

## FIRST FLIGHT (POETRY)

### 1. *Dust of Snow*

(Robert Frost)

#### ABOUT THE POEM

##### *Introduction*

"Dust of Snow" is a short poem consisting of just two stanzas. However, the poem has got the beauty of a miniature painting. In the fewest possible words, the poet has given the details of a landscape. A snow-laden hemlock tree, with a crow flying out of it, scattering the soft snow all over the poet passing by under the tree, make a perfect, balanced and complete winter landscape.

##### *Summary*

Dejected and depressed, in a very sullen and melancholic mood, the poet had spent a part of his day, feeling absolutely out of sorts and spirits when unexpectedly a seemingly small occurrence lifted the weight off his mind and made him experience a joyous mood.

The poet describes how when he was passing by under a snow-laden hemlock tree, a crow perched on it shook some flakes of snow which fell on him. This little incident brought about a big and positive change in his mood. The sudden contact with nature set in a strong sense of joy in the poet and made all his melancholy disappear.

#### THEME

The small poem "Dust of Snow" is based on the idea that nature is a

perennial source of joy. The poet reveals that contact with nature provides a healing touch and relieves us of depression, sadness and gloom. Even those objects of nature which we tend to treat as having negative, inauspicious associations can be effective in dispelling the gloom in a person's mind. Therefore, the poem contains the idea that nothing in nature is ugly, inauspicious, or unpleasant. Even a crow, a handful dust of snow, and a poisonous tree like hemlock can be instrumental in turning melancholy into cheerfulness. The poem, thus emphasizes that sometimes seemingly insignificant events can bring about a significant change in our lives.

#### TITLE

'Dust' is something that is modest, unassuming and humble, yet the poet has chosen to call the poem "Dust of Snow" in order to bring home the idea that it is not only glamour, grandeur and splendour of nature that fascinate the human mind; even its most humble, ordinary and simple aspects like a handful of snow have the capacity to deeply impact us. As the poem narrates how a handful of fine particles of snow falling on to the poet swept away all his melancholy and replaced it with joy and hope, the title is appropriate and well-chosen.

#### MESSAGE

The poem conveys the message that nature has a romance about it which can transform our mood and take away all the gloom from our spirits. Nature treats every creature and object impartially. Everyone and everything in nature has the power to impact the minds of human beings. Snow spreads itself all over evenly and it can make even an inauspicious crow and a poisonous tree like hemlock its instrument to set in a joyous mood, in a person burdened with tensions and sorrows.

The poem conveys another message that we should never lose hope and optimism, and never let gloom overpower our minds. Joys and

sorrows are inevitable. Therefore, we must adopt an optimistic attitude towards life.

### LITERARY DEVICES

#### *Alliteration*

Alliteration is the occurrence of the same sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words. It creates a musical effect and enhances the pleasure of reading a literary work.

#### *Examples:*

- ◆ *Has given my heart*

Here 'h' sound has been repeated.

- ◆ *And saved some part*

Here the repetition of 's' sound makes the line musical.

#### *Enjambment*

Enjambment as a literary device refers to the practice of running lines from one to the next without using any kind of punctuation marks to indicate a pause (*full stop, comma etc.*).

This poem is an excellent example of enjambment. Each of its lines runs on to the next without any punctuation mark and the thought ends with the last line. The full stop comes only at the end.

#### *Symbolism*

Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Generally, it is an object representing another, to give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant.

The poet has used three symbols - '*a crow*', '*a hemlock tree*' and '*a dust of snow*'. All the three symbols are conventionally associated with sorrow. A crow is considered ugly and inauspicious which portends ill-fortune. A hemlock tree is poisonous and, therefore, has direct

association with death and the snow represents hardships.

The poet has associated these negative symbols with his dark, depressed and gloomy mood. However, he makes these symbols instrumental in bringing about a deep, positive change in his mood. The crow, while fluttering away from the hemlock tree makes some snow fall on the poet passing by. This contact with nature dispels the gloom of despair and sets in a positive and joyous mood.

The negative associations of the three symbols are, in this way, replaced by positive connotations.

