



QUESTION BANK – THE LABURNUM TOP- by Ted Hughes

Class: XI

Sub: ENGLISH

I. Reference to context: Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.

1. *“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.”*

a) Who is ‘she’ in the first line? Where does she enter?

Ans: ‘She’ is the goldfinch and she enters the thickness of the trees.

b) What is the ‘machine’ referred to in line 2?

Ans: The ‘machine’ refers to the young ones of the goldfinch. They suddenly start twittering and chirruping as their mother comes to the nest to feed them.

c) Explain the meaning of the last line.

Ans: The tree was silent earlier but as the mother goldfinch comes to her nest, there is a lot of noise made by her young ones. The movement and the sounds produced are in contrast to the silence. The tree comes to life now.

II. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What is the condition of the Laburnum tree before and after the arrival of the goldfinch?

The Laburnum tree is described as silent; its leaves turning yellow (dying) and it is without any seeds. This deathly silence, however, is transformed into a celebration of life as soon as the mother goldfinch comes with a twitching chirrup.

2. What does the colour yellow signify in the poem?

In the first stanza, the poet refers to the “yellow” colour repeatedly—the tree’s flowers, its leaves and the yellow September sunlight. The yellow color symbolizes beauty (because of yellow flowers,) death (yellowing leaves, sap of life draining out), as well as silence (afternoon September sunlight without rain or wind). In the whole stanza, the poet is trying to describe the silent and inactive condition of the Laburnum tree.

3. How does the poet describe the movement of the Goldfinch?

The bird is quite cautious while sitting *at a branch end* of the tree and executes sudden quick movements. Perhaps it is looking out for any danger that might be there from predators. It then goes into the thick branches of the Laburnum Tree smoothly like a lizard (without a sound), but abruptly and with alertness.

4. What is meant by the phrase ‘a machine starts up’?

The image of the machine here refers to the young ones of the bird. A machine makes a lot of noise when it starts. Similarly, when the young birds see their mother they start chirping with necks rising and slouching like pistons in a machine, fluttering their wings in joy upon their mother’s arrival with food. They were hungry as well as sad being away from their mother.

5. Why does the poet say the Goldfinch is the engine of her family?

Just as the engine is essential (*it provides the energy and the movement*) to run a machine, as soon as the Goldfinch enters the tree (her nest is in the thick of Laburnum), ***a machine starts up of chitterings, and a tremor of wings, and trillings***. Also, she provides the nutrition to keep her brood of chicks alive. So she is the provider and is central to the existence of her family.

6. Does the whole tree start to tremble?

It is hyperbolic. The whole tree seems to tremble because of the excitement of the young ones. The poet probably wants us to feel how an apparently passive tree is thrilled and comes alive. The bird is given a shelter, and the tree in return experiences a burst of life now and then. The goldfinch is thus ***the engine of her family*** which includes the Laburnum tree as well.

7. What is the meaning of ‘showing her barred face identity mask’?

The poet refers to the face of the Goldfinch which nature has designed so. It provides the necessary camouflage to the bird blending her appearance so that it is undetected within the surrounding branches. Here, perhaps the bird wants to show her chicks her unique identity mask so that they should not mistake another bird for their mother.

III. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. The arrival of the goldfinch on the Laburnum top brings about a change in the poem. How do you interpret this change? Is change good or bad in life?

Ans: At the start of the poem, the top of the Laburnum tree in the poem is silent and still. There is hardly any activity as the sunlight falls on it on a September afternoon. However, with the arrival of the goldfinch, it suddenly becomes a place of intense activity. The silence of the place is broken by the twittering and chirruping of the chicks and the goldfinch.

The change brought about by the arrival of the goldfinch on the Laburnum top is good, as it breaks the monotony. The tree becomes alive and lively with the movement of the goldfinch and the twittering and chirruping of the chicks.

Change can be good or bad in life depending on a situation. However, the fact is that change is the only constant in life. So, we have to accept it and move on in life.