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POETRY

A Photograph

—Shirley Toulson



'A Photograph' by Shirley Toulson is a tribute to her mother. The poem describes three different scenes at different stages in the passage of time. In the first stage, the photograph shows the poet's mother as a 12 year old girl with her two girl cousins standing at the beach and enjoying her holiday. The second stage is of twenty or thirty years later where the mother would laugh at the way she and her cousins were dressed for the Beach holiday. In the third and the last stage, the poet remembers her dead mother and feels sad and lonely.

Topic Notes

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About the Poet

Shirley Toulson was born in 1924 in England. She had a huge passion for writing and was greatly inspired by her writer father. She was the author of several books and focused on the topic of walking routes used by farmers moving livestock from Wales to England. Shirley Toulson's 'A Photograph' is a tribute written in memory of her dead mother, who she missed dearly.



Poem in Detail

Stanza 1

*The cardboard shows me how it was
When the two girl cousins went paddling,
Each one holding one of my mother's hands,
And she the big girl — some twelve years or so.*

Interpretation

The poet recalls the memories of her mother by looking at a photograph of her being twelve years old and enjoying her holiday on a beach with her cousins. The two younger cousins were holding the hands of their elder cousin (the poet's mother) and walking in shallow water with bare feet. The photograph was very old, but the poet has kept it very carefully as the sweet memories of her mother's childhood are reminded by it. The photograph also indicates the enjoyable childhood of the poet's mother.



Poet's Mood

→ Nostalgic

Example 1. Extract Based:

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

*The cardboard shows me how it was
When the two girl cousins went paddling,
Each one holding one of my mother's hands,
And she the big girl — some twelve years or so.*

- (A) Fill in the blanks with an appropriate answer.
In the given extract, 'The cardboard' refers to _____.
- (B) 'It' refers to:
- the poet's childhood.
 - the poet's mother's childhood.
 - the beach holiday.
 - the relationship between the poet and her mother.
- (C) What is the rhyme scheme of the given lines?
- abca
 - abab
 - abcb
 - no rhyme scheme.
- (D) Other than the poet's mother, who else is mentioned in the poem?

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

In the given extract, the poet is referring to her mother's elder cousin as the 'big girl'.

Ans. (A) the photograph

- (B) (b) the poet's mother's childhood

Explanation: 'It' refers to the poet's mother's childhood.

- (C) (d) no rhyme scheme.

Explanation: There's no rhyme scheme followed in the stanza.

- (D) Apart from the poet's mother, the two other girls, Betty and Dolly are mentioned in the poem. They are the cousins of the poet's mother.

- (E) False

Explanation: The big girl in the photograph was the poet's mother. She was around twelve years old when the photograph was taken and was the eldest of the three.

Stanza 2

*All three stood still to smile through their hair
At the uncle with the camera. A sweet face,
My mother's, that was before I was born.
And the sea, which appears to have changed less,
Washed their terribly transient feet.*

Interpretation

The photograph shows all three girls smiling and getting clicked by their uncle at the seashore. Because of the windy weather, their hair was flying over their smiling faces. The facial expression of the poet and her cousins show their happiness.

Everything has changed since then. Now, the poet's mother is no more and she is reminiscing the memories of her mother. The only thing that has remained unchanged is the sea, which was washing the feet of all three girls. The word 'transient' indicates the ever-changing lives of human beings as well as their mortality in contrast to the eternality of nature. The lives of the girls underwent a drastic change during this period, but the sea has not changed. The stanza beautifully explains the transient nature of human beings.



Poet's Mood

→ Sad

Example 2. How does the poet describe her mother in the poem?

Ans. The poet described her mother's face as sweet with a broad smile. She was kind - hearted and caring by nature. Her mother's favorite time was when she went to the beach with her cousins and got a photograph clicked.

Stanza 3

*Some twenty-thirty – years later
She'd laugh at the snapshot. "See Betty
And Dolly," she'd say, "and look how they
Dressed us for the beach." The sea holiday
Was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry
With the laboured ease of loss.*

Interpretation

20-30 years later, the mother would look at the photograph and remember and laugh at the happy memories of her past. The poet's mother would also comment on the dresses worn by the cousins, Dolly, Betty, and herself.