### **Imagery**

Imagery in poetry refers to the mental pictures or images which are evoked in the minds of the readers through words in a literary work. Imagery makes a poem graphic and more appealing.

The small poem "Dust of Snow" is full of visual imagery of the winter landscape. It presents the landscape of the forest with snow-covered trees, a crow perched on the hemlock tree and a lonely traveller (*the poet himself*) passing by. The imagery corresponds with the mental state of the poet.

### **RHYME SCHEME**

Each of the two stanzas in the poem "Dust of Snow" follow the same rhyme scheme *i.e. abab*.

### STANZAS FOR COMPREHENSION

*Read the following extracts and answer the questions that follow in one or two lines each.*

**(I)**

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree

In this stanza, the poet narrates his contact with nature in the form of the snow-flakes falling on him from a tree.

The poet was passing from near a hemlock tree when a crow perched on the tree moved, and in the process, made the flecks of snow fall on him. However, it is significant that while presenting a sight of nature, the poet has chosen a poisonous tree like hemlock, instead of the traditionally chosen trees like oaks, maples and pines. Similarly, he has chosen a crow instead of a nightingale or a cuckoo. The season presented is not spring or summer, but snowy winter season.

The 'crow', the 'snow', and the 'hemlock tree' represent the world of nature. All the three symbols are associated with harsh aspects of nature and symbolize death. The crowing of a crow is regarded as a bad omen and the hemlock tree, being poisonous, stands for 'death'. Similarly, snow symbolizes barrenness and lack of life. The poet uses these symbols to emphasize his sad and depressed mood.

#### **TYPE – I    VERY SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

##### **SET – I**

**(a) Where was the crow perched?**

The crow was perched on a snow-covered hemlock tree in a forest.

**(b) How did the crow shake off snow from the hemlock tree?**

The crow shook off the snow from the hemlock tree unintentionally in the course of flying off from there. As it took off from a branch

of a hemlock tree, it displaced the powdery snow scattering it all over the poet passing from under the tree.

(c) Who does 'me' stand for? In what kind of mood is 'he'?

'Me' stands for the poet. He is in an utterly dejected and sombre mood.

(d) What do you understand by 'dust of snow'?

'Dust of Snow' means the small particles of soft, unsolidified snow.

### SET-II

(a) What does 'snow' represent in this stanza?

Although snow generally symbolizes difficulties and barrenness, in this stanza, 'snow' represents nature. It is with snow falling on the narrator that he comes in contact with nature.

(b) What are 'crow' and 'hemlock tree' usually symbolic of?

'Crow' and 'hemlock tree' are usually symbolic of the unpleasant aspects of nature. 'Crow' is not a sweet singing bird and is considered to be inauspicious, and 'hemlock' is a poisonous tree symbolizing death.

(c) Explain the imagery used in the stanza.

The imagery used in the stanza is that of a winter landscape with a hemlock tree laden with snow and a crow perched on its branches.

### TYPE-II OBJECTIVE TYPE QUESTIONS & MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

(a) The crow shook down on the poet a bit of

- |      |      |       |        |
|------|------|-------|--------|
| (i)  | dust | (iii) | snow   |
| (ii) | sand | (iv)  | poison |

(b) The crow was perched on a branch of a .....

(c) The hemlock tree is usually

- |      |           |       |           |
|------|-----------|-------|-----------|
| (i)  | fragrant  | (iii) | snow-clad |
| (ii) | colourful | (iv)  | poisonous |

(d) The rhyme scheme of the stanza is ..... .

**ANSWERS** (a) (iii) snow (b) hemlock tree (c) (iv) poisonous (d) abab

(II)

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.

In this stanza, the poet reveals that contact with nature is highly effective in soothing the sad, sorrowful mind of a person.

When the particles of snow fell on the poet when he was passing by near a hemlock tree, his mood was drastically transformed. He had been in a gloomy and foul mood throughout the day. He felt bad that sorrow had spoilt a major part of the day. But as he came in the lap of nature, he could spend the rest of his day with happy spirits. Even snow can bring about a complete change in the mood of a person.

