

5

POETRY

Father to Son

—Elizabeth Jennings



The poem, 'Father to Son,' by Elizabeth Jennings is about a father who doesn't have a good relationship with his son. He shares his feelings by saying that he does not know much about his son, and although they have lived together for so many years, there is no sign of understanding because of the generation gap between them. He wants their relationship to be just like it was when his son was a child.

Topic Notes

-  About the Poet
-  Poem in Detail
-  Poetic Devices
-  Significant Morals
-  Dictionary





About the Poet

Elizabeth Joan Jennings (18th July, 1926 - 26th October, 2001) was an English poet, whose works are related to intensely personal matters in a plainspoken, traditional, and objective style. Her poem, 'A Way of Looking', won her a Somerset Maugham Award. Some of the best of her later poems include Recoveries (1964), The Mind has Mountains (1966) Lucidities (1970), etc.



Poem in Detail

Stanza 1

*I do not understand this child
Though we have lived together now
In the same house for years. I know
Nothing of him, so trying to build
Up a relationship from how
He was when small*

Interpretation

The father unhappily shares his feelings about the relationship with his son as he is unable to understand him. They both lived in the same house for years, but due to a lack of communication and a lack of understanding, both son and father are not able to understand each other. The father does not know much about his son's interests, likes, or dislikes. So, the father tries to build the same bond that they had when the son was a small. The father has now perhaps realised that there is a lack of understanding between his son and himself, and he wants to improve their relationship. His son has changed as he has grown up.



Poet's Mood

→ Unhappy

Example 1. Extract Based:

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

*I do not understand this child
Though we have lived together now
In the same house for years. I know
Nothing of him, so try to build
Up a relationship from how
He was when small*

(A) The issue highlighted in the given stanza is :

- (a) communication gap
- (b) hatred
- (c) conflict
- (d) both (a) and (b)

(B) What is the desire of the speaker in the given lines?

- (a) He wants his son to talk to him.
- (b) He wants to build a new relationship with his son.
- (c) He wants his son to forgive him.
- (d) He wants to forgive his son.

(C) State whether the following statement is TRUE or FALSE.

The son is a grown - up when his father rants about his agony to him.

(D) What kind of relationship does the speaker want with the child?

(E) Fill in the blank with an appropriate answer. Even after living together in the same house for years, the father

Ans. (A) (a) communication gap

Explanation: In the poem, both the father and the son are poles apart. Though both of them have lived under the same roof for years, the father is still unhappy and is unable to understand his own child. He wants to build up a relationship with his son, but there is a generation gap between them: they lack understanding, and no communication takes place between them. He knows nothing about his son's desires and likes. Hence, (a) is correct.

(B) (b) He wants to build a new relationship with his son.

Explanation: The father wants to build a new relationship with his son. He desires to understand his son and know about what he likes or dislikes. Hence, (b) is correct.

(C) True

Explanation: The son is a grown - up when his father rants about his agony to him. The father wants their relationship to be the way it was when his son was a child.

(D) The speaker wants the same relationship that they used to have when the child was small.

(E) doesn't understand his son

Explanation: Even after living together in the same house for years, the father doesn't understand his son. There is a lack of communication between them. They do not talk much, and the father doesn't know about the likes and dislikes of his son.

Stanza 2

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.
This child is built to my design
Yet what he loves I cannot share.

Interpretation

The father wonders if he is responsible for the failure of the relationship. He feels as though the child is his son, yet the latter's world is totally different from his. Despite his continuous efforts, his son is in another place that is unapproachable. Although they are father and son, but due to a lack of understanding and communication gaps, they behave like strangers. The father further says that physically, his child resembles him, but he does not understand what his child likes or dislikes.



Poet's Mood

→ Disheartened; contemplating.

Stanza 3

Silence surrounds us. I would have
Him prodigal, returning to
His father's house, the home he knew,
Rather than see him make and move
His world. I would forgive him too,
Shaping from sorrow a new love.

