

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 3: KEEPING QUIET



KEEPING QUIET

~Summary~

-by Pablo Neruda

Stanza- 1

"Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.
For once on the face of the Earth
let's not speak in any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much."

Explanation: The poet urges each one of us to count up to twelve and then be quiet. The poet might have used the phrase 'count to twelve' as there are 12 hours represented on a clock or as there are twelve months in a year. He might have wanted the people to keep still as long as they could. He wants a moment of silence on the Earth when no language is spoken. In this way, there will be no language barrier between people. No harsh words will be spoken. In this moment of silence, the poet doesn't want anyone to move their arms. He wants us to remain motionless.

Stanza- 2

"It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness."

Explanation: The poet feels that such a moment of silence would be an unusual and exciting one. It will have miraculous consequences. There will be no hurry or the sound of machines to pollute the atmosphere. It will be a strange and unfamiliar moment with stillness all around. In this unusual period, the bonds of humanity will get stronger.

Stanza- 3

"Fishermen in the cold sea would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt would look at his hurt hands."

Explanation: In this moment of inactivity, the fisherman would not be catching fish. Hence, the whales in the sea will be safe. This idea is suggestive of the thought that human beings would not destroy nature. The man who gathers salt will be able to tend to his wounded hands for which he had no time earlier. Thus, both nature and humans will be able to recover from their wounds.

Stanza- 4

"Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing."

Explanation: The poet now speaks of those who wage wars against humanity or environment, wars of all kinds, including the use of chemicals or poisonous gases, wars that bring death and destruction, wars that leave none to celebrate victory. He says that such men should stop their activity shed their clothes stained with the blood of humanity, put on new clothes and walk with their brothers, building brotherhood. The poet implies that the war-torn world should be replaced by one with an atmosphere of peace, brotherhood and harmony.

Stanza- 5

"What I want should not be confused

with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death."

Explanation: The poet makes a clarification that though he is advocating the need for silence, his advice should not be confused with total inactivity. He does not want any association with death. He says that life is meant to be lived.

Stanza- 6

"If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death."

Explanation: The poet further advises that people should stop being self-centered and selfish. For one moment they should not think of keeping their lives moving, meeting their ends or fulfilling their duties. That huge silence, which will arise from such a moment, will only serve to help the people. It will help them introspect and overcome their sadness of failing to understand themselves. People have been threatening themselves with death by their activities. This moment of silence will give them time to understand themselves better.

Stanza- 7

"Perhaps the Earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.
Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go."

Explanation: The poet feels that the Earth can enlighten us and guide us in this process of keeping quiet. He wants us to observe that there is some activity under apparent stillness; for instance, a seed appears to be dead', but huge fruit-bearing trees are born' from such seeds lying 'dead here and there.

Finally, the poet thinks that he has said what he intended to. Now he wants us to keep quiet while he is counting to twelve, after which he will leave.

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NCERT SOLUTIONS

Questions (Page No. 96)

(Think It Out)

Question 1. What will counting upto twelve and keeping still help us achieve?

Answer: Counting upto twelve takes a short time. Staying still for this duration of time provides us a momentary pause to review and introspect the course of action. It is normally seen that most of the troubles and ills of the world are caused due to our hurry or rush. Violence is often the result of anger. Keeping still and quiet ensures peace and provides us necessary respite.

Question 2. Do you think the poet advocates total inactivity and death?

Answer: No, he does not advocate death or total inactivity. He says that 'stillness' shouldn't be equated to or confused with 'total inequality' which brings death. Neruda has 'no truck with death'. His stillness indicates the halting of hostile and harmful human activities.

Question 3. What is the 'sadness' that the poet refers to in the poem?

Answer: The sadness of a man is formed by his own thoughts and actions. It is ironic to notice that a person who can understand so much fails to understand his actions and himself. Rash actions are always disastrous and harmful. All disasters are created by man. He is threatening himself with death by his actions and thoughts. This is the disaster of his life.

Question 4. What symbol from Nature does the poet invoke to say that there can be life under apparent stillness?

Answer: The poet wants to show that under apparent stillness life can still exist. To prove his point, he invokes the earth as a living symbol. The earth will never attain total inactivity. Nature remains at work at all times, even under apparent stillness and keeps the earth alive. This idea is illustrated beautifully in the following lines – "as when everything seems dead and later proves to be alive'.