



Collegedunia NCERT Notes

Class 12 English Notes Chapter 8 Flamingo Poetry: Keeping Quiet

Chapter 8 – Flamingo Poetry: Keeping Quiet

by Pablo Neruda

CBSE Class 12th English Core, Flamingo Reader, Poetry Section

Aligned to CBSE syllabus 2026-27

Also see for this chapter: [NCERT Solutions](#)

This revision guide unpacks Pablo Neruda's quietly radical free-verse poem Keeping Quiet for Class 12th Flamingo readers. Inside: the full poem text, a stanza-by-stanza explication, the central themes, the dominant literary devices, the key quotations parsed for board examiners, a compact biography of Pablo Neruda, the CBSE exam-pattern question types you should expect, and a quick-revision summary you can read the night before the paper.

Contents

1 Introduction to the Poem and Its Poet

Keeping Quiet is a short, contemplative poem by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, anthologised as the second poem of the Poetry section of the Class 12 NCERT *Flamingo* textbook. The poem proposes a small but radical experiment: that every human being on Earth count slowly up to twelve and, for that brief stretch, fall silent and stop moving. What might feel like a trivial pause is, in Neruda's hands, a philosophical and political gesture. The silence is meant to be a shared moment of introspection in which fishermen do not hurt whales, salt-gatherers nurse their bruised hands, and the soldiers of green wars, gas wars and fire wars step out of their uniforms to walk beside their brothers. The poem closes with a tender promise: *I will count up to twelve / and you keep quiet and I will go.*

1.1 Why Class 12 Students Read This Poem

The CBSE Class 12 English (Core) syllabus uses the Poetry section of *Flamingo* to introduce students to a spread of international voices. Pablo Neruda is positioned second because his poem is accessible at the surface, short enough to teach in two periods, and yet opens into deep themes that the board paper rewards students for analysing: anti-war thought, ecological imagination, the value of stillness in a frenetic world, and the careful distinction between silence and total inactivity. For board exam purposes, the poem appears in the Reading-comprehension extract section, in the Short Answer Type questions, and as a strong candidate for thematic Long Answer Type questions on peace, introspection or human solidarity.

Why This Poem Matters in Class 12

- It is a **free-verse poem** translated from Spanish, with no rhyme scheme, no fixed meter, and short, breath-like stanzas.
- It introduces students to a **Nobel-laureate world poet** whose voice is at once intimate and globally political.
- It carries a sharp **paradox** at its centre: stillness is not the same as death, and silence is not the same as inactivity.
- It opens into **three big board-favourite themes**: introspection, anti-war thought, and ecological responsibility.

1.2 Quick Facts You Should Know

Before reading the poem, lock in these facts. The board paper often opens an extract-based question with one of them.

<p>Poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973)</p>	<p>Poem Keeping Quiet</p>	<p>Form Free verse, short stanzas</p>
<p>Source Collection <i>Extravagaria</i> (1958)</p>	<p>Central image Counting to twelve, all keep still</p>	<p>Tone Gentle, reflective, gently insistent</p>

Board-Paper Hook

If an extract-based question opens with *Now we will count to twelve / and we will all keep still*, identify (a) the poet, (b) the title, (c) the source textbook (*Flamingo*), and (d) the immediate proposal of the speaker (a single shared silent moment). Most 1-mark openings test exactly these four facts.

1.3 The Poem at a Glance

The poem is structured as a single speech act addressed to all of humanity. The speaker first proposes the experiment of counting to twelve, then sketches what such a silence would interrupt, then clarifies what silence is *not*, and finally ties the request to a larger lesson from the Earth itself. By the closing lines, the speaker steps aside, leaving the reader to keep counting.

2 The Poem Text and Layout

This section reproduces the poem in the line-break sequence used in the NCERT *Flamingo* reader so that you can lift quotations directly into board-paper answers without losing the original cadence. The poem is reproduced for educational purposes; the work is by Pablo Neruda, originally published in his 1958 collection *Extravagaria*, and the English version that appears in NCERT is the standard translation from the Spanish.

2.1 Full Text

Poem: Keeping Quiet, by Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the Earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;

I want no truck with death.
If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the Earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.
Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

2.2 How the Text Is Laid Out on the Page

Notice five textual choices that the board paper loves to ask about.

