



**INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT
SENIOR SECTION
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
CLASS XI
THE LABURNUM TOP
TED HUGHES**



ABOUT THE POEM:

‘The Laburnum Top’ is an image poem. It shows how the arrival of a goldfinch transforms the life of a silent brooding tree in the autumn. For some moments, the tree begins to throb with life. When the bird flies away, it plunges into silence once again. The two phases of the life of the tree remind us of such phases in human life. The moments of joy and activity are, of course, few. It is the period of boring silence that marks much of the life span of a human being.

SUMMARY:

The Laburnum tree – a tree with yellow flowers – stands still and silent on a bright September afternoon. Its yellowness is in harmony with the yellow light of the bright autumn sun.

The peace and serenity of the tree is momentarily disturbed when a goldfinch comes. The bird perches at a branch end with a twitching chirrup. She gives a curious look around and then enters the thickness of the tree. She feeds her young ones in the nest. There is a great commotion. The whole tree trembles with the twittering of the young ones and with the flapping of their wings.

Having fed her little ones, the goldfinch comes out of the tree. Making gentle whistling sounds, she soars away in the sky, leaving the laburnum to its old silence and serenity.

LITERARY DEVICES:

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.

SIMILE: ‘sleek as a lizard’: smooth movement of the bird is compared to that of a lizard.

METAPHOR: ‘engine of her family’: The noise of the engine is identified with the noise and commotion made by the young ones of the goldfinch.

ALLITERATION: ‘September sunlight’: consonant sound ‘s’ repeated close by.

Reference to context:

1. *A few leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen*
Till the goldfinch comes, with a twitching chirrup
A suddenness, a startlement, at a branch end

- a) How does the mood change on the arrival of the goldfinch?
- b) With what is the goldfinch compared to?
- c) Identify two poetic devices in the first line.

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

- a) Who has been described in the first line?
- b) What effect does the last line create?
- c) What impression is created by the description?

3. *It is the engine of her family*
She stokes it full, then flirts out to a branch end
Showing her barred face identity mask

- a) Why has the word ‘engine’ been used to describe her family?
- b) How does she stoke the engine?
- c) What does the bird look like?

Answer the following questions in 30 – 40 words each:

1. Why is the image of the engine evoked by the poet?
2. What is the bird’s movement compared to? What is the basis for the comparison?
3. Explain: ‘her barred face identity mask’.
4. What do you notice about the beginning and the ending of the poem?
5. Explain the line, ‘And the laburnum subsides to empty.’
6. How is the tree transformed during the bird’s visit?
7. Describe the laburnum top.
8. Why has the poem been named ‘The Laburnum Top’?