The poet has employed unusual imagery and symbols here. The 'crow' usually is considered to be a harsh bird and the 'snow' represents difficulties of life. Similarly, the 'hemlock tree' is venomous. But the poet transforms all the three into effective, pleasant symbols of pleasure giving objects of nature, which have the power to uplift the drooping spirits of a person.

#### **TYPE – I    VERY SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

(a) What state of mind did the poet have in the beginning of the poem?

In the beginning of the poem, the poet was in very low spirits. He had spoilt a good part of the day brooding pensively as his mind was filled with depressing, negative thoughts.

(b) How did the poet's mood change at the end of the poem?

The poet became relieved and cheerful. He no longer had any regrets. Having got out of his depressive mood, he meant to spend the rest of his day in a happy, uplifted mood.

(c) What brought about a change in the poet's mood?

*Or*

What does the poet say has changed his mood?

*Or*

What has given the poet 'a change of mood'?

A very insignificant incident brought about a change in the poet's mood. Particles of snow displaced by a crow from a hemlock tree fell on him as he was passing by. This direct contact with nature soothed and pacified his troubled mind and changed his mood.

(d) Explain: 'And saved some part/Of a day...?'

The poet had a very dull and a dreary day clouded with gloom and cheerlessness. But before the end of the day, a fall of dust of snow over him set in a joyous mood. It was like a blessing from heaven and the rest of the day was saved from being ruined.

(e) Which literary devices have been used in the above stanza?

The literary devices used here are 'enjambment' i.e. each line runs on to the next and carries on the idea till the last line ends with a full stop, and 'alliteration' i.e. there is repetition of 'h' and 's' sounds in the first and the third line respectively.

(f) What is the rhyme scheme of the stanza?

The rhyme scheme of the stanza is *abab*.

### TYPE-II OBJECTIVE TYPE QUESTIONS & MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

(a) The poet had spent the major part of his day in

- |      |         |       |            |
|------|---------|-------|------------|
| (i)  | delight | (iii) | merriment  |
| (ii) | regret  | (iv)  | meditation |

(b) The incident in the poem made the poet .....

(c) Who/What is responsible for the change in the poet's mood?

(d) The poem shows that the poet

- |     |                       |
|-----|-----------------------|
| (i) | does not enjoy nature |
|-----|-----------------------|

- (ii) keeps complaining about nature
  - (iii) is indifferent to nature
  - (iv) loves contact with nature
- (e) The extract seems to suggest that little things in our life can make us happy or sad. (*True/False*)

**ANSWERS** (a) (ii) regret (b) happy (c) dust of snow  
 (d) (iv) loves contact with nature (e) True

#### SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

(to be answered in about 40 words each)

- Q1.** What is a 'dust of snow'? What does the poet say has changed his mood? How has the poet's mood changed? *(Textual)*

'Dust of Snow' means powdered snow or small particles of snow. The poet explains that a sprinkle of dust of snow over him caused by a crow's sudden flight from a hemlock tree changed his mood. In fact it was the suddenness of this contact with nature that shook him out of his gloomy and pensive mood and set in some joy and cheerfulness.

- Q2.** What are the birds that are usually named in poems? Do you think a crow is often mentioned in poems? What images come to your mind when you think of a crow? *(Textual)*

The birds usually mentioned in poems are peacocks, parrots, larks, nightingales, cuckoos, skylarks which are associated with love, good luck, beauty and melodious singing. A crow hardly ever finds a place in poetry because the crow is neither a sweet-singing nor a good-looking bird. Moreover, it is considered to be inauspicious or a bad omen. The images evoked by a crow are of harshness and cunningness. Here the image goes well with the sad and dejected mood of the poet.

- Q3. What is 'a hemlock tree'? Why doesn't the poet write about a more 'beautiful' tree such as a maple, or an oak, or a pine? (Textual)**

'A hemlock tree' is a poisonous tree with white flowers. The poet has deliberately dropped beautiful trees like maple, oak or pine because he wants the imagery to represent his sorrow-stricken and depressed mind well. But the same tree becomes an instrument of change from sadness to happiness in the poet's mind. The poet wants to emphasize that every object of nature, even a poisonous tree, can be helpful in bringing about pleasure.