Interpretation

The father says that there is silence in their relationship because of a complete lack of communication between them. The father sees his son as a prodigal a person who spends money recklessly. He wants his son to return to his home, the one he always knew so that they can rebuild their relationship and start again. He didn't want his son to move around and make his own world. He further says that he is willing to forgive his son for running away and let go of the sorrows he had in his heart because of him.



Poet's Mood

→ Forgiving

Stanza 4

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,
Longing for something to forgive.

Interpretation

The son speaks for the first time and admits that he too feels the sadness of the broken relationship, but he is also angry as he is at a point where he doesn't understand himself. Both father and son want to forgive each other, but neither is ready to ask for forgiveness from the other. However, the situation can be improved if they find a way to get closer and communicate well with each other.



Poet's Mood

→ Sad; longing

Example 2. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

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,
Longing for someone to forgive.

- (A) What does the expression 'anger grows from grief' signify?
- (B) The poetic device used in 'anger grows from grief' is:
(a) hyperbole (b) consonance
(c) metaphor (d) personification
- (C) What does the line, 'on the same globe and on the same land' mean?
- (D) Fill in the blank with an appropriate answer.
After reading the extract, one can infer that in order to improve the relationship, the father and son should
- (E) State whether the following is TRUE or FALSE.
The last two lines of the stanza signify that both the father and son want to forgive each other, but neither is ready to take the first step.

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. (A) The given expression signifies that when the child speaks for the first time, he shares that he is at a stage in his life, where he cannot understand himself. His despair causes him to become angry.

(B) (d) personification

Explanation: Personification is a figure of speech in which human characteristics are attributed to an inanimate object. Here, 'anger grows from grief' is an example of personification. Hence, (d) is correct.

(C) The given line means that both the father and his son must learn to coexist under the same roof despite their differences and misunderstandings.

(D) try to communicate with each other and share their issues.

Explanation: One can infer that in order to improve the relationship, both the father and his son should try to

communicate with each other and share their issues. It is important to clear the past misunderstanding if one wants to build a healthy and loving relationship.

(E) True

Explanation: Both the father and son want to forgive each other, but neither is ready to take the first step.



Poetic Devices

(1) **Antithesis:** Two contrasting or opposing ideas are put together in this figure of speech. For example:

- The land is his and none of mine.
- Shaping from sorrow a new love.

(2) **Alliteration:** Alliteration refers to the occurrence or repetition of the same sound or letter at the beginning of the words in a sentence. For example:

- Silence surrounds us
- The seed I spent or sown...
- The home he knew
- anger grows from grief.

(3) **Metaphor:** Metaphor means an indirect comparison between a quality shared by two persons or things. For example:

- The land is his and none of mine?
- The seed I spent or sown it where. Here, 'seed' refers to the son.

(4) **Synecdoche:** In this figure of speech, a part is made to represent the whole. For example:

- Make and move his world.

(5) **Allusion:** In this figure of speech, an object or circumstances from unrelated context is referred indirectly. For example:

- 'Prodigal' is used in stanza 3 which is also a reference of the son story in the Bible.

(6) **Simile:** A figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another using 'as' or 'like'. For example:

- We speak like strangers.

(7) **Personification:** The attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects is called personification. For example:

- Anger grows from grief.



Significant Morals

(1) The central idea of the poem is the generation gap, which occurs when the communication link between two generations breaks due to a lack of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance.

(2) The poem shows the need for an ideal relationship between children and their parents, which is diminishing due to the generation gap.

(3) Respecting each other's differences is the only way to diminish the distance between parents and children.

(4) Importance of relationships and understanding the changing times.

(5) Forgiving the young ones to evolve a positive relationship.



Dictionary

Words	Meanings	Synonyms	Antonyms
<i>Prodigal</i>	spending money wastefully	imprudent	economical
<i>Grief</i>	great sadness	sorrow	joy

Longing	a feeling of wanting something very much	yearning	despising
Build up	develop	evolve	worsen
Sign	indication	mark	misfortune
Surrounds	all over	everywhere	nowhere
Same globe	this world	universe	a small area

OBJECTIVE Type Questions

[1 mark]

Multiple Choice Questions

1. What does the son share about himself?

- (a) He is at a point where he doesn't understand himself.
- (b) He remains angry all the time.
- (c) He does not know how to protect their relationship.
- (d) Not mentioned in the poem.