The poet still remembers her mother's laughter on looking at the photograph and remembering the sea-vacation with happiness and a sense of loss, for that time would never come back. Similarly, the poet feels nostalgic thinking about her mother and her laughter, which has become a thing of the past.

Although the words 'laboured' and 'ease' are opposite in meaning, but they describe the same entity, loss.



Poet's Mood

→ Sentimental

Stanza 4

*Now she's been dead nearly as many years
As that girl lived. And of this circumstance
There is nothing to say at all
Its silence silences.*

Interpretation

The poet recalls that her mother has died since twelve years. The poet is grief-stricken but has no words to express her loss and pain. The poet is totally absorbed in the memories of her dead mother and is left speechless by the painful silence of this situation. The silence caused by death makes the atmosphere gloomy.



Poet's Mood

→ Sad

Example 3. Do you think the poet is mourning the loss of her mother?

Ans. Yes, one can certainly claim that the poet is missing her mother as she looks at the photograph of her mother. The poet's mother is no longer alive. Although, the poet has accepted the reality, she is finding it difficult to overcome her loss. She appears to be grieving silently.



Poetic Devices

- (1) **Allusion:** An allusion is a reference of something, either directly or by implication. For example: In this poem 'cardboard', actually refers to the photograph.
- (2) **Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of the initial letter (generally a consonant) of several words in a sentence or a phrase. Examples of alliteration in this poem are 'stood still to smile', 'terribly transient', 'Its silence silences' etc.
- (3) **Transferred Epithet:** A transferred epithet is a description that refers to a character or event but is used to describe a different situation or character. For example: In this poem 'transient feet' refers to human feet, but it is also used to describe the lack of permanence in human life.
- (4) **Oxymoron:** In this literary device, there are two opposite ideas that are joined to create an effect. For example: 'Labourbed ease', where laboured means 'great difficulty' and ease means 'comfortably'. Both words have opposite meanings, but here they are grouped together.
- (5) **Personification:** Personification is a poetic device in which an idea or a thing is given human attributes and/or feelings. The examples are 'Its silence silences.' and 'washed their terribly transient feet'.
- (6) **Imagery:** Imagery is the use of vivid description that appeals to readers' senses to create an image or idea in their head. The two cousins paddling in the beach and the description of her mother's face are all examples of imagery.
- (7) **Metaphor:** It means to compare one thing with another without using 'as' or 'like'. The 'sea' in the poem is used as a metaphor for time and the transitory nature of life.
- (8) **Enjambment:** Most of the lines do not end with a punctuation mark to create a sense of continuous flow in the poem. The stanza three and four are examples of enjambment.



Significant Morals

- (1) Life is transient.
- (2) Death is permanent.
- (3) The mysteries surrounding life and death make us anxious.



Dictionary

Words	Meanings	Synonyms	Antonyms
<i>Paddling</i>	walking	strolling	running
<i>Wry</i>	disappointed	disgusted	mild
<i>Transient</i>	short-term; temporary	ephemeral	permanent
<i>Silences</i>	a complete absence of sound	quiet	noise
<i>Terribly</i>	extremely	very	mildly
<i>Ease</i>	without difficulty	comfort	unease
<i>Circumstance</i>	a situation	condition	absence of a situation
<i>Snapshot</i>	photograph	picture	mix up

OBJECTIVE Type Questions

[1 mark]

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Why has it been said that 'nearly as many years as that girl live'?

- (a) To indicate that it had been 12 years since her mother's death.
- (b) To indicate that the girl in the photo is of 12 years.
- (c) To show the poet's age when her mother showed her the picture.
- (d) To show her age when her mother died.

Ans. (a) To indicate that it had been 12 years since her mother's death

Explanation: The poet here refers to her mother. She says that the number of years that have passed since her mother died is nearly the same as the age of the girl in the photograph, i.e., her mother. Hence, (a) is correct.

