



INDIAN SCHOOL AL WADI AL KABIR  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH (2026-27)  
CLASS – XI  
A PHOTOGRAPH

**Timeline of the Poem "A Photograph"**

- **Phase 1: The Childhood Photograph (20-30 years before Phase 2)**
  - **The Scene:** The photograph shows the poet's mother (then a 12-year-old girl) on a beach holiday with her two younger cousins, Betty and Dolly.
  - **The Content:** They are standing in the sea, smiling at their uncle who is taking the picture.
  - **The Theme:** Represents innocent, joyful, and transient childhood.
- **Phase 2: The Middle-Aged Reminiscence (Past)**
  - **The Scene:** Twenty or thirty years after the photo was taken, the mother looks at the photograph.
  - **The Action:** She laughs at the photograph, remembering her childhood and pointing out how she and her cousins were dressed.
  - **The Theme:** Nostalgia and the bittersweet memory of a joyful past.
- **Phase 3: The Present Time of the Poet**
  - **The Scene:** The mother has been dead for nearly as many years as the girl in the photograph lived (around 12 years).
  - **The Action:** The poet looks at the same photograph, experiencing profound silence and grief.
  - **The Theme:** Acceptance of death, the permanence of the sea compared to transient human life, and the loneliness of loss.

**Key Observations**

- **The Contrast:** The sea (representing nature) appears to have changed very little, while the human beings in the photograph have aged and died.
- **The Circumstance:** The final line, "Its silence silences," refers to the immense void and lack of words resulting from the mother's death.

**THE THEME** of "A Photograph" by Shirley Toulson revolves around the **transience of human life**, the **pain of loss and separation**, and the **power of memory/nostalgia**. It explores the contrast between the permanent nature of a photograph and the fleeting, ever-changing nature of human existence, highlighting the bittersweet emotion of remembering loved ones who have passed.

### **Key Thematic Aspects:**

- **The Transience of Life:** The poem contrasts the fleeting, "transient" nature of human life (represented by the mother's "terribly transient feet") with the seemingly eternal nature of the sea, which has changed less over the years.
- **Loss and Grief:** The poem reflects on the irreversible loss of the mother and the resulting silence and emptiness in the poet's life.
- **Nostalgia and Memory:** The photograph serves as a medium to evoke memories of the past, specifically the mother's innocent, joyful childhood.
- **The Passage of Time:** It highlights how time changes people and circumstances, turning moments of joy into distant memories.

### **Key Symbolism:**

- **The Photograph:** Represents a frozen moment of happiness from the past that cannot be relived, yet brings comfort through memory.
- **"Labored ease":** Represents the difficult attempt to accept the loss of a loved one (the mother's loss of her past youth and the poet's loss of her mother).

## **POETIC DEVICES IN POEM A PHOTOGRAPH**

### **1. Imagery**

- Creates mental pictures of the scene.
- **Example:** *"The cardboard shows me how it was..."*

### **2. Alliteration**

- Repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words.
- **Example:** *"stood still to smile."*

### **3. Contrast**

- Juxtaposition of joy and grief, past and present.
- **Example:** The lively childhood vs. silence after death.

### **4. Irony**

- The photograph that once made the mother laugh now causes sorrow to the poet.

### **5. Symbolism**

- The photograph symbolizes memory, time, and loss.

### **6. Metaphor**

- Indirect comparison.
- **Example:** *"Its silence silences"* compares silence with the depth of grief.

## 7. Enjambment

- A line of poetry continues without a pause into the next line.
- **Example:** “*She’d laugh at the snapshot. ‘See Betty / And Dolly...’*”

### Below is the explanation of A Photograph poem:

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:** The poet looks at a cardboard-mounted photograph. It shows her mother as a twelve-year-old girl, standing on a beach with her two cousins. She was the eldest among them, holding the hands of her younger cousins. This stanza highlights childhood innocence and joy.