Ans. (a) *He is at a point where he doesn't understand himself.*

Explanation: In the poem, 'Father to Son', the son shares his sorrowfulness about the distance between his father and him. He also shares that he is at a stage in his life, where he doesn't understand himself. He feels angry at this point. Hence, (a) is correct.

2. What is the meaning of the line - 'Shaping from sorrow a new love'?

- (a) Leaving behind the sorrows and build a new relationship.
- (b) To build a new relationship without any sorrow.
- (c) To forgive the sorrows the father had faced because of his son and improve their relationship.
- (d) To discuss the sorrows he had faced because of his son.

Ans. (c) *To forgive the sorrows the father had faced because of his son and improve their relationship.*

Explanation: In this line, the father is expressing his wish to forgive his son for his mistakes and re-establish a loving relationship with him. He feels the alienation between them has brought sorrow to both of them. He feels that, perhaps, after forgiving the sorrows he had faced because of his son, a new love will develop between them. Hence, (c) is correct.

3. Why does the father want his son to return to his home?

- (a) To make amends with him.
- (b) To teach him a lesson.
- (c) To teach him the value of relationships.
- (d) To apologise to him.

Ans. (a) *To make amends with him.*

Explanation: In the poem, the father complains that his prodigal son has made a world outside his home that he cannot understand. The father wants him to return home so that, he can make amends with him and they can rebuild their relationship. Hence, (a) is correct.

4. Identify the figure of speech used in, 'Silence surrounds us.'

- (a) Personification
- (b) Metaphor
- (c) Simile
- (d) Alliteration [Diksha]

Ans. (d) *Alliteration*

Explanation: Alliteration refers to the occurrence or repetition of the same sound or letter at the beginning of most of the words in a sentence. Here, silence and surrounds both have the same letter at the beginning, so it is alliteration. Hence, (d) is correct.

5. What is the meaning of 'This child is built to my design, yet what he loves I cannot share.' ?

- (a) His son looks like him, and they share everything with each other.
- (b) His son looks like him, yet they don't have anything to share.
- (c) His son should follow his footsteps, but that is not the case.
- (d) Neither does his son look like him, nor does he understand him.

Ans. (b) *His son looks like him, yet they don't have anything to share.*

Explanation: The father says that his child looks like him and yet the father didn't know what he likes or dislikes. There is a lack of communication between both of them, leaving the father feeling sad and melancholic. Hence, (b) is correct.

6. Towards the end of the poem, transition of emotions that the son experiences is:
 (a) pity to sorrow (b) grief to anger
 (c) misery to elation (d) pensive to malice

[Diksha]

Ans. (b) grief to anger

Explanation: The son shares with his father that he is at a stage where he doesn't understand himself. His anger develops out of his sadness. Hence, (b) is correct.

Extract Based Questions

7. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

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.
 This child is built to my design
 Yet what he loves I cannot share.

- (A) What does the father feel in the given lines?
 (a) That his son is responsible for the situation.
 (b) That he is responsible for the situation.
 (c) That no one can be blamed for the situation.
 (d) That he himself should correct the situation.
- (B) Fill in the blanks with an appropriate answer.
 The figure of speech used in 'We speak like strangers' is
- (C) What do the last two lines of the stanza indicate?

Ans. (A) (b) That he is responsible for the situation.

Explanation: The father holds himself responsible for the present situation. He has used 'I' in the first line to accept his role in the communication gap between him and his child. He is guilty of allowing continued silence or non-communication between them, and also for not understanding the son's aspirations and feelings. Hence, (b) is correct.

- (B) simile

Explanation: The figure of speech used in 'We speak like strangers' is simile. Simile means to compare one thing with another using 'as' or 'like'. Here, the father is trying to say that he and his son face a lack of communication between them. A third person will think that they are strangers.