2. The feeling evident in the poem is one of:

- (a) regret
- (b) nostalgia
- (c) joy
- (d) loss

Ans. (d) loss

Explanation: The poet's mother died years ago, but she still misses her and remembers her. Through this poem, she talks about her mother's childhood and her laugh, which she misses. She also says that the silence has

silenced her. The poem talks about the loss of the poet's mother. Hence, (d) is correct.

3. "All three stood still to smile through their hair"

This line indicates:

- (a) the pleasant weather
- (b) the joy shared by the girl
- (c) the fun the girls had
- (d) the excitement of the occasion

Ans. (b) the joy shared by the girl

Explanation: The phrase, smiling through their hair, refers to the fact that these women had long hair half covering their faces, and their smiles were so bright that it seemed like sunshine penetrating through that cover. Hence, (b) is correct.

4. The sea is referred to as something that doesn't change. This reference is made to indicate:

- (a) the futility of life
- (b) the permanency of nature
- (c) time has effect on the sea
- (d) contrast the mortality of humans with immortality of sea

Ans. (d) contrast the mortality of humans with immortality of sea

Explanation: The sea has not changed over the years. It suggests that the prominent features of nature do not change much. Human beings come and go, but nature always remains. Hence, (d) is correct.

5. What does 'terribly transient feet' show?

- (a) change in time
- (b) permanency
- (c) the process of aging
- (d) a contrast between mortality and immortality

Ans. (a) change in time

Explanation: The word "transient feet" reflects human mortality. Unlike the sea, which undergoes little change over a span of hundreds of years, humans disappear from the face of earth within short periods of time. Hence, in these lines, the feet are described as "transient feet" to represent human mortality. Hence, (a) is correct.

Extract Based Questions

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

*Some twenty-thirty – years later
She'd laugh at the snapshot. "See Betty
And Dolly," she'd say, "and look how they
Dressed us for the beach." The sea holiday
Was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry
With the laboured ease of loss.*

(A) What does the poet indicate with "Mine is her laughter"?

- (a) That the poet is missing her mother.
- (b) That the poet's mother is dead.
- (c) That the poet's mother had stopped laughing.
- (d) Both (a) and (b)

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

The phrase 'laboured ease of loss' generates a feeling of

(C) In the given extract, what emotion was the poet's mother feeling about the photograph?

Ans. (A) (d) Both (a) and (b)

Explanation: Here, the poet indicates that she misses her mother's laughter as she cannot hear it anymore because she is dead. Hence, (d) is correct.

(B) Pain

Explanation: The given phrase generates a feeling of pain. The phrase 'laboured ease of loss' tells us about the acceptance of loss and living with it. The poet and her

mother feel the pain, but they accept it and live with it. The poet's mother accepted her lost youth, and the poet accepted the loss of her mother.

(C) The poet's mother laughed while recalling a moment of her past captured in the photograph. She looks back at her childhood days with nostalgia and recalls her innocent joys. Looking at the picture years later brings back fond memories. She laughs at the way they were dressed up for the beach holiday.

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

*Now she's been dead nearly as many years
As that girl lived. And of this circumstance
There is nothing to say at all
Its silence silences.*

(A) Which poetic device has been used in 'Its silence silences'?

- (a) Personification
- (b) Simile
- (c) Transferred epithet
- (d) Oxymoron

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

In the given extract, 'This circumstance' refers to

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

The poet finally accepts the death of her mother and gets past the tragedy.

Ans. (A) (a) Personification

Explanation: The expression is an example of personification. The situation has been given the human quality which silences the poet. This expression from the poem 'A Photograph' by Shirley Toulson means that the reality of the poet's mother's death fills her with sadness. She can't do anything about it. Whenever she remembers her mother, she just becomes silent with the pain that followed after her mother's death. Hence, (a) is correct.

(B) the death of the poet's mother.

Explanation: Whenever she sees the photograph of her mother, she becomes sad, as the photograph brings nostalgic feelings. She gets lost in the sweet memories of the past. But she can't do anything about it now. She has nothing to say at all about it. She maintains silence, and this silence leads to a deeper pall (cover) of silence.

