

## Class - 11<sup>th</sup>: Poem - *A Photograph*

### Introduction:

The poem 'A Photograph' is written by Shirley Toulson. In this poem, she recalls her mother and her memories while looking at a childhood photograph when her mother was twelve years old or so. She has been deceased twelve years ago and she cannot explain her grief on her mother's loss.

### Summary:

The poem is a tribute to the poet's mother. She is looking at an old photograph of her mother which has a frame of cardboard. The picture has three girls in which the middle one is the oldest and tallest.

It is her mother when she was twelve years old or so. Beside her, on both sides are her two cousins, Betty and Dolly, who are holding her hands and are younger than her. They went for paddling on a beach holiday. Her uncle took the photograph then. The poet could not help but notice her mother's sweet face. The sea touched her terribly transient feet which depicted that she changed over the years and the sea remained the same.

After twenty-thirty years, her mother would laugh at the photograph. She would make the poet look at the photograph and tell her how their parents would dress them up for the beach holiday. The beach holiday was her mother's favourite past memories while her laugh was the poet's favourite memory. Both of them lost something which they cherished a lot and yet cannot live that moment again.

Those sweet moments were memories now.

Now, the poet's mother had been dead for the past twelve years, which is the same number as of her age when the photograph was taken back then. She cannot express the grief that she has from her mother's absence.

### Text and Explanation:

Line 1 – 4:

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

[Paddling – walking](#)

In these lines, the poet is looking at an old photo album which is made up of cardboard. In the picture, there are three girls who are walking on the beach holding each other's hands. The girl in the middle is the tallest and oldest, the other two girls on each side are younger than her. The girl in the middle is the poet's mother. She is around twelve years old when the picture was taken.

Line 5 – 9:

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

Transient – short-term; temporary

In the above lines, the poet describes how the photograph was taken. Her mother's uncle took the photograph and told them to stop and pose. All three of them left their wet hair open and smiled at the camera. The poet's attention is drawn towards his mother's face which is described as a 'sweet face'. The photograph was taken long before the poet was born. The poet calls their feet 'terrible transient' as they were so young by then and now they had grown older. On the other hand, the sea which touched their feet has changed less.

Line 10 – 13:

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

Snapshot – photograph

After twenty-thirty years later, she would laugh at the photograph. She would tell me to look at her cousins, Betty and Dolly and how their parents would dress all three of them up for the beach. They would have planned to take a photograph beforehand.

Line 14 – 15:

Was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry

With the laboured ease of loss.

Wry – ironic; mocking

The poet recalls the sea holiday was her mother's favourite moment from the past. While the poet's favourite moment from the past was her mother's laughter. Both the women would think about those past memories which they cannot live again. They tried their best to adjust to what they lost.

Line 16 – 19:

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.

Silences – a complete absence of sound

In the above lines, the poet says that her mother died twelve years ago, the same age her mother was in the photograph. Whenever the poet thinks of her mother's death, she cannot explain what effect she has of her mother's death. Death has silenced her mother which has also left her speechless.

### **A Photograph: Literary Devices**

**Alliteration** - repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of two or more consecutive words. The instances of alliteration in the poem are as follows-

*Stood still*

*Through their*

*My mother's*

*Terribly transient*

*Silence silences*

**Oxymoron** - a term which contradicts itself

*Laboured ease*

**Epithet** - a phrase expressing a quality of a person or something

*Terribly transient*

## **A Photograph: Question and Answers**

### **Think it out**

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

**Ans:** In the poem, the word 'cardboard' means a frame which supports the photograph. This word had been used in the poem because the picture is very old when the cardboard was used as a photo frame.

2. What has the camera captured?

**Ans:** The camera has captured the poet's mother and her two cousins, Betty and Dolly, on the beach. They went for paddling where her mother's uncle captured the photo in between the moment. Her mother was around twelve years old and was in the middle. She was holding the hands of her cousins who were on the side of her. It was her mother's favourite past memories.

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

**Ans:** The lines 'And the sea, which appears to have changed less' depicts that the sea which touched her mother's feet is the one which has not changed over the years. Whereas, her mother and her cousins grew older. The sea symbolises eternity and immortality. Human being has a life span and has to die one day. Life is not permanent. The poet is sad about her mother's demise twelve years ago and her laugh is her favourite past memory.

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

**Ans:** The poet's mother laughed at the snapshot recalling her favourite past memories. She looked back at the photograph and remembered how their parents would dress them up for the beach holiday. Her laugh indicated her remembering the innocent days and the nostalgia feeling. Behind the laugh is also a feeling of pain that those days won't be back.

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

**Ans:** the above lines means that the poet's mother felt pain whenever she saw the old photograph because the innocent childhood days would never be back. Those are just the memories. While the poet has lost his mother twelve years ago and she misses her a lot and recalls her laughing and pointing out the outfits they used to wear at the beach holidays. Both of them lost something.

6. What does "this circumstance" refer to?

**Ans:** The words 'this circumstance' refers to the present situation of the poet which is the painful memories of her mother who have been deceased twelve years ago. While looking at the old photograph of her mother's childhood makes her miss her more. She remembers her laughing and how the photograph was her favourite past memory.

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

**Ans:** the first stanza depicts her mother's childhood days when she was twelve years old or so. It talks about a photograph of her with her two cousins on a beach holiday. Her uncle took the photograph. Her mother changed over the years as she grew older. While the sea which touched their feet in that beach holiday hadn't changed over the years.

In the second stanza, the poet talks about her childhood days when her mother used to look at the photograph and recalls everything mentioned in the first stanza.

In the last stanza, the poet shares that her mother is dead as many years ago as was her age in the photograph. She died twelve years ago. The poet is recalling her mother's old memories while looking at the photograph. She is in pain and misses her deceased mother. She has no words to describe her grief.

\*\*\*\*\*