- (C) The last two lines indicate that although the son had physical features like his father, the father hardly knew what his child loved.

8. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

Silence surrounds us. I would have
 Him prodigal, returning to
 His father's house, the home he knew,
 Rather than see him make and move
 His world. I would forgive him too,
 Shaping from sorrow a new love.

- (A) What does the line 'Rather than see him make and move his world' indicate?
 (B) The father is ready to forgive his son:
 (a) to make sure he doesn't spend money recklessly.
 (b) he wants to let go of all the sorrows
 (c) he wants to be a part of his son's world.
 (d) he wants to be a responsible father.
- (C) State whether the following is TRUE or FALSE.
 The son feels satisfied about the distance between them.

Ans. (A) The given line indicates that the father was desperate to see his son return home. He didn't want him to make a world of his own.

- (B) (b) he wants to let go of all the sorrows.

Explanation: The father is ready to forgive all the sorrows he had inside because of his son. He just wants his son to return to his home so that they can build a healthy relationship.

- (C) False

Explanation: When the child speaks for the first time, he shares that he is sad about his present relationship with his father. Both the father and the son are frustrated about their relationship gap.

SHORT ANSWER Type Questions (SA)

[2 marks]

Answer the following questions in about 40 - 50 words:

9. Does the poem talk of an exclusively personal experience or is it fairly universal?

Ans. In the poem, 'Father to Son', the poet talks about a fairly universal experience. This can be said so because when a child is young and needs his father, the father is busy with his work and is not able to take time out for his

child. When the father grows old, his son gets so occupied in his work that he has no time for his old father.

10. How is the father's helplessness brought out in the poem? [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The father says that he wants to build a better relationship with his son, but now his son is busy in his own world. They both talk like strangers and there is a lack of understanding between them. The father doesn't know anything about his son, and now that he is trying to build up a relationship with him like the one they had when he was a child, it is all in vain.

11. Describe 'anger grows from grief'.

Ans. The son shares his true feelings with his father for the first time. He shares that he feels miserable that there is a lack of interaction between them. He also shares that he is at a point where he doesn't understand himself. This confusion and sadness give rise to anger and a feeling of frustration.

12. How does the father express his grief in the poem?

Ans. The poet is deeply grief-stricken upon realising the lack of interaction and understanding between him and his son. He further says that despite all his efforts, his son is in a different place that he cannot access as the gap between them has increased. They talk to each other like strangers which makes him despondent. His son looks like him, but he doesn't know what he loves.

13. What compromise is the father ready to make with his son?

Ans. The father wants that his son should return home. He doesn't want him to move around and make his own world. He is ready to forgive him and let go of all the sorrows he had inside because of him. He is also ready to have him as a spendthrift (prodigal)

14. Comment on the theme of the poem.

Ans. The poem, 'Father to Son' is based on the concept of 'generation gap' between parents and their children. The father has his own set

of beliefs and ideas, while the son has turned into a more mature individual who wants to live life on his own terms. Both are unable to compromise or reconcile with each other.

15. Who do you think is responsible for the deterioration in the relationship - the father or the son? Give reasons for your answer.

[Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. According to me, the father is the root cause of the present condition of their relationship. It is so because he expects his son to stay at home. The son, now a mature man, wants to explore the world and seek new adventures. Coming from an older generation, the father should understand his child's aspirations and that it's common for children at this age to have their own set of rules.

16. What is the father's longing? How can it be fulfilled?

Ans. The father longs that both of them should forgive each other's mistakes and build a new relationship. He is ready to make amends with his son, and wants him to return to his home. The longing can be fulfilled if both of them try to communicate with each other, and find a solution to the problem.

17. How can we draw this conclusion from the poem that the father wishes to live with his son? [Diksha]

Ans. One can conclude that the father wishes to live with his son because he is ready to forgive him, and is pleading him to come back. He wants to start their relationship afresh, and doesn't want his son to live separately.