- **Free verse, multiple short stanzas.** The poem has no fixed meter and no rhyme scheme. Stanza breaks mark shifts in the argument, not metrical units.
- **The anaphora “let’s”** in the second stanza (*let’s not speak...let’s stop...*) draws the reader into a collective “we” rather than addressing them from outside.
- **The repeated word “twelve”**, which opens and closes the poem and so frames the silence with the same image.
- **Concrete plural images**, fishermen, the salt-gatherer, soldiers, brothers, instead of abstract nouns like “humanity” or “war.”
- **A late clarification stanza** (“What I want should not be confused / with total inactivity”) that, unusually, addresses a possible misreading inside the poem itself.

Do Not Mistitle the Poem

The correct title is *Keeping Quiet* (two words). Some students write “Keep Quiet”, “Keeping Quite” or “Silence”. The board paper marks the two-word participial form as the canonical title.

Translation Awareness

The English text you read in *Flamingo* is a translation of Neruda’s Spanish original. When you write about the poem’s word choices, treat the English wording as the authoritative version for the board paper, while remembering that “the original is in Spanish” is a fair fact to mention in a 1-mark biographical question.

3 Stanza-by-Stanza Summary and Explication

The poem moves through eight distinguishable units of thought, each separated by a stanza break in the NCERT printed version. This section walks each unit, explaining what is literally being said, what the speaker is doing rhetorically, and which line-level details carry the meaning.

3.1 Unit 1: The Proposal (lines 1-2)

Lines: *Now we will count to twelve / and we will all keep still.*

The poem opens with a flat declarative proposal. The word “now” makes the call immediate; the future tense *will count* and *will keep still* treats the silent moment as something already agreed. Twelve is a deliberate number, the count of an hour on the clock, of the months in the year, of the apostles, of the zodiac signs, of the hours of daylight in temperate latitudes. It is a number that already carries the sense of a complete cycle. “We” includes the poet, the reader and the entire human race in a single grammatical embrace.

Unit 1 Explication: The Proposal

What is happening: The speaker invites everyone, all of humanity, to count up to twelve and become physically still.

Why twelve: Twelve is a culturally loaded number, suggesting a complete cycle (twelve hours, twelve months). The count is small enough to feel doable, large enough to register as a real pause.

Why “we”: The first-person plural pulls the reader into the silence as a participant, not an observer.

3.2 Unit 2: The Conditions of the Silence (lines 3-6)

Lines: *For once on the face of the Earth, / let's not speak in any language; / let's stop for one second, / and not move our arms so much.*

The second stanza specifies what the silence requires: no speech in any language, a one-second halt, and a calming of the gestures of the arms. “For once on the face of the Earth” carries the weight of an appeal to a planet that has rarely, if ever, fallen fully silent. The anaphora *let's...let's...* turns the proposal into a shared hortative, like a parent or teacher gently leading a group. The mention of “arms” is double-edged: arms are also weapons, and to “not move our arms so much” is, in Neruda’s political register, also a quiet plea to lower the instruments of violence.

The “Let’s” Anaphora

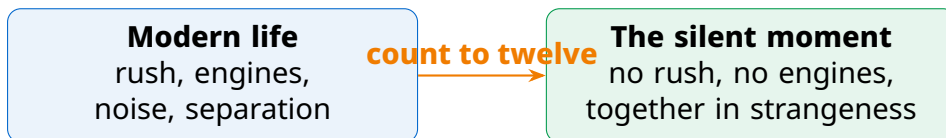
Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the start of successive lines or clauses. Here *let's not speak...let's stop...* repeats the inclusive contraction *let's* so that the proposal sounds like an invitation rather than a command.

The reader is recruited, not ordered.

3.3 Unit 3: A Sudden Strangeness (lines 7-10)

Lines: *It would be an exotic moment / without rush, without engines; / we would all be together / in a sudden strangeness.*

The third stanza shifts into the conditional: *it would be*. The speaker imagines what the silence would feel like. “Without rush, without engines” names the two great markers of modern life that the silence would suspend, hurry and machinery. “We would all be together / in a sudden strangeness” is the most quietly remarkable line in the poem: the strangeness comes precisely from togetherness in silence, an experience so rare in modern life that it would feel exotic. Notice that the togetherness is not warm or sentimental; it is *strange*, because we have practically forgotten how to be still in company.



3.4 Unit 4: Fishermen and the Salt-Gatherer (lines 11-14)

Lines: *Fishermen in the cold sea / would not harm whales / and the man gathering salt / would look at his hurt hands.*

The fourth stanza turns from abstraction to specific human figures. The fisherman in the cold sea is a global image, found in Chile, Iceland, Japan, Kerala; in the silence, the fisherman would pause his hunt of whales. The salt-gatherer, a recurring figure in Neruda’s political poetry of labour, would for the first time look at his own hurt hands. Two things are happening simultaneously here: **harm to other species pauses** (the whales) and **the worker pauses long enough to notice his own body** (the bruised hands). The stanza is the first concrete glimpse of what the silence would produce, both ecological compassion and self-awareness.

