

TELEVISION

Television by Roald Dahl: About the poem

Roald Dahl is one of the most prolific modern writers in English and is well known as a children's author. The poem 'Television' is a famous poem of Dahl that advises and inspires to read books instead of watching the television. This is one of the most relevant poems of our time. The poem takes a comic look at a serious problem among young children today. It warns us about the dangers of watching television excessively. TV robs our minds of the power of imagination and creativity.

He advises us to read books as it will enable us to discover deeper levels of joy, find fulfillment in life and open a whole new and exciting world for us.

The poem is a long one but very simple in language and form. It follows rhymed Iambic tetrameter lines throughout the poem with no stanza division. The poet has capitalized the important portions – especially where he talks about the undesired consequences of watching television.

Paraphrase & Explanation of the poem

The most important thing we've learned,
So far as children are concerned,
Is never, NEVER, NEVER let
Them near your television set —
Or better still, just don't install
The idiotic thing at all.

Dahl advises from his experience that people should never ever allow their children to go near the television set. It is even better not to install 'the idiotic thing' called television. But why is a television an idiotic thing according to the poet? Throughout the entire poem, Dahl attempts to answer it.

In almost every house we've been,
We've watched them gaping at the screen.
They loll and slop and lounge about,
And stare until their eyes pop out.
(Last week in someone's place we saw
A dozen eyeballs on the floor.)

The poet shares his experience here. In almost every house he has visited, he has watched children gaping at the screen. They were staring with their eyes wide open and with absolute concentration of mind. For sitting a long time before the television set, they become tired.

Sometimes they sit or lie in a lazy and casual manner (loll and slop and lounge about) and get sloppy. But still, they stare at the television until their eyes are too tired to watch any more (their eyes pop out).

All these are not Dahl's imagination. He indeed saw a dozen eyeballs, i.e., half a dozen children sitting on the floor at someone's house very recently, say last week.

They sit and stare and stare and sit
Until they're hypnotised by it,
Until they're absolutely drunk
With all that shocking ghastly junk.

When the children are before a television set, they 'sit and stare and stare and sit' for long hours. They don't seem to be moving from there, as they probably forget everything around them in the real world. Rather, the one they watch on the television becomes real for the time being.

They are almost hypnotized by this idiotic box. They are 'absolutely drunk', their minds are filled with those 'shocking ghastly junk' which are mostly unreal and inappropriate for the age. Those TV shows kill their valuable time and make them lazy with no room for their physical play and exercise. They have no scope of spending time with books and nature, and interacting with others. Their minds, filled with the images and stories of a

virtual world, are compared to a drunk man's imaginary world in an apt metaphor here.

Oh yes, we know it keeps them still,
They don't climb out the window sill,
They never fight or kick or punch,
They leave you free to cook the lunch
And wash the dishes in the sink –

The poet now says that he knows that the television keeps the naughty children calm. When they are in front of a TV set, they no more do mischievous things like climbing out the window sill, fighting, kicking and punching. They let the mother free to cook the lunch and wash the dishes in the sink without any disturbance. But that can't be an excuse to let them sit before a TV, because the poet thinks that the idiotic device does more harm than good.

But did you ever stop to think,
To wonder just exactly what
This does to your beloved tot?
IT ROTTS THE SENSE IN THE HEAD!
IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!

The poet-speaker now asks the parents whether they ever spent a moment to think exactly what harm this television does to their loving child. He himself answers it in a brilliant way.

Watching the television regularly damages the sense in the head. Children are drawn away from the reality, the real world around him. He just believes what he watches, without considering the context. His own environment hardly matches with the ones he sees on screen, but still he thinks all that are real and applicable to him.

It also kills the power of imagination in the mind. Children start to live in a pre-set imaginary world that they see on the screen. They slowly lose their own creative thinking, their own imagination. Though what TV shows display are mostly fictional, that is a close imitation of the real world, not a completely different world as in a fairy tale.

**IT CLOGS AND CLUTTERS UP THE MIND!
IT MAKES A CHILD SO DULL AND BLIND**

Roald Dahl continues to argue on how television affects a child's mind. Children watch different shows on different channels. Sometimes there are contradictory ideas. Sometimes, it does not match with reality and they are surprised. Thus these things clogs and clutters up the mind – messes up the organised ideas and thoughts.

Moreover, the child forgets to think on his own. His entire mind is full of the images he has seen on the TV. So how would he get the time and scope to think over other

things? His important time is wasted in the thoughts that are fictional and not related to his own life. Thus his study and thoughts on how to improve his skills and personality are neglected. This is as if the child gradually becomes ‘dull and blind’.

**HE CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND
A FANTASY, A FAIRYLAND!**

The poet feels that due to the imposed limitation on thoughts, the children can no longer understand a fantasy or a fairy tale. They cannot extend their imaginative power to that level. They are now used to see an image of the likely real world – a virtual reality.

