

The Laburnum Top

By Ted Hughes

Central Idea

The poem, "The Laburnum Top" by Ted Hughes describes a mutual relationship between a Laburnum Tree, which is large, beautiful but quite alone and a goldfinch bird which is quite amusing, beautiful but without a shelter. The Laburnum Tree lets the goldfinch bird and its young ones to nestle and, in turn, takes away its dead silence. The poet has used the Laburnum Tree and goldfinches as a symbol of life and its fluctuations. In this poem, the poet describes how the visit of a goldfinch changes the Laburnum tree. 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 symbolizes the pattern of our life in general, which is usually dull and inanimate. The goldfinch breaks the usual pattern and makes it lively. Without the goldfinch, the Laburnum tree is just like another tree. In other words, it is the attitude of a person towards life that makes life meaningful and worth living.

Theme

The poem 'The Laburnum Top' is written by Ted Hughes. It is about a repaying relationship between the Laburnum tree and the Goldfinch bird. The tree is yellow, silent and death-like. It becomes alive by the bird and her young ones. The yellow bird has her shelter on the tree where she feeds her young ones. But, as soon as the bird flies into the sky, the tree becomes silent and death-like again. In this poem, the poet talks about the mutual relationship of a Laburnum Tree and goldfinch who built its nest in the it. The main theme of the poem is "mutual benefit". The tree which is still in its position comes to life by the chirping and swift movement of bird and its chicks. On the other hand, the bird and her young ones get space to live in.

Message

The poet, here in the poem, wants to tell the readers about the importance of living with each other. Every person has different capabilities and qualities. We should live with each other and always try to lend a helping hand so that the others also do the same in times of need.

Summary

The poet describes his experience of what he witnesses in the Laburnum tree. It begins by describing how the leaves of the tree are yellow. Moreover, he notices that the treetop is still and remains silent even in the month of September.

Due to the autumn season, the tree has lost all its leaves and the seeds are on the ground. Most noteworthy, the poet uses 'yellow' to describe both, the colour of the leaves and the sunlight. Over here, yellow represents silence, death and beauty. Thus, he uses this colour and describes the whole setting perfectly.

After that, he notices that the death-like scene of the tree comes to an end when a goldfinch bird perches on it. The tree makes a sudden chirrup sound upon the bird's arrival. He compares the quickness, speed and alertness of the bird to that of a lizard. When she starts moving towards the thickness of the branch, the nestlings start chirping and flapping their wings. Thus, due to this movement, the tree also starts shaking and thrilling. Thus, we notice how the poet gives two contrasting scenarios while describing the tree. First was that it was death-like and then it gains life after the bird lands on it.

Further, the poet finally realizes that the goldfinch bird and the tree are the engines of her family. When she brings food for the little birdies, she moves to the end of the other branch. He describes the bird's appearance. It has a striped face which is dark in colour.

The goldfinch's body is yellow and, thus, blends in with the yellow leaves of the tree. Finally, after reaching the branch end, she makes a rather sweet chirping sound. The poet compares this sound to whispering as she flies away in the limitless sky. Thus, after the bird leaves the tree, the Laburnum tree once again becomes silent and death-like. We learn about the sweet and nurturing relationship between the tree and the bird and how they both play such important roles in their lives.

Explanation:

Paragraph 1

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

Paragraph 2:

Just then a goldfinch alights on the Laburnum tree making short, high-pitched sounds. The goldfinch has her nest in the tree and her chicks were resting in the nest. On the mother's return, a sudden movement stirs the tree. Her little ones are excited on her arrival and start chirruping. The cautious mother enters the tree with great care so that no predator can come to know that her babies are housed in the nest.

The poet has compared the alert, abrupt and sleek movement of the goldfinch with that of a lizard. The goldfinch has been called the engine of her family. Just as the engine starts up the machine, her arrival in the nest has suddenly started up the silent machine (nest) i.e. the young ones have started chattering and making noise. By feeding her young ones, she has added fuel to the machine and as a result the chicks now have the energy to be active and make noise.

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

Paragraph 3:

After some time, the goldfinch makes a strange short, high-pitched sound. Then she

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 the arrival of the goldfinch.

Rhyme Scheme

The **poem** is divided into three stanzas. There is no definite **rhyme scheme**.

Poetic Devices

Simile: In this figure of speech, one thing is compared to another. An example of simile in this poem is 'sleek as a lizard'.

Metaphor: In this figure of speech, a word/ phrase is used to represent something else. Examples of metaphor in this poem are 'engine of her family', where 'engine' represents the mother goldfinch, and 'machine' which represents the nest with its brood of bird chicks.

Alliteration: In this figure of speech, a number of words having the same first consonant sound occur close together in a series. Examples of alliteration in this poem are 'September sunlight', 'A suddenness, a startlement', 'and alert and abrupt' and 'tree trembles and thrills'.

