

Hornbill,Poem-2, The Laburnum Top (Summary)

By-Ted Hughes

The Laburnum Top is silent, quite still

In the afternoon yellow September sunlight,

A few leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen

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 of 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

Then with eerie delicate whistle - chirrup whisperings

She launches away, towards the infinite

And the laburnum subsides to empty

The poem "The Laburnum Top" by Ted Hughes describes the mutual relation between a Laburnum Tree and a goldfinch. Both of them are yellow in colour (the tree is yellow because of its flowers) and quite beautiful in appearance.

The Laburnum Tree is beautiful, large but quite silent and getting empty because of winter. However, the bird, Goldfinch appears from the sky and soon the whole tree is surrounded by the sweet chirps of the bird and her young ones. It was

previously dead and now it seems to be alive and shaking until the bird vanishes away again. Dead silence prevails.

The poem has been divided into three stanzas. There is not set rhyme scheme. The first stanza describes the tree before the bird reaches it. The second stanza describes the coming of the bird and the final stanza tells the condition of the tree when the bird goes away.

The Laburnum Top Line by Line Explanation

Stanza 1

In the first stanza, the poet says that he saw a Laburnum Tree (with its yellow flowers). In his words, "***The Laburnum top is silent***". The tree is still and looks dead-like in the day time of September. Even the sunlight is also yellow. As it is the time of autumn, the leaves of the tree have turned yellow and its seeds have fallen off it. In this stanza, the poet uses the image "***yellow***" colour repeatedly. First the tree's flowers are yellow, then its leaves have also turned yellow and the sunlight is also yellow.

The yellow color symbolises beauty (because of flowers, which, though have fallen off in the form of seeds), death (because of yellow leaves) as well as silence (day time without rain or wind). In the whole stanza, the poet is trying to describe the miserable condition of the Laburnum Tree which is silent, dying and without seeds (useless).

Stanza 2

The death-like scene however changes as soon as ***the goldfinch comes with a twitching chirrup***. Goldfinch is a bright yellow coloured bird. ***Twitching chirrup*** means "short chirping sounds".

The bird is quite precautious while sitting ***at a branch end*** of the tree and has sudden quick movements. Perhaps it is looking out for any danger that might be there.

It then goes into the thick bark of the Laburnum Tree smoothly but abruptly with alertness. As soon as she enters the tree (her nest is inside the Laburnum Tree), ***a machine starts up of chitterings, and a tremor of wings, and trillings***.

The image of 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 like a machine, flapping their wings fastly in joy as their mother has come with food. They were hungry as well as sad being far from their mother.

Now ***the whole tree trembles and thrills*** because of the mother bird and her young ones. The poet probably wants us to feel how a dead-like tree becomes alive because it has given space to the bird and her young ones. The birds got shelter and the tree in return has got life.

The goldfinch is thus ***the engine of her family*** which includes the Laburnum tree as

well. According to the poet it fills them with fuel i.e. it gives food to the young ones and thrill to the tree. Having done that, she again flies *to a branch-end*. Only her dark-coloured striped face is visible as it is yellow and hence becomes invisible in the yellow leaves of the tree.

Stanza 3

Reaching the branch-end of the tree, it makes strange but sweet chirping sounds and then begins his journey *towards the infinite* i.e. the sky and the Laburnum Tree again becomes silent and dead-like.

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

Answer

In the beginning of the poem the tree is calm & silent & in the ending it ends with motionless & empty level.

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

Answer

The goldfinch's movement is compared to that of a lizard. The basis of the comparison is the sleek, abrupt and alert movements of a lizard. The same kinds of movements are observed when the goldfinch arrives on the laburnum tree.

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

Answer

The engine is the source of energy to run machine. It is compared to bird as she is too a source of energy for her family. As without engine a machine can't work in the same without a bird her family can't survive.

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

Answer

The phrase means that the bird's barred or covered face becomes her identity mask recognition.