

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 1: A PHOTOGRAPH



A PHOTOGRAPH

~Summary~

-by Shirley Toulson

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."

Explanation: An old photograph of the poet's mother which was pasted on cardboard makes the poet recall the old memories of her mother's childhood. The photograph is a depiction of her mother's enjoyable moments at a sea-beach with her two cousins who were younger to her. They were walking in shallow water with bare feet near the beach. The mother was standing in the middle and holding hands of her two cousins, who were standing on each side. The poet's mother was twelve years old then. It shows that the photograph was very old but the poet has kept it very carefully as it reminded her of sweet memories of her mother's childhood. The photograph also indicates how enjoyable her mother's childhood was.

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."

Explanation: The photograph shows that all three girls - the poet's mother and her two cousins - stood still and smiled at the camera when their uncle clicked their photograph at the sea beach. As the weather was windy at that time, their hair was flying over their smiling faces. The expression on the faces of the poet's mother and her cousins was that of happiness and enjoyment. The mother was looking very pretty at that time and the photograph was taken a long time ago. Everything has changed since then, her mother grew up; now she was dead and the poet was reviving her memories. The only thing that has remained unchanged is the sea which was washing the feet of all three girls. The mention of the word 'transient' indicates the ever changing lives of human beings as well as the shortness of their stay on this world, in contrast to the eternity of nature. The girls's life changed drastically during this period but the sea has not changed. The stanza beautifully explains the transient nature of human beings.

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."

Explanation: Even 20-30 years later the mother would look at the photograph and laugh nostalgically remembering the happy memories of her past. Mother would look at the photograph and comment on the dresses worn by the cousins Dolly, Betty and herself. Sea holiday was her mother's past and her mother's laughter has become a thing of the past for the poet as her mother was now dead. The poet still remembers how her mother would laugh at the photograph remembering the sea-holiday with a fondness as well as a sense of loss because that time would never come back. In the same way poet feels nostalgic thinking about her mother and her laughter which has become a thing of the past. The words 'laboured' and 'ease' are opposite to each other, but describe the same entity, loss.

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."

Explanation: The poet recalls that it is nearly twelve years since her mother died. The poet is consumed with grief but is left with no words to express her loss and pain. The poet is totally absorbed in 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, where no one is able to utter words.

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NCERT SOLUTIONS

Questions (Page No. 12)

(Think It Out)

Question 1. What does the word 'cardboard' denote in the poem? Why has this word been used?

Answer: In the poem, the word 'cardboard' indicates the photograph which is glued on a paper that is hard and thick. It has been used to describe the old practices when the photographs were glued on cardboard and framed with glass in front in order to preserve them.

Question 2. What has the camera captured?

Answer: The camera has captured three girls – the mother of the poet and her two cousins, Dolly and Betty, in their swimming dress on either side of the poet's mother holding her hands and walking with feet in sea water.

Question 3. What has not changed over the years? Does this suggest something to you?

Answer: Over the years, the sea has not changed. Its waves are tireless, shining and fresh as they were in the old days. The changes that occur in a human face with growing age is reminded by the changelessness of the sea.

Question 4. The poet's mother laughed at the snapshot. What did this laugh indicate?

Answer: This laugh indicates her joy at remembering the incident that connected with her past life, when she was young and free from worries and tensions of life.

Question 5. What is the meaning of the line "Both wry with the laboured ease of loss."

Answer: The poet's mother's laughter and the sea holiday are the incidents from the past.

A sense of loss is connected with them. Both are amusing and disappointing as a relaxed or comfortable feeling is a forced one or unnatural. This sense of loss is painful to bear.

Question 6. What does "this circumstance" refer to?

Answer: "This circumstance" refers to the death of the poet's mother.

Question 7. The three stanzas depict three different phases. What are they?

Answer:

1. Girlhood of the poet's mother – The phase before the poet's birth.

2. Middle age – The phase during the poet’s childhood.
3. Death – The phase after the death of the poet’s mother.

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