The Laburnum Top

Ted Hughes

The Laburnum top is silent, quite still
In the afternoon yellow September sunlight,
A few leaves yellowing, all its seeds fallen.

Till the goldfinch comes, with a twitching chirrup
A suddenness, a startlement, at a branch end.
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.
It is the engine of her family.
She stokes it full, then flirts out to a branch-end
Showing her barred face identity mask

Then with eerie delicate whistle-chirrup whisperings
She launches away, towards the infinite

And the laburnum subsides to empty.

laburnum: a short tree with hanging branches, yellow flowers and poisonous seeds

goldfinch: a small singing bird with yellow feathers on its wings

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Find out

1. What laburnum is called in your language.
2. Which local bird is like the goldfinch.

Think it out

1. What do you notice about the beginning and the ending of the poem?
2. To what is the bird's movement compared? What is the basis for the comparison?
3. Why is the image of the engine evoked by the poet?
4. What do you like most about the poem?
5. What does the phrase "her barred face identity mask" mean?

Note down

1. the sound words
2. the movement words
3. the dominant colour in the poem.

List the following

1. Words which describe 'sleek', 'alert' and 'abrupt'.
2. Words with the sound 'ch' as in 'chart' and 'tr' as in 'trembles' in the poem.
3. Other sounds that occur frequently in the poem.

Thinking about language

Look for some other poem on a bird or a tree in English or any other language.

Try this out

Write four lines in verse form on any tree that you see around you.

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Notes

This poem has been placed after a text which has references to names of plants for thematic sequencing.

Understanding the poem

- Glossing of 'laburnum' and 'goldfinch'
- Factual understanding
- Movement of thought and structuring (poetic sensitivity)
- Focus on figures of speech and imagery used (poetic sensitivity)
- Attention to sounds, lexical collocations (poetic sensitivity)

Thinking about language

- Finding equivalents in other languages (multilingualism)
- Relating to thematically similar poems in other languages (multilingualism)
- Attempt at creativity

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