



INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT
SENIOR SECTION
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
CLASS XI
FATHER TO SON
Elizabeth Jennings

Introduction

The poem brings out the agony of a father who has lost all kinship with his son. The son is now grown-up. He lives in his own world. He has no feeling of any relationship with his father. The father bitterly feels the pangs of this emotional separation. He wants the same kind of bond with his son as he had when the son was a little child. Instead of coming together they are drifting apart. There is a gap of understanding and communication.

Such a situation is a common feature in most of the families. The new generation wants to live life on its own terms. The youngsters think independently. They cease to be on talking terms. Father feels helpless. He is ready to forgive the child provided the latter feels sorry. But he rarely tries to understand the young boy's likes and dislikes, demands and dreams. The conflict is never resolved because they refuse to compromise.

Explanation

The theme of the poem is the generation gap which occurs when the communication link between two generations breaks due to a mutual lack of understanding, tolerance and acceptance. The poem highlights the internal conflict a father undergoes when his son becomes old enough to define his own interests, thoughts and perceptions. The brooding father complains that he cannot understand his child despite having lived together for many years in the same house. The father tries to continue a relationship based on what he knew of the son from his youngest years but of course, the son has changed over time. The tone is almost pleading, attempting to find a link with his grown up son.

Using a typically agrarian imagery, he questions whether he has already lost his own child, his son, due to this distance between them or was the son on a mental plane that was entirely his own and which, the father cannot access. The father uses 'I' in these lines acknowledging his own role in creating this communication gap between them.

The father and son have become strangers with no understanding of each other. Traditionally, the son's upbringing is in the very environment and with the values the father provided. Thus, the father feels his son is built to his design and should be like his father in most aspects. However, his son now has interests the father cannot share. There is no shared passion, no common ground. Most times, there is only an awkward silence between them. The frustration of the father is evident as he struggles to understand why his own son, his flesh and blood, has turned into an absolute stranger.

The father in the poem sees his child as the prodigal (spendthrift, underlying implication: foolish) son and wants him to return to the home he has always known. He does not want the son to make his own world, away from his father. The father says he would forgive his son if he asked for forgiveness like the prodigal son. He would love him again despite the sorrow of the distance that existed between them once. The tone is slightly condescending and implies that the father is unable to let his son go, even at the cost of restricting the son's personal development and independence.

The son admits that he is at a point where he is struggling to understand even himself. He does feel the grief of the broken relationship he shares with his father and yet, there is an anger that arises out of his confused, fraught inner self. The son speaks for the first time and it is quite clear, that the frustration lies on both sides. Pablo Neruda once commented on the sadness that arose from being unable to understand oneself. The son seems to be in the same confused, sad and yet, angry phase of growth. This stanza is reminiscent of the poem 'Childhood' which outlines a child's struggle to understand himself as he turns into a young adult.

The father concludes the poem realizing that in their hearts, each of them wants to forgive the other. However, neither wants to take the first step and ask for forgiveness. Each puts out an empty hand for

the other to take, but neither places theirs in the other's hand. However, it is positive that at least they long to forgive and find a way to make things work.

Usually, by the time parents accept the new individuality of their children, the damage has already been done and the process of coming together is difficult and painful. Respecting each others' differences is the only way to alleviate the distance, the strange and awkward silence.

While the father's anguish and frustration is highlighted, the ego comes through as well. It is also noteworthy that the poem is written by a woman and not a man. A number of questions remain open to speculation.

THE PRODIGAL SON is a Biblical reference from the New Testament's parables of Jesus. The story is of a father with two sons. The younger demanded his inheritance despite the fact that traditionally, the eldest born is heir. The father accedes and the spoilt younger son leaves home. He spends his fortune foolishly, eventually returning to his father's house with barely a stitch of cloth on his body. The father forgives him, and welcomes him into his embrace with open arms and a celebratory feast.

Read the extracts given below and answer the questions that follow:

1. *Yet have I killed*

The seed I spent or sown it where

The land is his and none of mine?

We speak like strangers, there's no sign

Of understanding in the air.

- a. What does the word 'seed' signify?
- b. Why is the speaker repentant?
- c. Why do they speak like strangers?
- d. What is lacking between the two?

2. *Father and son, we both must live*

On the same globe and the same land.

He speaks: I cannot understand

Myself, why anger grows from grief.

We each put out an empty hand,

- a. How does the poet feel when his relationship with his son comes under strain?
- b. What could be the cause for their distancing from each other?
- c. What do both father and son long for?
- d. What do the words 'an empty hand' signify?

Answer the following questions in 30-40 words.

1. Why is the father unhappy? What does the father long for?
2. 'The child is built to my design, yet what he loves I cannot share'. What is the irony of the situation?
3. 'I would have him prodigal'. What does the father mean by this?
4. What does the poet mean by 'silence surrounds us'?
5. How is the father's helplessness brought out in the poem?