

**ENGLISH HL 9 August 2025**

**GRADE 12 POETRY NOTES ON: THE SHIPWRECK – EMILY DICKINSON**

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| **THE SHIPWRECK – EMILY DICKINSON**  |

1. **Glee! The great storm is over!**
2. **Four have recovered the land;**
3. **Forty gone down together**
4. **Into the boiling sand.**

1. **Ring, for the scant salvation!**
2. **Toll, for the bonnie souls, --**
3. **Neighbour and friend and bridegroom,**
4. **Spinning upon the shoals!**

1. **How they will tell the shipwreck**
2. **When winter shakes the door,**
3. **Till the children ask, ‘But the forty?**
4. **Did they come back no more?’**

1. **Then a silence suffuses the story,**
2. **And a softness the teller's eye;**
3. **And the children no further question,**
4. **And only the waves reply.**

**POET – DYLAN THOMAS**

Emily Dickenson was born in the United States of America in 1830. She died in 1886. She wrote close to 2000 poems but only 10 were published in her lifetime. She is deemed one of America’s most important and influential poets.

References to storms and shipwrecks appear in quite a few of Emily Dickinson’s poems as ships were not as sturdy as they are today, and storm warning equipment did not exist.

This is not surprising as news of shipwrecks, a common occurrence in those days, would have reached even those living far from the ocean. Also, classical poetry and literature is steeped in stories of shipwrecks – some which Dickinson herself would have read or heard as a child.

**DICTION**

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| **LINE**  | **WORD**  | **MEANING**  |
|  1  | Glee  | delight, happiness  |
|  5  | scant  | limited, barely sufficient  |
|  5  | salvation  | saving or protecting from harm  |
|  6  | toll  | slow ring of the bell  |
|  6  | bonnie  | good, beautiful  |
|  8  | shoals  | places where the water is shallow  |
|  13  | suffuses  | gradually spread through or over  |

**SUMMARY:**

This poem is about an actual shipwreck in which 40 people lost their lives. The poem contrasts the joy at the survival of four people and the sorrow that 40 people died. It is this sorrow/loss that us the focus of stanzas three and four. The tale is told to children on a cold winter night. The speaker’s sorrow is clear and there is no empty cliché offered as “only the waves reply”.

**FORM/STRUCTURE:**

This poem has 4 stanzas of 4 lines each. It follows a strict rhyme pattern: abcb defe ghih jklk. It is close in form to a ballad but does not have the prerequisite refrain characteristic of this form.

The first two stanzas focus on the positive news of the survival of four people. The last two stanzas focus on the grief of the loss of 40 lives.

**ANALYSIS**

**THE TITLE**

*The* – tells the reader that this poem is about a specific shipwreck.

*Shipwreck* – implies a tragedy, usually involving the loss of lives, grief and mourning. This sets the tone for the poem.

**STANZA 1 LINE 1**

*Glee! The great storm is over!*

*Glee!* – Joyous mood. There is reason to be very happy. This is emphasised by the !

*Great* – alludes to a terrible storm.

*The great storm is over!* – conveys a sense of relief. The ! emphasises that the people have something to celebrate.

The first line is ironic. While the people are relieved that the storm is over, 40 people died as a result of this storm.

**LINE 2**

*Four have recovered the land;*

*Recovered* – survived.

There were 4 survivors. This small number of survivors implies that there were others who did not survive.

*recovered the land* – They made it back to land/shore. They survived the shipwreck.

**LINE 3**

*Forty gone down together*

*gone* down / Euphemism: died *together* – all them drowned.

**LINE 4**

*Into the boiling sand.*

The *“boiling sand”* implies a very rough sea, with huge waves that it seemed to churn up the sand at the bottom of the sea. This emphasises the violent nature of the storm and shocks the reader.

There is a complete change in the tone to that in line 1: celebration turns to grief, mourning.

**STANZA 2 LINE 5**

*Ring, for the scant salvation!*

*Ring* – They ring the town bell to draw the attention of the people. *Scant* – very few

scant salvation! – they are thankful that there were 4 survivors. The ! emphasises that very few survived.

It also implies that they cannot really celebrate those who survived because it will be tainted by the loss of so many others.

**LINE 6**

*Toll, for the bonnie souls, -*

*Toll* – refers to the ringing of the church bell. This is a funeral bell for the forty who drowned. This evokes the sound of a bell ringing slowly and repetitively, usually a sign that someone has died. This contrasts with line 5: *‘Ring!’* evokes the sound of bells ringing in celebration

*bonnie* – beloved

*souls* – emphasises their death

The dash after *souls* provides a description of who died.

**LINE 7**

*Neighbour and friend and bridegroom,*

This makes it personal – the deceased were members of the community who were known to all. *Bridegroom* increases the shock of their death. He had just started a new life. Also implies that his wife was one of the survivors. We cannot imagine her grief.

**LINE 8**

*Spinning upon the shoals!*

*shoals!* – refers to a place where sea is shallow.

*Spinning* – the people are being tossed around helplessly in the shallow waters.

The irony is that they did not die in the middle of the ocean. They were close to the shore. However, the people had no control of their movement because of the extremely violent storm and the mountainous waves that sent them *Spinning.* This emphasises the fate of those who drowned. Leaves one feeling shocked.

**STANZA 3 LINE 9**

*How they will tell the shipwreck*

What explanation will they give.