- Q4. What do the 'crow' and 'hemlock' represent – joy or sorrow? What does the 'dust of snow' that the crow shakes off a hemlock tree stand for? (Textual)**

Crow, which is a lacklustre bird and hemlock that has poisonous flowers cannot be associated with joy. Hence, they represent sorrow. Here, they represent the sorrow-laden mood of the poet. Snow also stands for hardships but here it plays a catalytic role in lifting the mood of the poet and liberating his mind of tension and depression. It becomes symbolic of the force of nature.

- Q5. How did the crow shake down the dust of snow?**

The crow shook down the dust of snow from the branch of the hemlock tree on which it was perched. As it made some movement or flew out of the tree, the snow got displaced and its fine particles flew all over like small grains of dust.

- Q6. What role does the crow play in lifting the spirit of the poet?**

The crow plays a very significant role in lifting the spirit of the poet by making the dust of snow fall on him. The snow makes the poet have a direct contact with nature which relieves him of all sorrow and uplifts his spirit. The crow, in this way, may be regarded as a catalyst that makes a change possible.

**Q7. What are the 'crow', the 'hemlock' and the 'snow' symbolic of in the poem?**

The 'crow', the 'hemlock' and the 'snow' symbolize the world of nature in the poem. Although traditionally, all the three stand for unpleasant, harsh aspects of nature – a 'crow' symbolising jarring music and impending sorrowful events; 'hemlock' symbolizing death and 'snow' symbolizing barrenness and suffering. But in this poem, they all have been transformed into objects of nature that relieve gloom and sadness. The poet has used these symbols as catalysts in shifting his mood from despair to cheerfulness.

**Q8. What is the poet's purpose of introducing an unglamorous tree like hemlock and a lacklustre bird like crow in the poem?**

By introducing the two not-so-attractive objects of nature in the poem, the poet means to impress upon us the glory of nature even in the most humble and unglamorous aspects. Nature, in all its aspects, gives pleasure though we sometimes fail to realize it.

**Q9. What is the significance of 'dust of snow'?**

'Dust of snow' signifies the joys that nature bestows upon us. Nature with all its simplicity and spontaneity and snow-like coldness, can bring us a blissful state of mind.

**Q10. What was the poet's mood in the beginning? When and how did it change?**

*Or*

**What brought about a transformation in the poet's mood?**

In the beginning, the poet was in a very depressed, tense, and gloomy mood though there are no details as to why he was sad. But as he was passing by near a snow-laden hemlock tree, some dust of snow fell on him when a crow moved or flew away from

its branches. This contact with nature drove away all the sadness and transformed the poet's mood completely.

**Q11. How could a handful of dust of snow save 'some part of a day'?**

Dust of snow in all its whiteness, purity and soothing coolness came like a blessing from heaven which pacified the poet's agitated mind. The suddenness and spontaneity of the fall drove away all his gloom, leaving the poet to spend the rest of the day happily. Thus, the rest of the day was saved.

**Q12. Explain: "Of a day I had rued".**

The expression means that the poet's melancholic mood had spoilt his day by making it dull, dreary and sad. But his bad mood is immediately uplifted when the powdery snow showers down on him from the branches of the hemlock tree.

**Q13. Why do you think the poet had rued the day?**

One rues when one views life negatively, and rather than counting one's blessings one focuses all attention on the troubles and difficulties. The poet too must have rued brooding over some such incidents of life or some sorrowful incident might have left a deep impact on his mind to make him rue the day.

**Q14. Why do you think the poet has written the poem in just two stanzas? Do you think the poem could have been an elaborate piece? Why didn't the poet do so?      Or**

**Why do you think the poet has kept the poem short and simple?**

The beauty of the poem "Dust of Snow" lies in its brevity. Though the poem could have been elaborated, the poet didn't do so as he was able to bring out the larger significance of this small and simple incident very vividly in just two stanzas. Hence, he didn't feel the need for any further elaboration.

### LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

*(to be answered in about 100 – 150 words each)*

- Q1. How does Frost present nature in this poem? (Textual)**

Robert Frost's treatment of nature in the poem "Dust of Snow" is unconventional. Although, like the conventional nature poets, Frost believes that nature provides relief from the sorrows and troubles of the world, he does not present some beautiful landscape with green trees or flower-laden plants. Nor does he talk about some sweet singing birds like a cuckoo, a lark, or a nightingale. He presents a winter landscape – a hemlock tree with poisonous flowers all covered with snow and a crow sitting on it. In fact, the three symbols have been used to present effectively the mental state of the poet.

The poet who has been in a depressed and melancholy mood for the whole day happens to pass by near a snow-laden hemlock tree with a crow perched on it. But when the crow shakes down on him some particles of snow, this gentle shower is enough to lift his mood. He is transported from a sad, dejected mental state to one of relief and pleasure. The remaining part of the day is marked by happiness and a light mood.

Therefore, although hemlock tree and crow are not traditionally associated with pleasing emotions, still they, being part of nature, can be instrumental in imparting happiness. Similarly, snow is symbolic of difficult times or suffering, but snow can also liberate a person from the mood of sadness. Nature always provides pleasure. Such is the bond between human beings and nature that whenever human beings come into the lap of nature, they are certainly blessed with relief, delight and pleasure.

- Q2. How does a simple incident in the poem convey a significant idea?**

*Or*

**How does the poem reveal that sometimes small, insignificant events can bring about a significant change in our state of mind?**

The poem "Dust of Snow" by Robert Frost is a small poem consisting of just eight lines that narrate a simple incident. The poet narrates how one day he was in a depressed, dejected mood and had spent a large part of the day with his mind sunken in melancholy. But, by chance he passed by a snow-covered hemlock tree. A crow sitting on the tree moved and as a result some snow fell on the poet. This small chance happening had a deep impact on the poet's mind. He was at once transported from a depressed state of mind to that of delight and happiness. His mind was relieved of the burden of melancholy.

The seemingly insignificant event, in this way, proved to be so effective that it absolutely changed the poet's mood and state of mind. Moreover, it left an important message that sometimes trivial happenings may have a deep, serious significance. Such incidents are sometimes forceful enough to bring about a drastic change in the life of a person. Even a bird like a crow sitting on a poisonous tree covered with snow can be instrumental in bringing about a profound change in the attitude of a person. A small incident can reveal how one feels relieved of the worldly burdens in the lap of nature. Even the so-called harsh and frosty aspects of nature can impart solace and delight.

**Q3. What kind of imagery has been used by Robert Frost in the poem "Dust of Snow"?** *Or*

**How do you think the poem "Dust of Snow" is full of unconventional images?** *Or*

**"Dust of Snow", though small, is rich in imagery. Discuss.**

Robert Frost's poem "Dust of Snow", though very small, is replete with imagery from the world of nature. The poet has beautifully portrayed a winter landscape with snow-laden trees, a crow perched on a hemlock tree and a traveller (the poet himself) passing through the snowy land. The poem is picturesque, as the poet has painted a very vivid picture which the readers can visualize very clearly. The images are not taken from the store-house of earlier poets. Robert Frost has used the images which other poets have not considered to be worthy of being parts of poetry. Unlike the conventional poets, Frost has opted for a winter season instead of spring though traditionally winter is symbolic of difficulties, sorrows and sufferings. The tree chosen is not a banyan, or oak, or birch, or elm; it is hemlock - a poisonous tree. Similarly the poet has not brought in a sweet-singing lark, cuckoo, or nightingale to soothe his depressed spirit. It is a crow, a harsh singing bird who becomes instrumental in transforming drastically the mood of the poet. The snow scattered by the crow falling on the poet brings him in direct contact with nature and the touch of nature has a healing impact on the troubled mind of the poet. Thus, the imagery employed is unconventional, but it conveys the conventional message that nature is a rich source of pleasure.

