



INDIAN SCHOOL AL WADI AL KABIR  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
CLASS - XI  
**QUESTION BANK - THE LABURNUM TOP (2022-23)**

‘The Laburnum Tree’ by Ted Hughes is a poem about the ‘Laburnum’ tree and the ‘Goldfinch’ bird. *The poem is a celebration of life-energy.*

**I. Summary:**

It is the autumn season and the tree top is silent, without any movement. It is September and the yellow sunlight of afternoon falls on the motionless tree top. Leaves of the tree are losing their sap and turning yellow in the autumn season. All the seeds are already shed. The tree stands quiet until a goldfinch arrives all of a sudden at the end of one of its branches.

Excited and vigilant, it enters the thickness of the tree abruptly but in all alertness. Its movement towards its nest is as smooth as a lizard’s. The bird as soon as it approaches its nest her chicks immediately start a bedlam- the whole tree, sharing in the excitement of the noisy chicks, seems to tremble. It is as if a machine had started, the frenzied fluttering of tiny wings, the cacophony of high-pitched chirrup resembles the sound and fury of an engine under peak conditions. It is so called engine of her family.

She feeds her young with enthusiasm and afterwards briskly moves outward to the end of the branch. She shows her striped face the mark of identity to her young chicks. She emits strange, mysterious, soft whistle-like whispers - perhaps cautioning the chicks that she wouldn’t be around until the next feeding time. And then she takes flight toward the boundless sky.

The Laburnum once again becomes empty, dormant and quiet.

**II. LITERARY DEVICES:**

**1. Alliteration:**

‘September sunlight’

‘tree trembles’

‘whistle-chirrup whisperings’

**2. Simile:**

Sleek as a lizard

**3. Metaphor:** ‘The engine of her family’

**Extended metaphor:** ‘She ‘stokes’ it full’ - fueling is necessary to keep the engine running.

**4. Personification** –The whole tree **trembles and thrills**

**5. Symbols:** ‘Laburnum Tree’ is a symbol of peace and serenity, an integral part of nature.

‘Yellow’ is the symbol of decay and loneliness. ‘Yellow September’ and ‘yellowing leaves’ refer to the autumn and its process of decay. ‘Goldfinch’ is a symbol of activity and liveliness.

**III. Reference to context: Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow.**

1. *“Then sleek as a lizard, and alert and abrupt,  
She enters the thickness, and a machine starts up  
Of chitterings, and a tremor of wings, and trillings-  
The whole tree trembles and thrills.”*

**a) Who is ‘she’ in the first line? Where does she enter?**

Ans: ‘She’ is the goldfinch and she enters the thickness of the trees.

**b) What is the ‘machine’ referred to in line 2?**

Ans: The ‘machine’ refers to the young ones of the goldfinch. They suddenly start twittering and chirruping as their mother comes to the nest to feed them.

**c) Explain the meaning of the last line.**

Ans: The tree was silent earlier but as the mother goldfinch comes to her nest, there is a lot of noise made by her young ones. The movement and the sounds produced are in contrast to the silence. The tree comes to life now.

2. *“Then with eerie delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings  
She launches away, towards the infinite  
And the laburnum subsides to empty”*

**Question 1.**

**What does ‘launches’ mean in the extract?**

- (a) It means sleeping
- (b) It means flying
- (c) It means diving
- (d) It means fluttering

Answer:

- (b) It means flying

**Question 2.**

**What effect does the last line create?**

- (a) It creates the contrast between the liveliness of the tree and its silence
- (b) It creates the contrast between the change of seasons
- (c) It creates an opportunity to plant more Laburnum trees
- (d) It creates the scene for the arrival of new bird species on the tree

Answer:

- (a) It creates the contrast between the liveliness of the tree and its silence

**Question 3.**

**.....from the extract means the same as ‘strange’ and ‘mysterious’.**

- (a) Delicate
- (b) Odd
- (c) Infinite
- (d) Eerie

Answer:  
(d) Eerie

#### **IV. Short Answer Type Questions:**

##### **1. How does the poet describe the movement of the Goldfinch?**

The bird is quite cautious while sitting *at a branch end* of the tree and executes sudden quick movements. Perhaps it is looking out for any danger that might be there from predators. It then goes into the thick branches of the Laburnum Tree smoothly like a lizard (without a sound), but abruptly and with alertness.

##### **2. What is meant by the phrase ‘a machine starts up’?**

The image of the machine here refers to the young ones of the bird. A machine makes a lot of noise when it starts. Similarly, when the young birds see their mother they start chirping with necks rising and slouching like pistons in a machine, fluttering their wings in joy upon their mother’s arrival with food. They were hungry as well as sad being away from their mother.

