

The Arrow And The Song

- Henry W. Longfellow

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.

Assignments:

1. Read the poems aloud to the class. Decide which one sounds better.
2. Explain each poem in your own words like a small story.(Summary)
3. Discuss with your friends if there is any poetry or songs like this in your mother-tongue. If there are, write them on the board and translate them into English.

The Rainbow (a fragment)

(William Wordsworth)

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began,
So is it now I am a man,
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The child is father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

Little Things (a fragment)

(Ebenezer Cobham Brewer)

*Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean
And the pleasant land.
Thus the little minutes,
Humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages
Of eternity.*

Explanation by Christopher Nield, a poet from London:

We can never predict the power of our actions. The words said, the deed done, disappear into the past, but often, years later, we can be astounded to learn of their impact. A friend explodes with rage over an imagined slight; a stranger thanks us for a favor we'd forgotten.



In this poem, Longfellow compares two forms of action, represented by an arrow and a song. The speaker shoots an arrow into the air and it falls to earth, out of sight. What could it symbolize?

As a weapon, with the capacity to cut and kill, it could represent our destructive emotions and behaviour. We say a bad word, we spread a rumor, we lie. Our hatred may fly out of sight, but who's to say there's no lasting damage?

In the second stanza, the speaker breathes a song “into the air”. A song suggests something carefree and benign. Formless and free, it is the opposite of the arrow, but its destination is similarly unknown.

Does it represent our efforts to celebrate life rather than to damn it? To look for the good in people rather to condemn them for their flaws? But if we do someone a good turn, is our virtue ever rewarded?

There may be other ways of looking at the arrow and the song, however. After all, the arrow has positive, even heroic connotations of strength of will, resolve, and purpose. (Robin Hood comes irresistibly to mind.)

If the arrow represents the realm of physical action, then the song may, by way of contrast, represent the realm of poetry and art. Falling to earth, falling on deaf ears, it seems horribly ineffectual. (Anyone who's ever given a poetry reading knows the feeling well.)

The question posed at the end of the second stanza creates a pause as we ponder it. When the poem resumes, the scene and the tone have subtly changed. The repetition and the three strong stresses in the phrase “long, long afterward,” make us feel the heaviness of the speaker's aging body. We hear the rueful voice of an older, wiser man.

We associate old age with sagacity, a pragmatic perspective that sees things more clearly than thrusting youth; and, at this point, the speaker finally discovers the path of the arrow and the song. It's as if he discovers the path of his own life, and a hidden aspect of life itself.

If we interpret the arrow as a symbol of our negative actions, then its unbroken shaft slicing into the oak may indicate that the hatred of the past remains as sharp as ever.

The damage is done, and cannot be undone. But the song has grown within the heart of a friend. The sharing of simple joy has flourished. Significantly the song, like the arrow, exists unbroken.

It is known from beginning to end. This touches on the role of memory in the transmission of poetry; and, indeed, what is the literary canon other than what people have chosen to remember?

In a sense, this poem is about karma. It is a lesson to be aware of our moral choices and their consequences, because on some level they are always present, waiting to be discovered. It is also about the difference between our practical efforts to make a mark on the world, which often come to naught, and the peculiar power of art to shape reality in slow time.

As the final phrase suggests, art can create friendship among perfect strangers: it provides us with a common language through which we can come to know each other in our most distinctive selves.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was an American poet most famous for “*the song of Hiawatha*.”