The Salt-Gatherer’s Hands

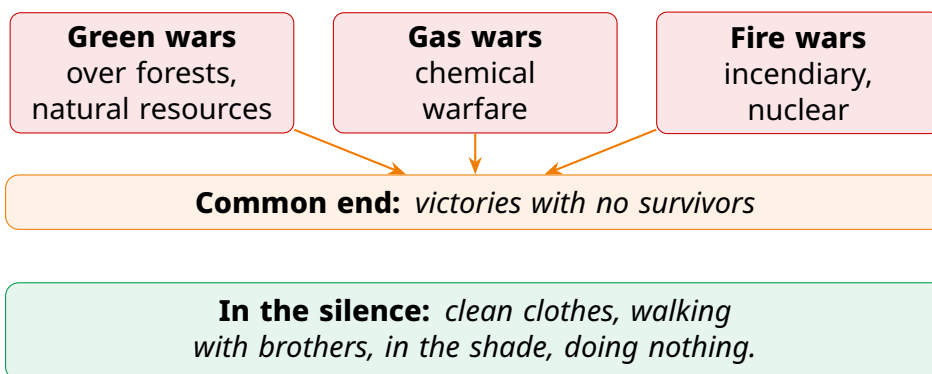
The salt-gatherer is a worker in salt pans on coastal flats; salt and sun together crack and burn the skin of the hands. In the silence, he would, for the first time, slow down enough to see those hands. The image carries the entire idea of work that proceeds without ever allowing the worker to feel his own pain.

3.5 Unit 5: The Three Wars (lines 15-20)

Lines: *Those who prepare green wars, / wars with gas, wars with fire, / victories with no survivors, / would put on clean clothes / and walk about with their brothers / in the*

shade, doing nothing.

The fifth stanza is the political heart of the poem. Neruda lists three kinds of war, *green wars* (a phrase that sweeps in wars fought over forests and natural resources, and also wars in jungle terrain), *wars with gas* (the chemical wars of the twentieth century, from World War I onwards), and *wars with fire* (the incendiary and nuclear wars of the modern age). The phrase *victories with no survivors* is the poem's bitterest line: a victory in which no one is left alive is no victory at all. In the silence, the makers of these wars would change their clothes, an ancient symbol of changing one's role, and walk in the shade with their brothers, doing nothing. "Brothers" is the key word: the same human beings they were trying to destroy are revealed, in the silence, as their own kin.



Neruda's Anti-War Voice

Pablo Neruda lived through two World Wars, the Spanish Civil War (in which his friend the poet Federico García Lorca was killed), the Korean War and the early years of the Cold War. *Keeping Quiet* appeared in 1958, between the atomic age and the proxy wars of the 1960s. The poem's three-fold listing of wars is not metaphorical decoration; it is shorthand for a century of modern violence Neruda had watched unfold.

3.6 Unit 6: The Crucial Clarification (lines 21-23)

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

The sixth stanza is unusual: the speaker pauses to correct a possible misreading. He has just spent five stanzas asking everyone to stop, and he now insists that this stopping is *not* the stopping of death. "Total inactivity" is the false reading; *life* is what the poem is about. The expression *I want no truck with death* means *I want no dealing, no business, no transaction with death* ("truck" here is an old English usage). The clarification is a tiny hinge that the entire interpretation of the poem turns on.

The Single Biggest Misreading

The poem is **not** a call for laziness, withdrawal or surrender. It explicitly says: "What I want should not be confused with total inactivity." The silence is a

pause for self-examination, not a dropping out of life. Writing that “Neruda asks us to give up working” or “Neruda glorifies idleness” will cost you marks; the poem is the opposite of that.

3.7 Unit 7: Single-Mindedness and the Huge Silence (lines 24-30)

Lines: *If we were not so single-minded / about keeping our lives moving, / and for once could do nothing, / perhaps a huge silence / might interrupt this sadness / of never understanding ourselves / and of threatening ourselves with death.*

The seventh stanza diagnoses the human problem the poem is responding to. We are *single-minded* about keeping our lives *moving*, that is, we are addicted to forward motion. The cost is a double sadness: we never come to understand ourselves, and we keep threatening ourselves with death (through wars, through violence, through the very velocity of our lives). The word “perhaps” twice softens the claim: Neruda does not promise that silence will heal humanity, only that it *might*. A “huge silence” is a richly imaginative phrase: silence here is not absence, it is a positive presence with size and weight.

