

FLAMINGO: KEEPING QUIET

PABLO NERUDA

About the Poet: Columbian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez called Pablo Neruda, the greatest poet of the 20th century of any language. Pablo Neruda always wrote with green ink which according to him was the colour of hope. He appeals to readers to take some time out of their busy lives for introspection and retrospection. The aim is to return to our routines with renewed vigour and awareness of ourselves and our actions.

Theme: In this deceptively simple poem, the poet has emphasized the need to introspect and bring in the spirit of brotherhood among the people of the world.

Values: Introspection, retrospection, universal brotherhood, sensitivity to the environment, peace, empathy, unity etc.

Title: The title is very appropriate as the poem celebrates the necessity of quiet introspection and silence. This moment of silence will act as an antidote to war, violence, hatred, exploitation and turmoil. By keeping quiet, mankind can try to understand itself and stop harming himself and others with death and destruction.

Understanding the Poem: Neruda begins by asking everyone to count to twelve and keep still. These twelve seconds would help everyone calm themselves and relax and be ready to begin introspection or retrospection. He wants people to break the barriers of communication and speak no language at all for a few minutes. These moments of silence would be unique and enticing because in our mundane life, we are constantly working towards selfish goals and never take the time to reflect. This sudden silence would give us an opportunity to introspect and unite humanity. We would all perform this activity together. Since we would not speak for a while, barriers between communities would break and a sense of brotherhood would prevail.

Man would get an opportunity to realize how he is destroying nature and harming himself in the process. The fishermen that harm aquatic life would realize how nature brings them a cold reception. The man who gathers salt from the sea would realize that nature retaliates by turning his hands rough. In this silence, futile wars against men and nature would be arrested and a new feeling of unity would be experienced. Those who plan and implement bio warfare and nuclear weaponry should, for once, shed their old attire (profession and preoccupations) and put on clean clothes to walk among their fellow men. They must use this time to truly witness what they would destroy with their attempts to achieve a fruitless victory. Such a win leaves no survivors because even if they were physically alive, they would be emotionally dead and eventually, mankind will perish.

The war will be a victory of scientific knowledge but there will be no survivors left. The poet does not want his desire for inactivity to be misunderstood as a state of uselessness or death. He knows and accepts life as it is. He accepts the rush, the noise and even the belligerent attitudes. He says he does not begrudge death or want anything to do with it. He does not want people to be like dead, doing nothing, forever. All he wants is that everyone should take out just a few moments from their busy lives for themselves and for the natural world around them.

He feels that if men were not so determined to keep lives moving all the time, the ensuing silence would interrupt sadness that has become so much a part of us that we do not even notice it. This sadness comes from not knowing oneself and always trying to achieve everything possible at the earliest, out of an illogical fear of impending death.

He wants men to learn a lesson from the Earth. The Earth appears to be inactive yet it is constantly and selflessly productive. The natural world seems omnipresent without being ostentatious and hence, is taken for granted. After the cold inactive unproductive winter, spring arrives with bounty and vivacity. Men too could be productive and progressive without any aggression, selfishness and the urge for destruction. They could care for nature as it cares for them. They could, after eons of selfish actions, bring back a degree of nobility, thoughtful attitudes and universal brotherhood.

Explanations:-

Now we will count..... all keep still: The poet through this expression commences the session of introspection and meditation. The poet feels that if for once we will keep quiet and still, it will provide us an opportunity to introspect on our follies. Twelve is indicative of the twelve signs to measure hours on the clock.

For once our arms so much: Language breeds discrimination, and linguistic chauvinism breeds domination and racial prejudice. The poet feels that if for some time no one spoke on the face of the Earth, all this misunderstanding and mistrust will wither away in the depth of silence.

Man is a victim of his own doing. Much of the unrest faced in the world is a repercussion of man's so-called progressive activities. Therefore if man's activities come to a standstill for a while and if man stops moving his arms too much, peace and tranquillity will prevail in the world

It would be an exotic sudden strangeness: This moment of silence, according to Pablo Neruda would be a moment of immense world peace, universal brotherhood and love that will be created through introspection and silence. In the modern competitive world there is a rat-race to outshine others. The phrases 'without rush, without engines' are symbolic of the humdrum of modern life. Life can be peaceful only if this thoughtless advancement is stopped. This exotic moment of silence will help build a sudden and strange feeling of universal brotherhood. This feeling of togetherness is new and inexplicable. It will turn out to be a blessing for mankind.