Onomatopoeia: In this figure of speech, a word is formed from a sound similar to it. Examples of onomatopoeia in this poem are 'twitching chirrup', 'chitterings', 'trillings' and 'whistle-chirrup'.

Transferred Epithet: A transferred epithet is a description which refers to a character or event but is used to describe a different situation or character 'Her barred face identity mask' is an example of transferred epithet in this poem. 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.

ANALYSIS OF THE POEM:

The Poem "The Laburnum Top" is a beautiful poem by Ted Hughes.

In this poem, the poet has used the Laburnum tree and the goldfinches as a symbol of life and its fluctuations. He describes the visiting of goldfinches on the Laburnum tree and how she made a nest on it. When the goldfinches have chicks, it brings alive the tree as the chicks start to rustle and chirp.

Hughes is trying to convey the message that life is a process of exchange and transformation. People are alive because they undergo exchange of energy.

The goldfinches transform the tree and make it alive, without the goldfinch and the chicks the laburnum is just like any other tree. The poem examines and articulates the inter-relationship between the soul and the body through common symbols of bird and tree.

Though the body and the soul can be separate entities, they are absolutely complementary to each other-one without the other is incomplete. It is in the interaction between the two lies the beauty, vigour and perfection of existence. Thus, the poem

shows the states of existence both in the separation of the body and soul (beginning and end of the poem) and the (middle of the poem) union.

There is an imagery of life and sustenance which is transported through the mother goldfinch to her young ones. She visits her young ones to feed them and assure them that she is there. It portends a yellow colour in the background of the laburnum leaves which speaks of warm but fading sunlight. It also indicates that the mother goldfinch has to fly far away at the close of autumn season. She also has to ensure a warm and secure winter for her young ones.

The laburnum tree symbolizes the pattern of our life in general. Life is seemingly dull and inanimate but, it is the attitude of a person towards life that makes it meaningful and worth living. The goldfinch brings cheer, happiness and mirth to the simple and inanimate surroundings. Its happiness is infectious and all encompassing.

Textbook Question Answers:

1. What do you notice about the beginning and the ending of the poem?

The beginning of the poem is about the silence and stillness of the laburnum. The end of the poem again drifts into silence and emptiness of the laburnum.

2. To what is the bird's movement compared? What is the basis for the comparison?

The bird's movement is compared to that of a lizard. The basis for the comparison is the sleek, alert and abrupt movement with which the bird enters its nest. This movement of the bird is comparable to that of a lizard.

3. Why is the image of the engine evoked by the poet?

The poet evokes the image of an engine because as soon as the goldfinch enters its nest on the laburnum top, the whole tree comes alive with the chirruping of the young ones of the bird, their twittering and the tremor of their wings. As an engine brings a seemingly dead machine to life, so the chattering family of the goldfinch brings the whole tree into life.

4. What do you like most about the poem?

Open-ended question. Here is a suggested answer: I like the depiction and the imagery in the poem. The poet creates a mundane yet beautiful picture of a tree top that goes through stages from being silent to alive and drifts back into silence again. The imagery of an engine bringing alive a machine is also something that catches my fancy.

5. What does the phrase "her barred face identity mask" mean?

The phrase refers to the face of the bird that is covered with fur of different colours and which looks like a mask making it the identity of the bird.

Note down

1. the sound words

Chirrup, machine starts up, chitterings, whistle-chirrup whisperings, trillings, engine, stokes it full, subsides to empty.

2. the movement words

Seeds fallen, sleek as a lizard, enters the thickness, tremor of wings, tree trembles and thrills, flirts out to a branch-end, she launches away.

3. the dominant colour in the poem.

The Laburnum tree has yellowing leaves, sitting still in the afternoon yellow sunlight. The goldfinch, a bird full of yellow feathers flies on to its branches to sit and sing. The dominant colour in all the descriptions in the poem is yellow.

Extra Questions and Answers:

1. Why is the poem named 'The Laburnum Top'?

The poem has been named 'The Laburnum Top' because the top of the Laburnum tree has been described in detail in the poem. It is on the top of the Laburnum tree that the nest of the goldfinch is located and where all the activity takes place when the goldfinch visits the nest.

2. What is the significance of 'yellow' in the poem?

The flowers of the Laburnum tree and its leaves (in autumn) both are 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 (goldfinch) ensures for her babies and the colour yellow helps in camouflaging the babies. Hence they escape being noticed by any predator.

3. What is the engine of the machine? What is its fuel?

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 of the engine is the food that the goldfinch brings for her chicks.

4. How does the Laburnum ensure security for the nestlings?

According to popular belief, the bark and the seeds of the Laburnum tree are poisonous. So, predators normally do not come near the tree. Apart from this, its yellow flowers and yellowing leaves in the autumn season complemented by the yellow coloured feathers of the goldfinch help in camouflaging the nestlings from the predators.

