

Class 10, First Flight

POEM - THE BALL POEM

By John Berryman

About the Poet

John Berryman was an American poet and scholar. He is best known for the Dream Songs (1969) which was a sequence of 385 poems. He won Pulitzer Prize for the dream songs. He also won National book award.

Introduction to the lesson

The poet John Berryman through his poem, 'The ball poem' has described the reality of life which everyone has to face one day. He has touched the topic of how to stand up against the miseries and sorrows of life.

Its poet John Berryman is beautifully describing a boy who has lost his ball. He gave a lesson that is full of wisdom through the loss of everyone, must learn to bear the pain associated with loss. The poet assumes a boy who is playing with a ball. Once the ball bounces out of his control and consequently falls into the water. The boy became sad. The poet feels that no other ball will be sufficient to lessen his sadness. Here, the lost ball stands for the general loss of a human being.

The losses may be the loss of personal possession or the death of some near and dear one or due to the separation from the beloved one. As long as there is life, everyone has to bear many types of losses. Therefore we need to learn the way for bearing those losses.

Summary - 1

This poem is about losing something which we love and then learning to grow up. It is about a little boy, who in his young life, for the first time, is learning what it is like to experience grief after the loss of a much-beloved possession which is here his ball. Maybe for us, the loss of a ball is of minor consequence. Our natural reaction may be that still there are many more balls. So, need not worry. But to a little boy, this is something different. One can get another ball with a very less amount of money. But, money is external and immortal here, as it cannot buy back the love and hence cannot replace the things that we love.

In this poem, the boy's ball van is easily personifying with his young days and which were happy and innocent. People may take balls just as they will take away our innocence and force us to grow

up soon. And once we lose our innocence, then we cannot get it back. But, despite all of these we have to learn to stand up. Obviously we need to be strong and get on with our life, irrespective of the sadness inside. This is the only way we will survive. Therefore, we have to learn to accept and let go.

The poet has made the use of the imagery while telling how the ball personifies the spirit of the boy's childish innocence. We may visualize how the spirit of this little boy, like the ball, is sinking into the dark waters of the harbour. And as it drifts further away, the little boy will learn to grow up, and that part is linked to that ball grows up as well, until it is no longer a little boy.

Thus the reader may interpret this poem literally and metaphorically both. If literally, then it is a soulful picture of little boys growing up and learning to deal with the loss of the first in his possession. If metaphorically, then it is the story of mankind learning to deal with the loss of their loved things or people.

This poem successfully describes how we may feel to lose something that we love and grow up eventually without it.

Summary - 2

The poet is talking about a little boy who has lost his ball. He was playing with his ball. The ball skipped from his hand and went into the nearby water body. The poet says that this sight of the boy losing his favorite ball made him think about the boy and his reaction to this situation. He further says that the boy was helplessly looking into the water where his ball had gone. He was sad and was trembling with fear. He got so immersed in his sorrow that he kept standing near the harbour for a very long time and kept on looking for his ball. The poet says that he could console him that he may get new balls or he could also give him some money to buy another ball. But he stops himself from doing so because he thinks that the money may bring a new ball but will not bring the memories and feelings attached to the lost ball. He further says that the time has come for the boy to learn his responsibilities. Here the poet wants to say that now the boy will learn the toughest lesson of life. The lesson of accepting the harsh realities of life that one day we will lose our loved ones and our loved things.

The Ball Poem: Text and Explanation

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,
What, what is he to do? I saw it go
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
Merrily over — there it is in the water!

Merrily: cheerful

Bouncing: jumping up and down

The poet is talking about a boy who has lost his ball. He wants to know about him and his reaction because he has lost his ball. Further, he asks to himself that what this boy will do after losing his ball. The poet has seen the ball going away from the boy. He says that the ball was cheerfully jumping up and down in the street. This means that when the ball skipped from boy's hand it went into the street and later on, it fell into the nearby river.

Literary devices:

Anaphora: use of repeated words in two or more lines (What is the boy... what, what and merrily bouncing... merrily over)

Assonance: repeated use of vowel 'o' (boy, now, who, lost)

Imagery: when poet says merrily bouncing down the street

repetition: 'what' is repeated



No use to say 'O there are other balls':
An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
All his young days into the harbour where
His ball went. I would not intrude on him;
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now
He senses first responsibility

Grief: sorrow

Rigid: fixed

Trembling: shaking

Harbour: dock, port

Intrude: invader

Dime: 10 cents (U.S)

Worthless: valueless, useless

The poet says that there is no benefit of consoling the boy by saying that he will get another ball because he has other balls too. He says so because the boy is feeling very sad. He is completely surrounded by sorrow. He is sad because all the memories of the childhood days went down the harbour with the ball. Here the poet says that the boy is very sad as the ball which has now gone into the water reminds him of those sweet memories, of the times when he owned it. This loss is unbearable for him and he is grief stricken. The poet says that he can't even tell the boy to take some money from him in order to buy another ball. He says so because the new ball will not bring the sense of belonging to the boy. Further, the poet says that the time has come for the boy to learn the responsibility of taking care of his things.

Literary devices:

Repetition: use of word 'ball'

Asyndeton: no use of conjunction in a sentence (A dime, another ball, is worthless)

In a world of possessions. People will take
Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.
And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.



He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up
Knowing what every man must one day know
And most know many days, how to stand up.

Possessions: ownership

External: Here, things with which feelings are not attached

Desperate: hopeless

Epistemology: The Greek word episteme means 'knowledge'

Here the poet says that the boy has to learn that in this materialistic world, many of his belongings will be lost. He personifies the ball as his belongings, be it the worldly things or the relationships he is in possession of. So, he says that he has to learn to live without them no matter what. He says no one can buy back such things for him. The poet said so because according to him money can't buy you everything. If it does buy you some materialistic thing, still, it will not be able to buy the sense of belongingness. He says that the boy is learning how to stand up against the sense of lost things. This means that the boy is trying to learn the real truth of life which states that you have to accept the miseries of life and stand up again. This is the truth which everyone has to learn in his or her life. The harsh truth of standing up against the odd miseries of life that everyone has to bear.

Literary devices:

Alliteration: use of sound 'b' at the start of two consecutive words (buys a ball back)

Assonance: use of vowel sound 'e' (He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes)

Repetition: 'ball' word is repeated

Rhyme scheme: There is no rhyme scheme followed in the poem.

Questions and Answers

Q1-Why does the poet say, “I would not intrude on him”? Why doesn't he offer him money to buy another ball?

A1- The poet does not want to intrude so that the boy can get a chance to learn the real truth of life. He has to learn to accept the loss. The loss here means the most important thing or relationship.

Q2- “... staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went ...” Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?

A2- Yes we can say that the boy had the ball for a very long time. The line itself describes how the boy recalls those days when he used to play with the ball. The ball was surely linked to some sweet memories of his playing with the ball.

Q3- What does “in the world of possessions” mean?

A3-In the world of possessions means that the world is full of materialistic things. Materialistic things are those things which bring comfort and luxury in our life.

Q4- Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer?

A4- The line in the poem “now he senses his first responsibility’ helps us to know that the boy has not lost anything before.

Q5- What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words?

A5- The poet means that the boy will learn the real truth of life. He will learn how to move on in life despite of incurring heavy losses. Everyone experiences this in his/ her life when they lose either something or someone. This harsh reality that lost things never come back make people strong enough to live their life by accepting this truth of life.