Fishermen in the coldhis hurt hands: This moment of quietude will help man realize the harm he has been causing to others and to himself. The fishermen are symbolic of man's indiscriminate exploitation of nature for his vested interests. And when fishermen do not harm the whales they will no longer be on the verge of extinction. The men, who gather salt, have no time to reflect on the pain they are causing to their hands and to themselves. In his efforts to add comforts to his life man has paid little heed to the pain he has been causing himself.

Those who preparedoing nothing: The word 'those' refers to the politicians, statesmen and the scientists who are involved in initiating and aggravating wars. The wars that are waged by man include wars against Nature which is caused by pollution and the chemical and nuclear weapons created by man which have caused his own annihilation. The war which man is waging against Nature will one day convert this 'living planet' into a dead one and humans themselves will become an extinct species. The result of the war may be indicative of man's achievement and scientific knowledge, but there would be no survivors to celebrate this victory.

Men would put on clean clothes and for some time would reflect inwardly realizing the strength of humanity and also become conscious of universal brotherhood. His destructive activities will come to a standstill and this will provide a healing touch for mankind.

What I wanttruck with death: The poet clarifies to the readers that he does not want 'total inactivity'. By this he implies a phase of complete stagnation when no activity will take place on the face of the earth. This is not what he advocates. What he wants man to do is to stop all his destructive activities for a while and analyse their consequences and not become inactive and bring life to a standstill. Man should continue with his positive and constructive activities that are for the betterment of mankind.

Lie is an on-going process and we need to be a part of the flow. If we stagnate then it would not be worth living. The phrase 'want no truck with death' means that he refuses to associate with death or would not bring life to a dead end by such inactivity.

If we were not so ourselves with death: Man has become so single-minded that he is concerned only about the scientific progress and advancement. He has not stopped to pay heed to the pros and cons of this reckless progress and moves ahead without any thought about the consequences. His selfish nature is worried about keeping 'our lives moving', which means that man leads a mechanized and busy life. Man, in his race towards materialism has sacrificed the fulfilment of his emotional needs and thus has become sad and isolated. The psychological problems faced by man are because he has not cared to satisfy his emotional needs. He has failed to even realize that his unthinking progress has brought him on the verge of extinction. The huge silence that results out of this introspection advocated by Neruda will interrupt this sadness making man understand the need for peace and harmony in this world.

Perhaps the Earthkeep quiet and I will go: The Earth can teach us the lesson of preserving and resurrecting life. Shelley clearly points out in his 'Ode to the West Wind' that the West Wind is both a preserver and destroyer. It preserves the dead seeds in their dark wintry beds till spring comes and conducive weather conditions help the seeds to procreate new life. Pablo Neruda also emphasizes the same point in these few lines. The things which apparently seem dead in Nature prove to be alive later.

The counting is then a part of meditation asking man to experience those exotic moments of silence which will create a rejuvenation of thoughts and a transition of our mind-set. He himself departs leaving the meditator in silence.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

1. Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the Earth
let's not speak in any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

- a) What does 'count to twelve' imply?
- b) How would humanity benefit if people did not speak in any language?
- c) Why does the poet ask men to stop all movement?

2. It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

- a) What does he mean by 'exotic moment'?
- b) How could man achieve this exotic moment?
- c) Explain: 'without rush, without engines.'

**3. Fishermen in the cold sea
Would not harm whales
And the man gathering salt
Would look at his hurt hands.**

- a) What are fishermen symbolic of?
- b) What message does the poet convey in these lines?
- c) What image does the poet create in the last line?

**4. Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.**

- a) What are the kinds of wars mentioned in the above lines?
- b) What are green wars?
- c) How would the wars affect our lives?
- d) What could be the ideal situation?

**5. Perhaps the Earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.**

**Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.**

- a) What can the Earth teach us?
- b) How does the Earth 'prove to be alive'?
- c) Explain: 'you keep quiet and I will go'.

Answer the following in about 30-40 words.

- 1. What is the significance of 'twelve' in the context of this poem?
- 2. What is the sadness referred to in the poem?
- 3. What harm do the fishermen do and why do the salt gatherers' hands hurt?
- 4. How is inactivity different from death? What does the poet mean by 'to have no truck with death'?
- 5. What are we single-minded about?
- 6. What symbol from nature does the poet use to prove that keeping quiet is not total inactivity?
- 7. Do you think the poet advocates total inactivity and death?
- 8. What is the poet's appeal to the people?