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.*”

**Explanation:** The three girls are smiling at the camera, their hair flying in the sea breeze. The poet notices her mother’s sweet face in the picture, taken long before the poet was born. The sea in the background seems unchanged, in contrast to human life, which changes with time.

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.’*”

**Explanation:** Many years later, the poet’s mother would often look at this photograph and laugh. She fondly remembered the day, joking about how they were dressed for the beach. This shows her nostalgic connection with her childhood.

Stanza 4: “*The sea holiday  
Was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry  
With the laboured ease of loss.*”

**Explanation:** The poet reflects that her mother’s childhood sea holiday belonged to her past, while for the poet, her mother’s laughter while recalling that day is now a memory. Both mother and daughter share experiences tied to loss—the mother of her childhood and the poet of her mother’s presence.

Stanza 5: *“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 sadly states that her mother has been dead for as many years as she had lived as a child in the photograph. Faced with this loss, the poet feels speechless. The silence of death leaves her completely silent, unable to express her grief.

**Four important points to remember:**

1. “An embodiment of time and timelessness” (the eternal state of the natural being and ephemeral state {Transitory /lasting for a very short time} of the humans)
2. ‘A melancholic poem (Sad)
3. A Nostalgic poem` (a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past:)
4. Three different phases of life (Stanza 1: a twelve-year-old girl with a pretty smiling face.

Stanza 2: have a happy youthful laughter, before the poet was born.

Stanza 3: the death of poet’s mother)

**Short Answer Questions (30-40 words)**

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

It refers to the stiff paper on which the photograph was mounted. It is used to indicate that the photograph is old, fragile, and represents a past that is now fixed and lifeless.

**2. What have the camera captured?**

The camera captured a joyful, fleeting moment of the poet’s mother’s childhood, showing her at age twelve on a beach holiday with her two cousins, Betty and Dolly.

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

The sea has not changed, while the humans in the photo have aged and died. This highlights the permanence of nature compared to the transient nature of human life.

**4. What does the phrase "terribly transient feet" mean?**

It refers to the human feet being washed by the sea, highlighting the temporary, fleeting nature of human existence, which is constantly threatened by death and the passage of time.

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

It indicates that both the mother (looking at the photo) and the poet (thinking of her mother) have suffered loss, but both have learned to live with the pain, trying to accept it with difficulty.

**6. Why does the poet say nothing about her mother’s death?**

The poet is completely overwhelmed by the pain of her mother's loss. The situation is so profound and absolute that she has no words to express her grief, leading to a silent resignation.

## Long Answer Questions (120-150 words)

### 1. Justify the title of the poem, "A Photograph."

The poem revolves around an old photograph that serves as a bridge between the past and present. It captures a moment of happiness in the mother's childhood. The photograph evokes nostalgia in the mother later, and brings back painful memories of loss for the poet when she looks at it after her mother's death. It is a symbol of memories, mortality, and the changing phases of life.

### 2. What are the three different phases depicted in the poem?

1. **Phase 1 (The Photograph):** The childhood of the poet's mother, full of joy and innocence, captured in the photo.
2. **Phase 2 (The Middle Age):** The mother as a middle-aged woman looking at the photo, laughing at how they dressed, and experiencing nostalgia.
3. **Phase 3 (Present):** The poet in the present, dealing with the painful silence and loss of her mother, who has been dead for about 12 years.

### 3. Discuss the theme of the poem "A Photograph."

The central theme is the transient nature of human life, the inevitability of death, and the nostalgic memories of childhood. It explores the emotional impact of losing a loved one and the pain of moving on. The poem highlights that while human beings and their laughter are temporary, nature (represented by the sea) is enduring and permanent.

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#### Extract:

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 photograph)

#### Question (i): What does the word 'cardboard' refer to in this extract?

**Ans:** The word **cardboard** refers to the old photograph.

**Explanation:** The poet is looking at a physical photograph that is mounted on stiff card. Calling it "cardboard" emphasises its material quality - it is a tangible, possibly worn or fragile object - and so points to an old printed photograph rather than to any abstract object.

