER Type Questions (SA)

[2 marks]

Answer the following questions in about 40 - 50 words:

8. Justify the title of the poem, 'The Laburnum Top'. [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The poem has been named 'The Laburnum Top' because the top of the Laburnum tree has been described in detail in the poem. The nest of the goldfinch is located on the top of the

Laburnum tree and all the activity takes place over there when the goldfinch visits the nest.

9. What gives a unique character to the Laburnum tree top ?

Ans. The Laburnum tree top is all quiet and alone in the forest. But it suddenly comes to life with the arrival of a goldfinch. It starts up like an engine. The young ones start chattering upon seeing the goldfinch. However, this noise lasts only for a short time. As the mother bird flies away after feeding the chicks, the tree retaliates into silence.

10. Why has the poet laid emphasis on 'yellow' in the poem? What does it signify?

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The flowers of the Laburnum tree and its leaves (in autumn) are both yellow in colour. Apart from this, the goldfinch's feathers are also yellow in colour. The poem highlights the high security that the mother bird (the goldfinch) ensures for her babies, and the yellow colour helps in camouflaging the babies. Hence, the mother escapes without being noticed by any predator. The colour also symbolizes stillness. Before the arrival of the mother bird, the tree appears to be silent and still. There is a sense of calmness all around. The beauty of nature is also highlighted in the poem. The yellow color also symbolizes day time. The rays of the sun are yellow in colour. The yellow colour adds to the beauty of the tree.

11. "The arrival of the goldfinch transforms the Laburnum tree". Explain. [Diksha]

Ans. As soon as the goldfinch arrives on the tree, the silent and still laburnum tree suddenly starts trembling and moving. The whole tree comes to life as the chicks of the goldfinch make a lot of noise. They chatter and trill with happiness upon seeing their mother.

12. The Laburnum tree undergoes changes in the month of September. Justify the statement.

Ans. September is the season of autumn. In this, season the trees lose all of their leaves so that new ones can grow. The Laburnum's leaves have also turned yellow, and the seeds have fallen to the ground.

13. How has the poet compared the goldfinch? What is the basis for the comparison?

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The movement of the goldfinch is compared to that of a lizard. The basis of the comparison is the sleek, alert, and sudden movements of a lizard. The goldfinch makes similar kinds of movements when it arrives on the Laburnum tree to avoid being noticed by any predator. She wants to ensure that her young ones are safe and secure.

14. What makes the whole tree tremble and thrill ?

Ans. The whole of Laburnum tree starts shaking by the loud chirping sound of the little birds. They are exhilarated to see their mother goldfinch. The goldfinch has arrived to feed her young ones.

15. 'Then sleek as a lizard and alert, and abrupt, she enters the thickness'. Explain the given line. [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The lizard is a swift reptile. It is also very alert and its movements are sudden. In the given line, the arrival of the goldfinch on the Laburnum tree is compared to the movements of a lizard. The poet describes the goldfinch's movements as alert and sudden, just like a lizard. This is done to avoid getting the attention of predators.

16. What is the significance of the metaphor used in the phrase 'the engine of the machine'?

Ans. The goldfinch has been called the engine of her family. Just as the engine starts up the machine, the goldfinch's arrival in the nest has suddenly started the machine, i.e., the young ones in the nest have started making noise. The fuel for the engine is the food that the goldfinch has brought for her chicks.

17. How does the Laburnum ensure security for the nestlings? [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. It is known that the bark and the seeds of the Laburnum tree are poisonous. So, predators usually do not come near the tree. Apart from this, its yellow flowers and yellowing leaves in the autumn season, along with the yellow-coloured feathers of the goldfinch, help in camouflaging the nestlings from predators.

18. Explain the line, 'And the laburnum subsides to empty'.

Ans. This is the last line of the poem. It describes how with the departure of the goldfinch from the Laburnum tree, makes the tree silent again. The tree was noisy and lively when

the goldfinch came to feed its chicks, but it reverted to its earlier self after its departure from the tree.

19. The poet has called the whispering of the bird eerie. Comment.

Ans. The noise created by the goldfinch's young ones is loud enough to disrupt the silent atmosphere around the tree. The sound is so sudden and unexpected that the tree appears to be trembling. It looks unnatural and strange.

LONG ANSWER Type Questions (LA)

[5 marks]

Answer the following questions in about 120 - 150 words:

20. What are the distinctive features of the beginning and end of the poem?

Ans. The poem's opening line is 'The Laburnum Top is silent, quite still' and its closing line is 'And the laburnum subsides to empty'. The opening lines signify that the Laburnum tree was quite and still before the arrival of the mother bird. There was silence all around. The closing line signifies that the silent atmosphere is reverted after its departure from the tree. The silent atmosphere around the tree was interrupted when the goldfinch came to feed the young ones. There was a sudden and unexpected noise created by the young ones, and the tree appeared to be trembling.

21. The arrival of the goldfinch on the Laburnum top brings about a change in the atmosphere around the tree. How do you interpret this change? Is life better or worse with change?

Ans. In the beginning of the poem, the Laburnum tree is silent and still. No activity takes place in the tree, and this would make it difficult for someone to determine that there is a nest present there. However, with the arrival of the goldfinch, it suddenly becomes a place of feverish activity. The silence of the tree is disrupted by the chirruping of the chicks as they see their mother arriving.

I believe that the change reflected in the atmosphere around the tree upon the arrival of the goldfinch is good as it breaks the monotony. The tree becomes alive and lively with the movement of the goldfinch and the chirrupings of the young ones.

Change can be good or bad in life, depending on the situation. However, the fact is that change is the only constant in life. So, even if the change is bad, one should accept it and move on in life.

22. What values do you learn from the goldfinch in the poem 'The Laburnum Top' ?

Ans. In the poem, 'The Laburnum top', the goldfinch has its nest on top of it. Her chicks stay in the nest while she (the mother goldfinch) keeps flying at regular intervals to find food to feed her chicks. This shows her caring nature and highlights the care and affection of a mother towards her offspring.

Another trait of the goldfinch that is captured in the poem is its movement. She arrives at the Laburnum top in a slow and sudden manner and is very alert to her surroundings. Her movement has been compared with the sleek movement of a lizard. She is moving alertly in order to avoid getting noticed by any predator. She does not want any predator to know about her chicks as they may harm or even kill the innocent birds. This highlights that the responsibility of a mother to ensure that her young ones are safe and healthy. A mother can do anything to protect her young ones from any predators.

23. Sum up in about 120-150 words, the scene depicted in the poem 'The Laburnum Top.'

Ans. The Laburnum tree stands in a desolate place. The atmosphere is quiet and still. There is no movement or noise on its top where a goldfinch bird has built its nest. The young ones wait anxiously for their mother's arrival. As soon as the mother bird comes to feed the little birds, they start making sudden noise like an engine. The tree, before the arrival of the goldfinch was dull and lifeless. Now, it has been given life. It appears to be trembling due to the chitterings of the young ones. The chitterings, tremor of the wings, and excitement of the chicks breaks the monotony of the Laburnum tree and makes it lively. Unfortunately, the excitement and the liveliness lasts only for a short period of time. As the bird flies away, the tree appears to be still and silent again.

24. Comment on the theme of the poem 'The Laburnum Top'.
[Diksha]

Ans. 'The Laburnum Top' is a beautiful poem by Ted Hughes in which he has depicted the Laburnum tree and the goldfinch as symbols of life and its

