

A Photograph Shirley Toulson

Nostalgically recollecting fond memories, the poet looks at a very old photograph of her mother who is no more. The poet is consumed with grief but is left with no words to express the loss.

The poem begins with the poet looking at a very old photograph of her mother at twelve years of age. The photograph, on a cardboard frame, shows the poet's mother, with her two girl cousins each holding one of her hand. She was the eldest of the three and had a 'sweet face'. In the snapshot, all the three girls stand still, smiling with their hair falling on their faces, to get clicked by the camera of their uncle, on an occasion when they went paddling. The sea, which has apparently undergone no change, washed their 'transient' feet. This image of transience provides a sharp contrast to the eternal sea.

Some twenty or thirty years later, the poet's mother laughed at the picture pointing how she, Betty and Dolly (the two cousins) were made to dress for the beach holiday. That sea holiday was a thing of past for her mother at that time, while her mother's laughter is the poet's past now. Both signify their respective losses and the pain involved in recollecting the past.

For the present 'circumstance' the poet has nothing left to say. She is absorbed in the memories of her dead mother. The painful 'silence' of the situation leaves the poet silent, with no words to express her grief. Thus, the 'silence silences' her.

Title:

The poem, 'A Photograph' is composed in blank verse. A blank verse is a poem with no rhyme, most frequently used in English dramatic, epic, and reflective verse. The title of the poem is very appropriate as it reminds the poet of his mother. A photograph is something that captures a certain moment of someone's life. The person might change in course of time but the memories attached with the photograph are eternal. In this poem, the poet's mother is no more but the photograph makes her memories come alive. The mother's sweet face or her cousins heavily dressed up for the beach have all changed with time but the moment captured in the photograph still gives happiness to the poet's mother when she views it thirty to forty years later.

Allusion:

An Allusion is a reference or an incidental mention of something; either directly or by implication. Example of an allusion from 'A Photograph' is the cardboard (photograph) itself. The durability of the cardboard shows the lack of permanence of human life.

Alliteration:

Alliteration is the repetition of the initial letter (generally a consonant) of several words marking the stressed syllables in a line of a poetry.

'stood still to smile' is an example of alliteration from the poem.

Transferred Epithet:

A transferred epithet is a description which refers to a character or event but is used to describe a different situation or character. 'Transient feet' is a transferred epithet in the poem, 'A Photograph.' It refers to the human feet but it is used to describe the lack of permanence of human life. The sea is constant and eternal while the human feet which are being washed away by the sea are transient.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

- 1. ...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.**

- a. When did this incident take place?
- b. How is the poet able to remember her mother's childhood?
- c. What has stood the onslaught of time and what has not?

- 2. 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."**

- a. Who would laugh at the snapshot after twenty – thirty years later?
- b. How did mother remember her past?
- c. Who were Betty and Dolly?

Answer the following questions in 30-40 words.

- 1) What does the word 'cardboard' denote in the poem? Why has this word been used?
- 2) What has the camera captured?
- 3) What has stood the onslaught of time and what has not?
- 4) The poet's mother laughed at the snapshot. What did this laugh indicate?
- 5) What is the meaning of the line "Both wry with the laboured ease of loss".
- 6) What does "this circumstance" refer to?
- 7) Explain the line, 'Washed their terribly transient feet.'
- 8) The three stanzas depict three different phases. What are they?
- 9) Comment on the tone of the poem.
- 10) The poet's mother laughs at her photograph. How does the poet react at her past?