



Collegedunia NCERT Solutions

Keeping Quiet NCERT Solution: line-grounded explanations for Pablo Neruda's poem from *Flamingo* (2026-27)

Chapter 8: Flamingo Poetry: Keeping Quiet

About this Chapter

Keeping Quiet is Pablo Neruda's free-verse meditation from *Extravagaria* (1958), translated from Spanish and anthologised in *Flamingo*. The poem invites a single, twelve-count moment of shared stillness as a way of breaking the human habit of restless, often violent activity. These solutions ground every answer in specific lines of the poem: the opening framing, the exotic fishermen-and-salt-gatherer images, the green-wars stanza, and the closing image of an Earth that looks dead yet is alive.

Topics covered: Stillness as introspection • Paradox of active silence • Critique of war and exploitation • Ecological imagination • Free-verse form

Poet and source.

Pablo Neruda (1904–1973), Chile; from *Extravagaria*.

Form.

Free verse, no fixed metre or rhyme; differing stanza lengths.

Central paradox.

Silence is not death; it is the pause that lets life begin again.

Also see for this chapter: [Revision Notes](#)

Think it out

Q8.1 What will counting upto twelve and keeping still help us achieve?

SOLUTION

The opening two lines of the poem, "Now we will count to twelve / and we will all keep still," set up a tiny, shared ritual. Counting to twelve is a familiar measure (twelve hours on a clock, twelve months in a year), so Neruda chooses a number every reader already

knows. **Keeping still** here means a temporary, deliberate pause from speech and from physical activity, not a permanent stopping of life.

How to read the framing

The number twelve is intentional but not magical. Any short, familiar count would serve; what matters is that the pause is brief, collective and shared by everyone on “the face of the Earth” for “one second”.

- Neruda asks for one second in which we “not speak in any language” and do “not move our arms so much”. The count of twelve simply gives a definite boundary to that pause, so it feels do-able rather than abstract.
- Inside that pause, the noise of human activity falls away: “without rush, without engines” the world becomes “an exotic moment”. The first thing the stillness achieves is therefore a break from the constant hurry that normally fills our days.
- Once the rush is gone, we are forced to notice ourselves and each other: “we would all be together / in a sudden strangeness”. The pause creates a chance for fellow feeling among people who otherwise have no time to look up.
- The pause also exposes the harm built into ordinary work and conflict, so that we can choose differently when we return to it: fishermen “would not harm whales”, the salt-gatherer “would look at his hurt hands”, and those who prepare “wars with gas, wars with fire” would put on clean clothes and walk with their brothers “in the shade, doing nothing”. The stillness lets each of these people see the cost of what they do.
- The final result is introspection: the “huge silence” that “might interrupt this sadness / of never understanding ourselves”. Counting to twelve, then, is a small device for a large purpose: a brief, collective quiet inside which self-awareness, empathy and a softening of violence become possible.

Final Answer: Counting to twelve and keeping still gives us a short, shared pause from rush, language and habitual action; in that pause we feel kinship with others, notice the harm in our ordinary work and wars, and gain the silence needed for honest self-understanding.

Exam Tip

A clean two-part answer impresses examiners on this question: first say *what* the pause physically interrupts (speech, engines, arms, work, war), then say *what it makes room for* (togetherness, introspection, an end to harm). Quote at least one phrase, e.g. “exotic moment” or “huge silence”.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : Dr Ananya Iyer, PhD English Literature, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Strategic angle. Read the count of twelve as Neruda's gentle trick on the modern reader: he picks the most ordinary number on a clock face and then asks us to do the most extraordinary thing with it, namely *nothing*. The achievement of the pause is therefore both psychological (a pause from the self that hurries) and political (a pause from the systems that hurry us).

- Notice that Neruda never asks for permanent silence. The verb is “count”, a measured, finite action; the qualifier is “for once” and “one second”. The poem is structured as a bounded experiment, not a vow.
- The pause is collective by design: “we will all keep still” and “we would all be together”. A solitary silence would be only personal therapy; a shared silence becomes a small civic act.
- Inside the silence, the imagery moves outward in concentric circles: from individual workers (the fisherman, the salt-gatherer), to those waging “green wars”, to the planet itself in the closing image of an Earth that “seems dead / and later proves to be alive”. The pause therefore scales up to ecological awareness.
- The achievement, finally, is a change in *attitude*, not in occupation. People return to their work afterwards, but with cleaner clothes, looked-at hands and a sense of brotherhood: the silence is a moral reset, not a holiday.