(C) False

Explanation: The poet is consumed with grief but is left with no words to express her loss and pain. The poet is totally absorbed in the memories of her dead mother. The

painful silence of this situation leaves the poet speechless. The poet can feel the grief but is unable to express it through words. The silence caused by death makes the atmosphere gloomy.

SHORT ANSWER Type Questions (SA)

[2 marks]

Answer the following questions in about 40 - 50 words:

8. What has the camera captured?

OR

What had the camera captured in the poem "A Photograph"? [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The camera had captured the image of three happy youngsters enjoying a holiday by the sea. They are the mother of the poet and her two cousins. The poet's mother is only twelve years old. The girls look happy in the picture.

9. Justify the emotions of the poet upon seeing the photograph.

Ans. The poet feels emotional after seeing the happy pictures of her mother enjoying a seaside holiday as her mother is no longer with her. She has been dead for twelve years, and the poet misses her.

10. Compare the past of the poet and her mother. [Diksha]

Ans. The past of the poet's mother was full of outings, enjoyments, fun, and laughter. The poet's past is of her mother and her laughter who is no longer alive. The poet misses her mother, and the latter's death has created a vacuum in the poet's life.

11. "And of this circumstance there's nothing to say at all. Its silence silences", says the poet in 'A Photograph'. What is she referring to?

Ans. She is referring to the death of her mother, which has left her speechless.

12. The poet has expressed her sense of loss. Comment.

Ans. The poet feels a sense of loss by looking at an old photograph of her mother. She remembers her mother's reaction to that photo later in life. These memories make her personal loss deeper.

13. The poem 'A Photograph' contains the line, 'And the sea, which appears to have changed less, washed their terribly transient feet'.

The idea conveyed is that human life is subject to change in terms of age and circumstances.

A philosopher once said, "Nothing is permanent except change." Briefly express your views on how a human being should handle change. [Diksha]

Ans. One should handle change by recounting the past, as did the poet in the poem 'A Photograph' where she recalls memories of her dead mother through a photograph taken on a beach holiday.

14. The poet's mother laughed at the snapshot. What did this laugh indicate ?

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The laugh of the poet's mother indicates that her childhood days were of being carefree and joyful. She was free from the tensions and worries of life.

15. What is the meaning of the line "Both wry with the laboured ease of loss" ?

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The line "Both wry with the laboured ease of loss" tells us about the poet and her mother and how they have been disappointed with the loss but they have accepted it. The poet's mother was disappointed that she was not able to live her childhood again, and the poet's disappointment is that she won't be able to hear her mother's laugh again. But despite the disappointments, they both accepted their situation.

16. Comment on the tone of the poem.

Ans. The tone of the poem is one of sadness. Shirley Toulson looks at an old photograph of her mother who is no more. She mentions about her mother's death indirectly. The photograph made her sad, speechless and silent.

17. What does the word 'cardboard' denote in the poem ? Why has this word been used ?

OR

What is the implication of the word 'cardboard' in the poem 'A Photograph' ?

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The word 'cardboard' denotes the damaged photograph of the poet's mother, and it was clicked when the poet's mother was only twelve years old. The word 'cardboard' has been used to denote that the photograph is now an old picture with the memory of the poet's dead mother.

18. What does the poet see in the photograph ?

Ans. The poet sees the sweet face of her mother in the photograph. It was a sea-holiday when the photograph was taken. The poet's mother and her two girl cousins, Betty and Dolly were present. They all smiled at their uncle, who clicked their photograph.

LONG ANSWER Type Questions (LA)

[5 marks]

Answer the following questions in about 120 -150 words:

19. What impression do you form of the poet and her mother after reading the poem, 'A Photograph'?

Ans. The poem presents the poet as a sensitive person who is quite affectionate towards her mother and is deeply attached to her. She loves her 'sweet' face and observes the changes in it as she advances in age. She remembers all the incidents connected with her life, including her laughter when looking at the photograph. She finds it hard to bear the loss of her mother. The pangs of separation stun her into speechlessness.

