

# THE BALL POEM

## —JOHN BERRYMAN

### About the Poet

John Barryman was born on 25 October 1914, in McAlester, Oklahoma. He was an American poet and scholar. He was a major figure of the 20th century's American poetry. He was considered as a key figure in the Confessional School of Poetry.

### THEME

In this poem, for the little boy, his ball is the first thing he has ever held dear. However, he has never even considered the possibility that he might one day lose his ball. It is only when that happens, he realises that it was his responsibility to keep the ball safe. The boy quickly realises that everything he will ever own will be his responsibility. He also realises that things will get lost from time to time, and money simply cannot replace them all. As he is learning these lessons, he is growing up. He will never again be as innocent as he was before the loss of his ball. He will never be naive enough to not feel the pressure of his responsibilities. This is a very painful thing for the poet to watch.

In this poem, the ball symbolises our family or friends whom we love, and the loss of the ball symbolises their death. As we grow older, we will become more and more accustomed to seeing our loved ones die. We will learn how to deal with such a loss and to move on from it as well. Death may grieve us or cause us to feel depressed, but sooner or later, we must overcome those feelings and start living our normal lives again.

### Summary

This poem is about a boy who loses a ball in the water. He is very upset. Though the ball does not cost too much, it gives a big shock to him. He keeps staring at the place where his ball has gone. The poet sees all this, but he doesn't interfere with the boy's ruminations. The poet thinks that the loss of the ball will teach the boy a lesson of accepting the loss with tolerance and pleasure. Everyone has to lose something or the other in this world, still they are to survive and fulfil their obligations. This loss makes the boy learn that gains and losses are part and parcel of life. One should accept them as a common matter.

### Explanation of the Poem

1. What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,  
What, what is he to do? I saw it go  
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then  
Merrily over—there it is in the water!



Exp- In these lines, the poet asks his readers a question. He has seen a young boy's ball rolling away from him, bouncing happily on its way, and finally falling into the water. He asks his readers what the boy should do now.

No use to say 'O there are other balls':

2. An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy  
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down  
All his young days into the harbour where  
His ball went. I would not intrude on him;  
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now

Exp- In these lines, the poet thinks for a moment that he ought to console the boy who has lost his ball by telling him that there will be other balls just like that one which he will come across sooner or later. However, he understands that such false consolation will not make the boy feel any better. A feeling of grief has come over the boy. He stands very straight for some time and then starts shivering all over. He watches the ball go into the harbour and down in the water, and he feels that his childhood has also taken the same route away from him. At such a time, the poet feels that it would be wrong to go up to the boy and intrude on his solitude. Giving him a dime to purchase another ball will not hold any value for him.

3. He senses first responsibility  
In a world of possessions. People will take  
Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.  
And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.

Exp- In these lines, the poet tells us that the little boy is undergoing a transformation. He is just now coming to the realisation that the ball was his responsibility, as many things will be after this. In this world, everything you own is our responsibility and you must keep those things safe. However, nothing you own will be yours forever. Other people will take away your ball, or it will get lost in some way or the other. No one will buy another ball for you. Money is only something you can show off, but ultimately it cannot buy you inner peace. Here, the 'ball' is a symbol for all of one's possessions, and the poet is saying that we will certainly lose them one day and that they cannot be easily replaced.

4. He is learning; well behind his desperate eyes,  
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up  
Knowing what every man must one day know  
And most know many days, how to stand up.

Exp- In these lines, the poet says that the boy's eyes have become filled with an awful sadness, but that behind all the grief, he is learning an important lesson. He is learning about the loss of things one considers precious. He is learning a lesson that every man must learn, and one that man must learn again and again. He is learning how to accept the loss and then move on. Suddenly, the boy is brought back to his senses after hearing the sound of a ball nearby. He can no longer see the ball at all.



## POETIC DEVICES

### Rhyme scheme

The poet does not follow any identifiable rhyme scheme in this poem.

### Metaphor

This poetic device is used when a covert comparison is made between two different things or ideas. In this poem, the poet uses the device of metaphor in the 8th line when he compares the boy's young days or his childhood with the lost ball.

### Apostrophe

This poetic device is used when the poet addresses his or her poem to an absent audience. In this poem, the poet uses the device of an apostrophe in the 13th line as he directly speaks to the little boy and tells him that balls are always liable to get lost, but we never see the boy responding to him.

### Transferred epithet

This poetic device is used when an emotion is attributed to a non-living thing after being displaced from a person. In this poem, the poet uses the device of transferred epithet in the 15th line, when he writes the phrase "desperate eyes". It is not that the eyes of the boy are sad, but that the boy himself is sad and that his eyes are expressing that emotion on his face.