Why this matters. For a Class 12 reader, this is also a quiet lesson on how poetry works. A poem cannot stop wars, but it can stage a one-second pause inside the reader's mind, and that pause is where its work is done.

Final Answer: The count to twelve frames a brief, shared, finite pause in which Neruda imagines a moral reset: introspection at the personal scale, fellow feeling at the social scale, and ecological humility at the planetary scale.

Q 8.2 Do you think the poet advocates total inactivity and death?

SOLUTION

The poem itself answers this question explicitly. After the long stretch of silence-images, Neruda turns inward to clarify his own meaning in the lines “What I want should not be confused / with total inactivity. / Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with death.” The phrase **to have no truck with** is footnoted in the textbook as “to refuse to associate or deal with, to refuse to tolerate something”. So the poet's position is the opposite of the one the question raises: he is for life and against death.

🔑 Key lines

“What I want should not be confused / with total inactivity. / Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with death.”

- Neruda anticipates exactly the misreading that the question names. The fact that he stops the poem to disown “total inactivity” shows he is aware some readers will mistake his silence for surrender.
- He separates two ideas that often get blurred: *being still* and *being dead*. Stillness in the poem is a chosen pause inside life; death is the cancellation of life. Neruda asks for the first and refuses the second.
- The qualifying lines that follow make the same point in positive form: “If we were not so single-minded / about keeping our lives moving, / and for once could do nothing” we might have “a huge silence” that interrupts the sadness of “threatening ourselves with death”. The danger Neruda actually fears is not stillness but the rush of activity that has produced wars “with gas” and “with fire”, that is, the rush that ends in death.
- The closing image of the Earth seals the argument: “when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive”. Under the apparent stillness of winter, seeds are already preparing to grow. The poem’s silence is of this kind, a season of rest that conserves life, not extinguishes it.
- Neruda therefore advocates a brief, conscious quiet that restores the self and softens violence. He does not advocate passivity, withdrawal from the world, or any embrace of death.

Final Answer: No. The poet explicitly says, “What I want should not be confused with total inactivity . . . I want no truck with death.” He pleads for a brief, life-giving silence, not for inertia, and ends with the Earth’s hidden vitality as proof that stillness can hold life within it.

✗ Common Mistake

A common slip is to read the salt-gatherer’s pause or the soldiers’ walk “in the shade, doing nothing” as an argument for never working again. Neruda’s word is “for once”, not “forever”. Quoting the “no truck with death” line in the answer puts this objection to rest quickly.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Mr Arjun Mehra, MA English, Delhi University

Alternative reading. It is worth reading this question through the lens of **ecopoetry** and **silence-as-resistance**. Neruda was an active political poet, a Nobel laureate (1971) and a diplomat; he had seen, in his lifetime, the human cost of fascism, of the Spanish

Civil War and of the wars his own continent endured. For such a poet to recommend “inactivity” would be a contradiction in terms.

- The silence Neruda asks for is not the silence of the dead but the silence of a person who has decided to stop and look. It is closer to a peace march that pauses traffic than to a funeral.
- Read against his politics, the stillness is in fact a form of resistance: a refusal to keep feeding the engines of war and exploitation, even for a moment. In that sense the poem is an extremely *active* document, not a passive one.
- The ecological frame in the last stanza, “Perhaps the Earth can teach us / as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive,” shows Neruda taking his model of silence from nature, where stillness is always pregnant with the next season. Inactivity in this sense is the opposite of death.
- Therefore the poem’s stance is double: anti-war, anti-rush, but emphatically pro-life. “I want no truck with death” is the single line that settles the question.

Why this matters. Misreading the poem as a vote for inactivity flattens its politics. The poem is closer to a satyagraha, a deliberate, dignified pause that refuses cooperation with harm, than to a counsel of withdrawal from life.