The poet's mother appears as a physically well-formed person, with a sweet face and a beautiful smile. She had a friendly temperament, and carefree nature. She had great affection for her two girl cousins and went with them for a seaside vacation where they put on quaint dresses. She posed with them with a beautiful smile for a snap. Her laughter upon seeing the dresses in the snap showed her fine temperament and good humour.

20. The three stanzas depict three different phases. Elucidate. [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. Shirley Toulson's 'A Photograph' describes three phases of life.

In the first phase, the poet's mother is described as a twelve-year-old girl with a sweet and innocent smile. She is standing on the beach, enjoying a holiday with her two cousins, Dolly and Betty.

In the second phase, the poet's mother's middle age is described, where she is laughing at the way she and her cousins were dressed for the beach holiday.

The third phase describes the poet's feelings for her mother, who died many years ago. The poet remembers her dead mother and feels sad. This is the current phase. The photograph makes the poet nostalgic which makes her silent.

21. Comment on the theme of the poem, 'A Photograph'.

Ans. Toulson explores several important themes in 'A Photograph'. The most prominent are loss, mourning, and memories. The poem depicts how quickly time passes and how, when a person departs from someone's life forever, one may only cherish the memories related to them while they were a part of their lives. The entire poem is centered around the speaker's recollections from her own life and her mother's memories. She feels both sorrow and joy as she recalls her mother's words when the two looked at the photograph together. So much time has passed since the photograph was taken, and since she looked at it with her mother. But, it's clear from the poem that the memories of those moments are still strong in the poet's mind.

22. The structure of the poem 'A Photograph' is unique. Explain.

Ans. 'A Photograph' by Shirley Toulson is a nineteen-line poem that is contained within one stanza of text. The lines are written in free verse, meaning that they do not follow a specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. But, that being said, it does not mean that the poem is entirely without rhyme or meter. There are several examples of half-rhymes scattered throughout the poem that help to give it the feeling of rhyme without forcing the poet to stick to a specific pattern. For example, "sea" and "feet" in lines eight and nine, as well as the "l" consonant sound in "laboured," "loss," and "lived" near the end of the poem.

23. Justify the title of Shirley Toulson's poem 'A Photograph'. [Delhi Gov. SQP 2022]

Ans. In Toulson's poem "A Photograph", she describes the emotions felt as remembering the story behind the image and what it means to her now.

For the poet, the photograph brings out feelings of loss given that her mother has passed

away. The poet remembers her mother looking at the image and laughing as she recalled the moment in time.

The title of the poem represents something very different for the poet than it did for her mother. The image evokes sadness over the loss of her mother, while it evoked thoughts of happiness for her mother.

Materialistically, the poet can find sadness in the fact that those depicted in the image have changed while the scenery in the photo has been allowed to stay the same. Here, the poet senses a feeling of the memory being unfair given the ocean has been allowed to exist, without change, over the years while her mother has changed dramatically and is now gone.

Therefore, the title of the poem creates different meaning for both the poet and the poet's mother.

Another justification behind the title lies in the fact that a photograph captures something seen by many and can, therefore, evoke many different feelings for those depicted and those looking at the image.

24. What is the thematic relationship between 'The Portrait of a Lady' and 'A Photograph'?

Ans. The thematic relationship between 'The Portrait of a lady' and 'A Photograph' is the transience of human life and how we must take care of those we love. Death doesn't give any notice before arriving, it comes as a surprise at any time in one's life. The author of the story, 'The Portrait of a Lady' states the fact that he let his relationship with his grandmother go to waste and he could not spend much time with her, while the poet of the poem, 'A Photograph' reminisces upon the death of her mother, and how a photograph reminds her of her mother whom she loved so dearly. Our memories, whether in the form of the anecdotes we remember or the photographs we have, are not enough to capture the essence of that person.

The poem and the short story give us message that we should show, nurture, love and care for the person when they are with us before it is too late and we have to live only with their memories.