## ANSWERS TO NCERT QUESTIONS

### THINKING ABOUT THE POEM

1. Why does the poet say, "I would not intrude on him"? Why doesn't he offer him money to buy another ball?

**Ans.** The boy is really shaken at the loss of his ball. The poet says that he will not intrude upon the boy because the boy must learn to tolerate loss. The poet emphasises this loss. He thinks that money cannot compensate for the sense of loss. So he doesn't give the boy money.

2. "...staring down /All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went..." Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?

**Ans.** Yes, the boy has had the ball for a long time. It is clear from the lines in the poem, 'staring down/ All his young days...' These lines show that the ball is linked to the memories of many days.

3. What does "in the world of possessions" mean?

**Ans.** It means 'the world' of materialistic things. In such a world, one's possessions carry importance.

4. Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.

**Ans.** The boy has lost something earlier also. It is clear in the opening line 'What is the boy now'.

5. What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words.

**Ans.** The poet says that the boy is learning to live with his loss. In this world, loss is a fact. The boy has lost his ball. He is shaken by it. But he must try to understand the emotional implication of the sense of loss.



6. Have you ever lost something you liked very much? Write a paragraph describing how you felt then, and saying whether—and how—you got over your loss.

Ans. Yes, I have lost many things in life. But the loss of my camera will always remain fresh in my memory. My father had given it to me on my fourteenth birthday. I was very happy. I showed it to many friends. One day, we went to see a match. We went to the local bus. I placed it on my seat. When the bus stop came, I left the bus and forgot the camera on the bus. It was lost forever. I remained sad for many days at that loss.

## ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

### Extract Based Questions

Read the following extracts carefully and answer the questions that follow: (4 Marks each)

1.

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,

What, what is he to do? I saw it go

Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then

Merrily over — there it is in the water!

(a) What becomes peculiar of the boy who has lost his ball?

(b) What did the poet see?

(c) Where did the ball land finally?

(d) What has the boy lost?

Ans.

(a) The boy is confused as to what he is to do.

(b) The poet saw the ball bouncing towards the water.

(c) The ball finally landed in the water.

(d) The boy has lost his ball.

2.

No use to say 'O there are other balls':

An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy

As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down

All his young days into the harbour where

His ball went.

(a) How do people generally comfort a boy who has lost his ball?

(b) What does he stare at?

(c) What comes to his mind, when he looks at the ball?

(d) Why is the boy so sad?

Ans.

(a) People generally comfort a boy by saying, "There are other balls".

(b) He stares at the ball which has fallen in the water.

(c) When he looks at the ball, all his young days come to his mind.

(d) He is grief-stricken at the loss of his ball.

3.

I would not intrude on him;

A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now

He senses first responsibility

In a world of possessions.

- (a) Who does the word 'he' refer to?
- (b) Why is money or another ball worthless for the boy?
- (c) How does the boy sense responsibility?
- (d) What kind of a world is it?

- Ans. (a) The word 'he' refers to the boy whose ball has lost.  
 (b) Money or another ball is worthless for the boy because he has lost something dear to him. He is suffering from a sense of loss.  
 (c) He senses responsibility when his possessed ball is lost.  
 (d) It is a materialistic world.

4. People will take  
 Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.  
 And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.

- (a) Why does the poet say 'balls will be lost always'?
- (b) Why does the poet say that no one buys a ball back?
- (c) What does the poet mean by 'money is external'?
- (d) What is external?

- Ans. (a) The poet wants to say that the loss of dear things is a fact of life.  
 (b) The poet says so because the ball is lost and money cannot compensate for the sense of loss.  
 (c) It means that money is always meant to be spent.  
 (d) Money is external.

5. He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,  
 The epistemology of loss, how to stand up  
 Knowing what every man must one day know  
 And most know many days, how to stand up.

- (a) How are the boy's eyes?
- (b) Why are the boy's eyes 'desperate'?
- (c) What is the boy learning?
- (d) What is the boy going to know?

- Ans. (a) The boy's eyes are desperate.  
 (b) The boy's eyes are 'desperate' because he has lost his ball.  
 (c) The boy is learning the meaning of loss.  
 (d) The boy is going to know the universal truth that almost all men lose something and they have to compromise with their loss.

### Short Answer Questions

(30-40 words: 2 Marks each)

1. Express your views on the title of the poem, 'The Ball Poem'.

- Ans. When one reads the title 'The Ball Poem', one assumes that the poem may be a light-hearted one but perhaps about the joys of childhood. We must not feel disheartened, dejected and desperate but try to stand up and bear the loss through self-understanding.



2. **What is the theme of the poem — 'The Ball Poem'?**

Ans. In this world, sometimes we lose things which we love and are attached to. We must not feel disheartened, dejected and desperate but try to stand up and bear the loss through self-understanding as the boy who lost the ball he loved was trying to learn.

3. **A ball is an easily available, inexpensive thing. Then, why is the boy so sad to lose it?**

Ans. No doubt the ball is an easily available and inexpensive item but the ball which the boy lost is valuable for him. His memories of young days are associated with it, for he had been playing with it for a long time. It was not an ordinary but a special ball for him. No other ball could take its place. So, he is sad to lose it.