##### **3. Why does the poet say the Goldfinch is the engine of her family?**

Just as the engine is essential (*it provides the energy and the movement*) to run a machine, as soon as the Goldfinch enters the tree (her nest is in the thick of Laburnum), *a machine starts up of chitterings, and a tremor of wings, and trillings*. Also, she provides the nutrition to keep her brood of chicks alive. So she is the provider and is central to the existence of her family.

##### **4. Does the whole tree start to tremble?**

It is hyperbolic. The whole tree seems to tremble because of the excitement of the young ones. The poet probably wants us to feel how an apparently passive tree is thrilled and comes alive. The bird is given a shelter, and the tree in return experiences a burst of life now and then. The goldfinch is thus *the engine of her family* which includes the Laburnum tree as well.

##### **5. ‘Then sleek as a lizard and alert and abrupt, she enters the thickness’ Explain the given line.**

**Ans:** The lizard is a quick moving animal. It is also very alert and its movements are sudden. In the given line, the arrival of the goldfinch on the laburnum tree is described. The poet describes its movements as alert and sudden just like that of a lizard. This is done to avoid getting the attention of the predators.

##### **6. How is the tree transformed during the bird’s visit?**

**Ans.** After the goldfinch arrives on the tree, the silent and still laburnum tree suddenly starts trembling and moving. The whole tree comes to life as the chicks of the goldfinch make a lot of noise as they chitter and trill on seeing their mother.

#### **V. Long Answer Type Question:**

##### **1. The arrival of the goldfinch on the Laburnum top brings about a change in the poem. How do you interpret this change? Is change good or bad in life?**

**Ans:** At the start of the poem, the top of the Laburnum tree in the poem is silent and still. There

is hardly any activity as the sunlight falls on it on a September afternoon. However, with the arrival of the goldfinch, it suddenly becomes a place of intense activity. The silence of the place is broken by the twittering and chirruping of the chicks and the goldfinch.

The change brought about by the arrival of the goldfinch on the Laburnum top is good, as it breaks the monotony. The tree becomes alive and lively with the movement of the goldfinch and the twittering and chirruping of the chicks.

Change can be good or bad in life depending on a situation. However, the fact is that change is the only constant in life. So, we have to accept it and move on in life.

## **2. What values do you learn from the goldfinch in the poem 'the laburnum top'?**

**Ans:** The Goldfinch has its nest on the top of the laburnum tree in the poem, the laburnum top' her chicks stay in the nest while she (the mother goldfinch) keeps going out at regular intervals to get food to feed her chicks. this shows her caring nature and highlights the values of motherly care and affection of a mother towards her offspring.

The other aspect of the goldfinch that is captured in the poem is its movements. she arrives at the laburnum top in a sudden manner and is very much alert to her surroundings. the poet has compared her movement with the sleek movement of a lizard. However, there is a reason for her moving like this (in an alert and sudden manner.) she is moving in this manner so as to avoid getting noticed by any predator. she does not want any predator to know that her chicks are resting in her nest on the laburnum top as then the predators may kill them or harm them. the values of safety and security for her offspring is highlighted in this act of the goldfinch.

## **3. What is the significance of yellow in the poem The Laburnum Top?**

In this poem, colour yellow finds a dominant spot as the poet tries to set an atmosphere of death and silence. The Laburnum tree stands tall with its beautiful yellow flowers brightening the visuals. Gold finch bird perches along the tree fluttering with its yellow feathers further symbolizing activeness.

At the same time, in the first stanza, yellow portrays death and silence with the image of fallen leaves. Ted Hughes by using this simple colour forms a melancholic atmosphere where a sad tree tries to survive by interacting with nature and surrounding.

## **TEXTUAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

### **Question 1.**

**What do you notice about the beginning and the ending of the poem?**

Answer:

The beginning of the poem is about the silence and stillness of the laburnum. The end of the poem again drifts into silence and emptiness of the laburnum.

### **Question 2.**

**To what is the bird's movement compared? What is the basis for the comparison?**

Answer:

The bird's movement is compared to that of a lizard. The basis for the comparison is the sleek, alert and abrupt movement with which the bird enters its nest. This movement of the bird is comparable to that of a lizard.

**Question 3.**

**Why is the image of the engine evoked by the poet?**

Answer:

The poet evokes the image of an engine because as soon as the goldfinch enters its nest on the laburnum top, the whole tree comes alive with the chirruping of the young ones of the bird, their twittering and the tremor of their wings. As an engine brings a seemingly dead machine to life, so the chattering family of the goldfinch brings the whole tree into life.

**Question 4.**

**What does the phrase “her barred face identity mask” mean?**

Answer:

The phrase refers to the face of the bird that is covered with fur of different colours and which looks like a mask making it the identity of the bird.