18. The poem is a commentary on generation gap. Do you agree with the statement? Support your answer. [Delhi Gov. QB 2022]

Ans. The poem 'Father to Son' revolves around the central idea of a generation gap between two people. In the poem, the father, coming from an old generation, has some expectations from his son. His son, however, wants to live a life on his own terms and explore the world. Both of them are unable to express their desires and feelings. They don't know how to solve the problem of lack of communication.

LONG ANSWER Type Questions (LA)

[5 marks]

Answer the following questions in about 120 - 150 words:

19. How far has the poet succeeded in transforming a purely personal matter to

a universal experience prevalent in modern times?

Ans. The poem begins on an autobiographical note. The speaker, i.e., the father, recounts his own

experience. He talks about the non-functional father-son relationship. He neither understands nor knows anything about his son. Even after living in the same house for many years, they lack understanding and the distance between them has increased with the passage of time. There is a lack of communication between them. They either talk like strangers or there is silence between them. The father is unable to understand what his son likes to do. He is lost in his own world, which the father is not able to access. The distance has reached its sorrowful limit. Even then, the father is willing to forget the sadness he had inside because of his son and build up a fresh relationship. The son also feels sad, and his grief takes the form of anger, as they fail to find a solution.

The poet has succeeded in transforming his personal matter into a universal experience through this poem because the lines in the poem speak to the reality of the present time. In most families, one would find a lack of interaction due to the generation gap. When the older generation fails to understand the demands of the younger generation, they either move out, or this leads to disastrous consequences.

20. What sort of father-son relationship has been depicted in the poem 'Father to Son'?

Ans. The poem depicts a father-son relationship that exists in name only. The two have been living together in the same house for years, yet, the father does not understand his son. He confesses that he knows nothing about his son. The bond of affection between them is broken. They have become formal, just like strangers. Although the son resembles his father physically, he had his own visions, dreams and aspirations. He doesn't want to stay at his home forever, and is not afraid to seek new adventures. The protective father is willing to forgive him for incurring a loss of material wealth provided, he returns home. The painful experience of a lack of communication fills the father with utter helplessness, anger, and grief. He is unable to find a solution to their current problem.

21. Write an article on 'Generation Gap' in about 120 - 150 words.

Ans. **Generation Gap**
by Shivaay

Generation Gap is a term given to the age difference between two sets of people, especially children and their parents. People of different age groups have different ideologies and opinions which creates a difference in them.

The generation gap causes distance between the children, their parents, and their grandparents, and it becomes tougher to maintain peace and harmony. The younger generation aspires to have complete freedom and no interference from the outside world. They wish to have their own set of rules and do not enjoy being dominated. On the other hand, the older generation demands that the younger generation conform to their way of life. However, while their intention is pure, this is not always achievable, and might result in arguments or even separation from the loved ones.

Nothing in this world can be as beautiful as a parent-child relationship. It should be nurtured very delicately, and therefore it is essential to bridge the gap between the two generations. It is time to realise that nobody is completely right or wrong. Both generations have to develop more understanding and acceptance of each other.

22. Imagine that you are a journalist from a reputed newspaper. You witnessed a disagreement between the father and his son this morning. After noticing this, you made the decision to write a report on the harsh treatment on parents by children in modern homes. Write a report in about 120 - 150 words.

Ans. The Reality of Families at Present

By: Roshni, Journalist

The Student Times

Today, as I waited for the bus to take me to my office, I saw something that completely broke my heart. I witnessed a father and son having a disagreement. Given their current financial situation, the father was kindly asking his son to stop spending money recklessly. However, the advice soon turned into an altercation when the son started yelling at him. Instead of owning up to his mistake, he blamed his father's lower income and said that the poor infrastructure of their house made him embarrassed in front of his peers. He even threatened his father by saying if he didn't increase his allowance, he would leave the house and live a life on his own terms. In the modern world, this is how families actually function. The younger generation no longer respect their parents. This is a matter of serious concern. When parents first notice their kids acting inappropriately, they should have a direct conversation with them and establish clear limits. Family ties may be severed if the lines between right and wrong are not upheld.