4. **What shows that the ball was valuable for the boy?**

Ans. The ball was valuable for the boy is obvious (clear) from the way he reacts after losing it. He was shocked, remained fixed, trembled with grief, staring at the place where the ball had fallen. All this shows that he loved the ball and it was valuable for him.

5. **'He senses first responsibility'. What responsibility is referred to here?**

Ans. The responsibility referred to here is how to stand up or bear the loss through self-understanding and trying to console oneself on his own as the boy who lost his ball was trying to do.

6. **Why did the poet not console the boy?**

Ans. The poet did not console the boy for two reasons—One, the boy was too shocked and grief-stricken to listen to any sense. Second, the poet also observed that the boy was trying to stand up or bear the loss on his own through self-understanding which is much more reflective and lasting. The poet's or anybody else's consoling would not be that effective.

7. **Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.**

Ans. I don't think the boy has lost anything earlier. The first loss is shocking and full of grief—the line—'An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy' reflects it. Also in the 'senses first responsibility'—the word first shows that it was his first loss.

8. **What does the poet notice at the beginning of the poem?**

Ans. The poet sees a boy playing near a harbour with a ball. The poet saw his ball bouncing. It bounced and fell into the water of the harbour. The boy lost his ball. He became very sad.

9. **What was the effect of the loss of ball on the boy?**

Ans. The poet sees the boy whose ball has fallen into the harbour. He describes the effect of the loss on the boy. The boy is shaken with grief. He trembles and stares down the harbour. His past days come alive in his mind.

10. **Why does the poet decide not to give money to the boy or he buy another ball for him?**

Ans. The poet says that he will not intrude upon the boy because he must learn to tolerate loss. The poet emphasises this loss. He thinks that money cannot compensate for the sense of loss. So he doesn't give the boy money or buy another ball for him.

11. **Explain the line, "And no one buys a ball back. Money is external".**

Ans. This line means that no one can buy something that is lost forever. No one can buy the boy that very ball which he has lost. Money is an external thing. It is a medium of possessing things. But even money cannot compensate for the sense of loss suffered by a person.



**12. Why does the poet say, "Balls will be lost always"?**

**Ans.** Here, balls are the symbol of man's possessions. We love our things. Some things are dearer to us than the others. But nothing is permanent in life. We may lose our dear things. Then we suffer from a sense of loss. This is experienced by everyone in life. That is why, the poet says, "Balls will be lost always".

**13. What is the main idea of the poem?**

**Ans.** The main idea of the poem is 'the sense of loss in life'. The loss is a fact of life. The sooner man learns to tolerate it, the better it is. When we lose something for the first time, we feel very sad. But later, we learn to live with our loss. In this poem, the boy loses his ball. He is very sad. The poet can buy him another ball. But he does not want to do so. He wants the boy must learn the bitter truth of life that everyone can suffer the loss of something dear.

### Long Answer Questions

(100-150 words: 8 Marks each)

**1. Should the boy be allowed to grieve for his ball? If his loss is irreparable or irretrievable, then how should one handle it? What lessons can be learnt?**

**Ans.** Yes, the boy should be allowed to grieve for his ball, as he had that ball for a long time. He had many old memories associated with it, since his childhood. Moreover, when a person is trying to come over his grief on his own, then one should not intrude or disturb him as it may break his chain of thoughts and may irritate him.

One should have self-consolation, and self-understanding in order to bear the loss. Self-realisation and understanding are more effective and lasting than when it is done by an external agency or a person.

**2. How did the boy really react to the loss of the ball or was he fearful of something or someone? Can our attention be directed toward his family and other people? Are there any lessons to be learnt?**

**Ans.** (i) The boy was not fearful of anyone, in fact, he was really upset about the loss of the ball. The ball was valuable for him. He was shocked, remained fixed, trembled with grief staring at the place where the ball had fallen. His family must not have been affected by the loss as a ball is an easily available and inexpensive item.

(ii) The loss of the ball teaches a lesson to us. Money is external in the sense that it can give you only outer happiness or pleasure not inner. Money cannot buy the emotions and heavenly virtues. It cannot be linked with old memories. Moreover, self-consolation, realization or understanding is more effective and lasting than done by an external agency or a person.

**3. Why does the poet say, 'I would not intrude on him?' Why doesn't he offer him money to buy another ball?**

**Ans.** When a person is trying to come over his grief on his own, he is busy making himself understand certain things. If then, someone intrudes or disturbs, his chain of thoughts is broken. It makes him irritated. Moreover, self-consolation, realisation or understanding is more effective and lasting than when it is done by an external agency or a person. The poet knows it. So he does not intrude on him.

His offer of money to buy another ball is useless for the boy as he wants the same ball he is attached to and has been playing for a long time. No other ball will be able to take its place.