Final Answer: Neruda does not advocate inactivity or death. His silence is a conscious, ecological, ethically active pause, the kind that refuses war and exploitation while remaining firmly on the side of life.

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Q 8.3 What is the ‘sadness’ that the poet refers to in the poem?

SOLUTION

The word “sadness” appears in the central stanza of the poem: “perhaps a huge silence / might interrupt this sadness / of never understanding ourselves / and of threatening ourselves with death.” **Sadness** here is not a private mood but a shared human condition with two named causes, which Neruda spells out in the very next two lines.

Key lines

“perhaps a huge silence / might interrupt this sadness / of never understanding ourselves / and of threatening ourselves with death.”

- The first cause is given directly: “never understanding ourselves”. We are always so busy moving, speaking, working, fighting, that we never pause long enough to know

our own motives. This is the sadness of *unexamined life*.

- The second cause is also named directly: “threatening ourselves with death”. Human beings are the only species that wages large-scale, organised violence against itself. Neruda lists this violence earlier in the poem: “wars with gas, wars with fire, / victory with no survivors”. The sadness is therefore also the sadness of *self-inflicted harm*.
- Neruda widens the same sadness to the natural world. The fisherman who “would not harm whales” and the salt-gatherer who “would look at his hurt hands” are reminders that our restlessness wounds both other creatures and ourselves. The sadness includes the cost of our work, not only of our wars.
- The remedy Neruda offers is structural to the sadness: a “huge silence” that “might interrupt” it. Notice the word “interrupt”, not “end”. Even one shared pause is enough to break the loop in which we hurry past ourselves and harm each other.
- So the sadness in the poem is the chronic, modern sorrow of a species that does not know itself and keeps choosing its own destruction. It is at once psychological, social and ecological.

Final Answer: The “sadness” is the persistent human sorrow that comes from never pausing long enough to understand ourselves and from constantly threatening our own lives through hurry, exploitation and war. Neruda hopes a huge, shared silence can briefly interrupt this sadness.

♥ Why This Matters

Naming the sadness precisely matters because Neruda’s answer to it is precise too. He does not propose festivals, slogans or new laws; he proposes a one-second silence. The smallness of the remedy is the point: change begins in the brief inward pause, not in louder activity.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Ms Kavita Rao, MPhil Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University

Strategic angle. Read this question alongside Neruda’s political life. The poem is from *Extravagaria* (1958), written between two world wars in living memory and during the early Cold War. The “sadness” is therefore not a vague melancholy; it is the specific weariness of a twentieth-century reader who has seen “wars with gas” (mustard gas in WWI; chemical weapons later), “wars with fire” (firebombing) and “victory with no survivors” (nuclear endings).

- At the psychological layer, the sadness is the modern condition of self-estrangement: we live without knowing the person we live as. Neruda treats this as a sorrow, not a neutral fact.
- At the social layer, the sadness is the cycle of organised violence Neruda lists by name.

Each phrase, “wars with gas . . . wars with fire . . . victory with no survivors”, names a historical reality of his century.

- At the ecological layer, the sadness includes the harm done to whales by fishermen and to the salt-gatherer’s own hands by relentless labour. Neruda does not separate human sorrow from the planet’s, which is a hallmark of **ecopoetry**.
- The interruption Neruda imagines, “a huge silence”, is therefore three things at once: a psychological retreat inward, a social moratorium on violence and an ecological breathing space.

Why this matters. The sadness is not solved in the poem. Neruda is honest enough to write only that silence “might interrupt” it. The political poet’s gift here is to make the size of the sorrow visible and to name the smallest possible intervention that takes it seriously.

Final Answer: The sadness in the poem is the layered sorrow of a self that never knows itself, a society that keeps choosing war and an ecology that absorbs our hurry. Neruda’s response is a brief, honest, shared silence offered as the first repair.

Q 8.4 What symbol from Nature does the poet invoke to say that there can be life under apparent stillness?

SOLUTION

In the closing stanzas Neruda turns to the natural world for proof that stillness is not the same as death. The symbol he invokes is the **Earth** itself: “Perhaps the Earth can teach us / as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive.” The image is drawn from the seasonal cycle, especially the way winter looks lifeless and yet conceals seeds, roots and buried life that will return in spring.