**HIS BRAIN BECOMES AS SOFT AS CHEESE!
HIS POWERS OF THINKING RUST AND FREEZE!
HE CANNOT THINK — HE ONLY SEES!**

Dahl now opines that by watching television, the brain becomes soft like cheese. Children now believe everything they watch or hear on TV. They cannot find their own logic to analyse and interpret a thing. The power of thinking, the thought process freezes and gets rusty. They cannot think on their own. All they do is watching and believing what others say on TV.

‘All right!’ you’ll cry. ‘All right!’ you’ll say,
‘But if we take the set away,
What shall we do to entertain
Our darling children? Please explain!’

Now the poet says that he knows what the readers or especially the parents would ask him. The question is how parents shall entertain their affectionate children if they take the TV set away from them. The poet has the answer in the following lines.

We’ll answer this by asking you,
‘What used the darling ones to do?
‘How used they keep themselves contented
Before this monster was invented?’
Have you forgotten? Don’t you know?

The poet answers the above question only by throwing a question. What people used to do to keep themselves entertained when television was not invented? TV set is a dreaded device, a monster to him. He wants people remind what they used to do in the absence of such a device.

We’ll say it very loud and slow:
THEY ... USED ... TO ... READ! They’d **READ** and
READ,

AND READ and READ, and then proceed
To READ some more. Great Scott! Gadzooks!
One half their lives was reading books!

The poet himself reminds us that children in earlier times used to read lots of books. Surprisingly people then spent half of their lifetime by reading books. ('Great Scott! Gadzooks!' is an expression of surprise or amazement.)

The nursery shelves held books galore!
Books cluttered up the nursery floor!
And in the bedroom, by the bed,
More books were waiting to be read!

In those earlier days the nursery selves were full of bools.
In nursery schools, books remained scattered on the floor.
Even in their home, the bedroom and the bed – books cluttered up everywhere.

Such wondrous, fine, fantastic tales
Of dragons, gypsies, queens, and whales
And treasure isles, and distant shores
Where smugglers rowed with muffled oars,
And pirates wearing purple pants,
And sailing ships and elephants,
And cannibals crouching 'round the pot,
Stirring away at something hot.

(It smells so good, what can it be?
Good gracious, it's Penelope.)

Here the poet talks about the popular books of adventures that children used to read in his time. In those days boys and girls read fantastic stories of dragons, gypsies, queens, whales, treasure islands, smugglers, pirates, ships, elephants, cannibals and so on.

The younger ones had Beatrix Potter
With Mr. Toad, the dirty rotter,
And Squirrel Nutkin, Pigling Bland,
And Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle and-
Just How The Camel Got His Hump,
And How the Monkey Lost His Rump,
And Mr. Toad, and bless my soul,
There's Mr. Rat and Mr. Mole-
Oh, books, what books they used to know,
Those children living long ago!

The younger children used to read stories written by Helen Beatrix Potter, an author of children's books featuring animals with colourful illustrations. Dahl here pays a tribute to the children author for her fantastic stories on animals. He also mentions some of the stories like 'How the camel got his hump' and some characters like Mr. Toad, Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle etc. from those stories.

This shows the poet's love for those books and how he enjoyed them in his childhood days.

So please, oh please, we beg, we pray,
Go throw your TV set away,
And in its place you can install
A lovely bookshelf on the wall.

Roald Dahl, the poet now requests the parents for their own good to throw away their television set and install a book shelf in its place.

Then fill the shelves with lots of books,
Ignoring all the dirty looks,
The screams and yells, the bites and kicks,
And children hitting you with sticks-

After installing the book shelf in place of a TV set, the parents will face some dirty looks, screams, yells, bites and kicks from their children. They may even hit them with sticks. But the poet insists on filling that shelf with lots of books on various topics ignoring all those screaming and such.

Fear not, because we promise you
That, in about a week or two
Of having nothing else to do,

They'll now begin to feel the need
Of having something to read.

Dahl here assures us that after a week of two, those children would find nothing to do without a TV set around. So they will finally feel the need to read books. They will come closer to books on their own.

And once they start — oh boy, oh boy!
You watch the slowly growing joy
That fills their hearts. They'll grow so keen
They'll wonder what they'd ever seen
In that ridiculous machine,
That nauseating, foul, unclean,
Repulsive television screen!

And once they start reading, the only way is ahead of them. They will find it interesting to read more and more books. That will give them the imagination and thoughts, the knowledge and wisdom, the satisfaction of mind and heart. And at one stage they will grow so keen on reading books that they will wonder what they had found in that silly machine called television. They will find the television screen disgusting and unclean then, as they will discover the real joy of reading books.

And later, each and every kid
Will love you more for what you did.

And finally each and every kid will love the parents for giving them the opportunity to find real joy in reading books. Even when they would grow up, they would thank their parents for taking that television set away and installing the book shelf there.

The poet advocates for reading and only reading. Dahl thinks TV can never be a substitute for books. Books are the only things that can deliver real wisdom.