**LINE 10**

*When winter shakes the door,*

Winter is associated with death. Literally, the personification refers the door shaking because of the cold and windy conditions. Figuratively, the personification refers to the death of the forty people; *door* is symbolic of their life.

**LINE 11**

*Till the children ask, ‘But the forty?*

The initial celebration to offer thanks for the survival of the four will stop when children start asking questions.

**LINE 12**

*Did they come back no more?’*

Emphasises that they could give the children a suitable explanation. The disbelief of the children is evident in this question: Are you sure that they will not return?

**STANZA 4 LINE 13**

*Then a silence suffuses the story,*

When the children questioned what had happened, silence gradually spread (*suffuse*) among the adults as they could not offer any explanation that would help the children come to terms with their loss. There is a mournful tone at the loss of so many innocent people.

**LINE 14**

*And a softness the teller's eye;*

This creates a sombre tone as the storyteller is reminded of the deaths and how they have all lost a love one.

**LINE 15**

*And the children no further question,*

Children sense the difficulty of the adults. *no further question* – implies that the children have understood that the forty have died. Their sorrow and grief cause them to stop asking questions. This emphasises the pathos (sense of pity).

**LINE 16**

*And only the waves reply.*

This emphasises the silence of the adults and the children. There is no empty platitude (cliché saying) that will offer comfort.

**THEMES**

 Contrasts evident throughout:

* Joy vs Grief
* Celebration vs Mourning
* Saved vs Lost
* Living vs Death

**TONE**

* Grief
* Mourning
* death
* Stanza 3 and 4: sombre mood as focus is on the loss

**QUESTION 1: ESSAY**

*Give a brief account of the poem, “Shipwreck” indicating the reactions of the community to the tragic loss of the sailors as well as towards those who had survived.*

Your response should take the form of a well-constructed essay of 250–300 words (about ONE page).

**Suggested answers to activity A**

* Use the following points, among others, as a guideline to answering this question.
* The poem is about the arrival of four survivors from a shipwreck. They are received by the community with extreme joy and delight (Glee! the great storm is over!). The ‘great storm’ (line 1) can be attributed to the cause of the shipwreck in which forty sailors had died.
* The poem consists of four stanzas. The first two stanzas deal with the euphoria surrounding the arrival of the four survivors who had ‘recovered the land’ (line 2), i.e. survived the shipwreck. However, the poet also highlights the tragic loss of the lives of forty sailors. The euphemism ‘gone down’ (line 3) downplays the stark reality of the huge loss of human lives. The sailors were mercilessly destroyed by strong winds, rain, thunder and lightning which they succumbed to. They were also victims of the ‘boiling sand’ (line 4) which is a reference to earthquakes that cause tsunamis and makes it virtually impossible to survive at sea.
* The ringing of bells in line 5 symbolises the celebration of the survival of the four sailors, however, there is a contrast in line 6. The word ‘toll’ refers to a mournful sound which is reminiscent of the forty sailors whose lives perished at sea.
* There are still many unanswered questions concerning the demise of the forty sailors (‘But the forty?’). There is a distinct change in tone in stanza 3. The tone is now sorrowful and mournful. Furthermore, the alliteration in the line ‘Then a silence suffuses the story’ (line 13) is quite effective in context. The slow pace created by the repetition of the ‘s’ sound induces a melancholic mood. The absence of a response to the question posed in the previous stanza ‘But the forty? Did they come back no more is indicative of the innocence of children. The adults find it difficult to explain to the children that the men have drowned at sea. The sound of the waves in the background seems to fill the void of the uncomfortable silence of the adults.

### The Shipwreck Emily Dickenson

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1. What is the effect of the exclamation marks in lines 1 and 5? How does this contrast to the exclamation mark used in line 8? (3)

*(The exclamation marks in lines 1 and 5 are celebratory – there are survivors! The exclamation mark in line 8 brings a sense of sorrow and shock. So many died in the shipwreck.)*

1. What are the two reasons for “glee” in the opening lines? (2)

*(The storm is over and there are some, if only 4, survivors.)*

1. Explain what “recovered the land” means. (2)

*(They made it back to land/shore. They survived the shipwreck.)*

1. Critically discuss the effectiveness of the imagery in “Forty gone down together/Into the boiling sand”. (3) *(Forty people died, together, in the shipwreck. The “boiling sand” implies a tumultuous sea – great waves – that sent the drowned people straight to the bottom of the ocean. This increases the shock.)*

1. Why would “scant salvation” be celebrated? (2)

*(Although 40 people perished in the storm, there were at least 4 survivors. Scant refers to few. It could also imply that the celebration of those who survived will be tainted by the loss of so many others.)*

1. Explain the two ways in which the bells ring in this poem. Quote in support of your answer. (4)

*(The first ‘ring’ in line 5 is celebratory for the four who survived. The second ‘ring’ (“toll”) is like a funeral bell for the forty who drowned.*

1. Identify and comment on the effectiveness of the figure of speech in “When winter shakes the door”. (3) *(Personification – it is so cold and windy that it seems that Winter is shaking at the door. Emphasises the coldness and wind.)*
2. How does the final stanza evoke pathos? (3)

*(Pathos – pity – the story is told to other people and they all feel sorrow for the loss of the forty people. Even the children are speechless at the story. Great pity and pathos. No empty cliches are offered. There is just silence.)*

1. Discuss the effectiveness of the alliteration/sibilance in line 13. (2)

*(The alliteration/sibilance slows down the pace of the line. It evokes sadness/pity/pathos. There is a mournful tone at the loss of so many innocent people.)*