#### Question (ii): How old was the poet's mother when this photograph was taken?

- (a) Ten years
- (b) Twelve years
- (c) Fourteen years
- (d) Sixteen years

**Ans:** (b) Twelve years.

**Explanation:** The extract itself gives the clue in line four: "And she the big girl - some twelve years or so." This directly indicates that the mother was about twelve years old and was the eldest of the three girls in the picture, so option (b) is correct.

**Question (iii): What does the use of the word 'paddling' suggest?**

**Ans:** The word "paddling" suggests that the girls were playfully moving in shallow water, enjoying themselves.

**Explanation:** "Paddling" means to move through shallow water using short steps, typically making small splashes. In this context it creates an image of innocent, carefree play at the seashore, so the word highlights the girls' happiness and youthful freedom.

**Question (iv): Why is there no punctuation at the end of line 1 in this extract?**

**(a) To show that the poet is speaking in a casual tone**

**(b) To create a sense of continuity between the past and the present**

**(c) To indicate that the poet is confused about her feelings**

**(d) To emphasise that the photograph is a static image**

**Ans: (c)**

**Explanation:** The correct choice for the statement that is NOT true is (c). The lack of punctuation at the line break links the fragment "The cardboard shows me how it was" to the following lines, creating continuity between past and present (so (b) is true). It also helps produce a casual, conversational tone (so (a) is true) and contrasts the moving memory with the static photograph (so (d) is true). There is no evidence of confusion in the speaker's voice here, so option (c) is not true.

**Question (v): What is the rhyme scheme of this extract?**

**Ans:** There is no fixed rhyme scheme (free verse).

**Explanation:** The end words of the four lines - "was", "paddling", "hands", "so" - do not rhyme with one another, so the extract does not follow a regular rhyme pattern. This places the lines in free verse rather than a fixed rhyme scheme.

**Question (vi): How does this extract contrast with the rest of the poem?**

**Ans:** This extract contrasts with the rest of the poem by showing a moment of happiness and innocence in the past, while the remainder of the poem expresses present sorrow and loss.

**Explanation:** Here the poet recalls a bright childhood scene - cousins paddling, a twelve-year-old mother holding hands - which evokes warmth and simplicity. Elsewhere in the poem the tone shifts to grief and absence; the contrast highlights how the fixed, cheerful image in the photograph differs from the poet's present feelings of loss and longing.

**Read the given extract and answer the questions**

**Extract:**

The sea holiday  
was her past, mine is her laughter. Both wry  
with the laboured ease of loss  
(A photograph)

**Question (i) What does the word "wry" mean in this context?**

- (a) twisted or distorted**
- (b) dry or mocking**
- (c) sad or regretful**
- (d) angry or bitter**

**Ans:** (b) dry or mocking.

**Explanation:** "Wry" here describes a kind of humour that is quietly ironic or slightly bitter. The poet's and her mother's laughter is not straightforward joy but a dry, knowing response to their losses, so option (b) fits best.

**Question (ii) State True or False: The poet and her mother share the same past.**

**Ans:** False.

**Explanation:** The line "The sea holiday was her past, mine is her laughter" distinguishes the mother's direct experience (the sea holiday) from the poet's relationship to that past (she only has her mother's laughter). The poet did not live that holiday herself; she inherits memories and traces of it, not the same lived past.

**Question (iii) Complete the sentence: The phrase "laboured ease of loss" suggests that \_\_\_\_\_.**

**Ans:** they have learned to show an easy, controlled outward manner toward loss, but that ease is achieved with effort.

**Explanation:** The phrase is an oxymoron: "laboured" implies effort, while "ease" implies comfort. Together they suggest that the calm, smiling response to loss is not natural but practiced - a coping mechanism rather than spontaneous ease.

**Question (iv) What is the rhyme scheme of this extract?**

- (a) ABC**
- (b) AAB**
- (c) ABA**
- (d) BAA**

**Ans:** (a) ABC.

**Explanation:** The three lines end with "holiday", "wry" and "loss" respectively. None of these end words rhyme with one another, so each line must be given a different letter, producing the pattern ABC.