Note on the image

Neruda does not name a single creature or plant. He names the Earth as a whole, then describes its behaviour. This wide framing is deliberate: the lesson is planet-sized, not species-sized.

- The symbol is the Earth, and specifically the way the Earth behaves in seasons of dormancy. “Everything seems dead” is the visible surface; “later proves to be alive” is the hidden truth.
- The symbol works as evidence for the poem’s central argument. If even the Earth, the largest body in the poem’s imagination, can carry life inside apparent stillness, then a small human pause of twelve counts cannot mean death. Stillness in Nature is generative; therefore stillness in us can be generative too.
- The image also corrects a possible misreading of the earlier stanzas. A reader might

worry that the silenced fishermen, salt-gatherers and soldiers have given up on life. The Earth-symbol answers this worry: just as a seed under snow is gathering strength, the silent human being is gathering self-knowledge.

- The final couplet uses this confidence to close the poem: “Now I’ll count up to twelve / and you keep quiet and I will go.” The poet trusts that the silence he leaves behind is fertile, not empty. The Earth-symbol licenses that trust.
- So the natural symbol of life within stillness in *Keeping Quiet* is the Earth in its dormant phase: outwardly still, inwardly alive, and patient about its own renewal.

Final Answer: Neruda invokes the Earth itself, especially its dormant seasons, as the symbol of life inside apparent stillness: “when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive”. The image proves that a chosen silence, like winter, can hold the seeds of renewal.

Exam Tip

For a high-mark answer, name the symbol (the Earth), quote the exact phrase (“everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive”), and then connect it back to the poem’s argument: if Nature renews itself in stillness, so can human beings.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Prof Rohit Banerjee, MA English, University of Hyderabad

Ecological reading. Neruda’s choice of the Earth as teacher places *Keeping Quiet* firmly in the tradition of **ecopoetry**: writing that takes the planet itself as a moral authority. The poem is therefore not only about human silence but about learning from a model of life that humans have largely forgotten.

- The Earth in Neruda’s lines is personified as a patient teacher: “Perhaps the Earth can teach us”. The hesitant “perhaps” is important. Neruda does not lecture; he offers Nature as an example that the reader may accept.
- The natural process he points to is dormancy: a state in which life is concealed, not absent. Seeds under frost, bulbs underground, sap retreated into roots: each of these looks dead and is not. The image teaches a kind of *patience with apparent emptiness*.
- This contrasts with the human pattern the poem critiques: “so single-minded / about keeping our lives moving” that we refuse any pause. The Earth-symbol therefore works diagnostically: it shows us how restless we have become by showing us what unforced stillness actually looks like.
- There is also an implicit political point. A poet who has seen wars “with gas” and “with fire” invoking the Earth as authority is also asking his reader to choose the planet over the war-machine. The natural symbol is therefore at once meditative and political.

Why this matters. Reading the Earth-symbol as merely a nice seasonal image undersells it. In Neruda’s hands it is an argument: the planet has already solved the problem the poem worries about, how to be still without dying, and the human task is to learn from that solution.

Final Answer: The poet invokes the Earth, especially its seasons of apparent death that yield new life, as Nature’s proof that stillness can hold life. Read as ecopoetry, the image makes the planet itself the teacher of the silence the poem recommends.

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Key Takeaways

- “Keeping Quiet” asks for a brief, shared, twelve-count silence: a pause from speech, work and war, not a permanent stopping of life.
- The pause is meant to break the hurry that produces the “sadness / of never understanding ourselves / and of threatening ourselves with death”.
- Neruda explicitly rejects total inactivity: “Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with death.”
- Imagery moves from individual workers (fishermen, salt-gatherer) to wars “with gas, with fire” to the planet itself, widening the silence from personal to ecological.
- The Earth’s seasonal dormancy, “when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive”, is Neruda’s natural symbol for life held inside stillness.
- Form: free verse, no fixed metre or rhyme, with stanzas of varying length that mirror the shifts in thought.

End of Think it out