**Question (v) Select the option that is NOT true about the lack of punctuation at the end of line 1 in the extract.**

- (a) It creates a sense of continuity between the past and the present.**
- (b) It shows that the poet is reluctant to end her mother's memory.**
- (c) It indicates that the poet is confused about her feelings.**
- (d) It reflects the poet's breathlessness as she speaks.**

**Ans:** (c) It indicates that the poet is confused about her feelings.

**Explanation:** The absence of punctuation at the line break links "The sea holiday" directly to the next phrase, creating continuity (a). It also suggests reluctance to stop recalling the mother (b) and can convey breathless or emotional speech (d). There is no sign of confusion; the poet expresses a clear distinction between her mother's past and her own relationship to that past, so (c) is not true.

**Question (vi) What does the use of the word "holiday" suggest?**

**(a) The poet's mother enjoyed her time at the sea.**

**(b) The poet's mother was a carefree and adventurous person.**

**(c) The poet's mother had a different lifestyle than the poet.**

**(d) All of the above.**

**Ans:** (d) All of the above.

**Explanation:** "Holiday" carries positive connotations of leisure and pleasure, so it implies the mother enjoyed her time by the sea (a). It also suggests a certain carefree, possibly adventurous spirit (b), and by contrasting that past with the poet's present relationship to it, the line implies a difference in experience or lifestyle between mother and daughter (c). Hence all options apply.

**Ans:** (c)

**Explanation:**

(i) Assertion: True - The eldest girl (the mother) would have laughed at this cheerful snapshot when she was alive.

(ii) Reason: False - The photograph evokes happy memory and laughter for her, not sorrow; the sorrow belongs to the speaker now because the mother is dead.

(iii) Justification: The snapshot recalls a joyful occasion for the mother, so the reason given is incorrect as an explanation for the assertion.

**Q3: Assertion: The sea in the photograph remains the same.**

**Reason: The sea touched the girls' feet in the picture.**

**(a) Both assertion and reason are true, and the reason is the correct explanation of the assertion.**

**(b) Both assertion and reason are true, but the reason is not the correct explanation of the assertion.**

**(c) The assertion is true, but the reason is false.**

**(d) The assertion is false.**

**Ans:** (a)

**Explanation:**

(i) Assertion: True - The sea represents continuity and appears unchanged over time.

(ii) Reason: True - In the photograph the sea is shown touching the girls' feet.

(iii) Justification: The physical detail of the sea touching their feet supports the symbolic claim that the sea remains the same while people and circumstances change; thus the reason explains the assertion.

**Q4: Assertion: The photograph is framed with cardboard.**

**Reason: The photograph is old and faded.**

**(a) Both assertion and reason are true, and the reason is the correct explanation of the assertion.**

**(b) Both assertion and reason are true, but the reason is not the correct explanation of the assertion.**

**(c) The assertion is true, but the reason is false.**

**(d) The assertion is false.**

**Ans:** (a)

**Explanation:**

(i) Assertion: True - The photograph is said to be framed with cardboard.

(ii) Reason: True - The image is old and faded, which is implied by the description.

(iii) Justification: The aged, faded condition explains why a simple cardboard frame would have been used; the reason therefore correctly explains the assertion.

**Q5: Assertion: The poet's mother cannot express her grief.**

**Reason: The mother is alive but unable to speak.**

**(a) Both assertion and reason are true, and the reason is the correct explanation of the assertion.**

**(b) Both assertion and reason are true, but the reason is not the correct explanation of the assertion.**

**(c) The assertion is true, but the reason is false.**

**(d) The assertion is false.**

**Ans:** (c)

**Explanation:**

(i) Assertion: True - The mother cannot now express grief because she is dead and cannot respond.

(ii) Reason: False - The reason wrongly states that the mother is alive but unable to speak; this is not accurate.

(iii) Justification: The inability to express grief arises from her absence (death), not from being alive and speechless; therefore the assertion stands but the reason is incorrect.