The Paradox of “Doing Nothing”

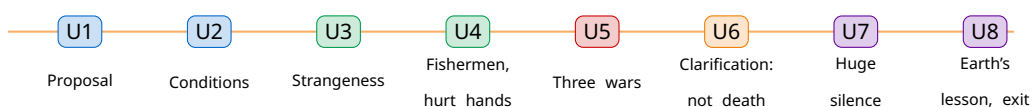
“For once could do nothing” is a paradox because doing nothing is, in Neruda’s argument, a form of doing something deeply important. The “nothing” is the absence of the surface activity; underneath, the mind is interrogating itself, learning to understand the self instead of fleeing from it.

3.8 Unit 8: The Earth’s Lesson and the Quiet Exit (lines 31-end)

Lines: *Perhaps the Earth can teach us / as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive. / Now I’ll count up to twelve / and you keep quiet and I will go.*

The last two stanzas pull the poem out of the human alone and into the natural world. The Earth itself models the lesson Neruda is asking for: in winter, in drought, in the bare months, everything looks dead, and yet life is gathering underneath, waiting to return. Stillness, in nature, is not death; it is generative. Then comes the close: the speaker counts to twelve a second time, asks the reader to keep quiet, and steps away. The poem does not stay to watch the silence; it leaves, trusting the reader to keep counting.

Argumentative Arc of the Poem



The Three-Image Triad

Remember the poem through three visual snapshots, in order:

1. **Count to twelve** (everyone falls still on the face of the Earth)
 2. **Fishermen, hurt hands, soldiers in clean clothes** (the silence's concrete effects)
 3. **The Earth in winter** (everything seems dead, later proves to be alive)
- If you can describe these three images in order, you have the whole poem.

3.9 One-Paragraph Summary for Revision

The speaker invites all of humanity to count slowly to twelve and, for that single moment, to fall completely silent and still, speaking in no language and lowering even the gestures of the arms. He imagines what that strange togetherness would look like, fishermen sparing whales, salt-gatherers noticing their own hurt hands, the architects of green wars, gas wars and fire wars stepping out of uniform to walk with their brothers in the shade. He then carefully clarifies that this silence is not death, not idleness, not surrender; it is a pause for self-understanding, an antidote to the single-minded rush that has made us threaten ourselves with death. He looks to the Earth itself for proof that what looks dead can prove to be alive, and ends by counting to twelve once more before stepping aside. The poem is a quiet, planetary plea: please stop, look, and understand yourself.

4 Central Themes

This section unpacks the six major themes the CBSE board paper most often tests on *Keeping Quiet*. For Long Answer questions, your introduction should name the theme and your body paragraphs should anchor it to specific lines.

4.1 Theme 1: Stillness as a Path to Introspection

The first and most central theme is that physical stillness creates space for self-knowledge. The speaker argues that we are so busy keeping our lives moving that we have never stopped long enough to *understand ourselves*. Counting to twelve and falling still is a small experiment in introspection; what we would find in that silence is, for once, our own selves, sitting beside us. The theme is the philosophical engine of the entire poem.

Theme 1: Stillness and Introspection

Where it appears: Lines 1-6 (the proposal and conditions of silence), and lines 24-30 (the diagnosis: "the sadness of never understanding ourselves").

Key insight: The silence is not for its own sake; it is for the sake of meeting ourselves. The huge silence might *interrupt* the sadness of never knowing

who we are.

4.2 Theme 2: The Paradox of Active Silence

A theme closely tied to Theme 1, but distinct, is the careful philosophical claim that silence and stillness are themselves a form of activity, not the absence of life. Neruda even pauses inside the poem to insist on this: “What I want should not be confused / with total inactivity. / Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with death.” The paradox, that doing nothing on the surface can be doing the deepest possible work underneath, is one of the poem’s most quotable ideas.

Silence Is Not Death

The poem distinguishes three states that students often collapse into one. **Stillness** is a physical pause; **silence** is the absence of speech; **death** is the cessation of life. The poem asks for the first two and rejects the third. Writing that Neruda is “asking for the silence of death” is a major misreading; the poem explicitly says, “I want no truck with death.”

4.3 Theme 3: Anti-War and Universal Brotherhood

The poem’s most explicitly political theme is its rejection of war. Neruda lists three kinds of war, green wars over natural resources, gas wars of chemical destruction, and fire wars of incendiary or nuclear violence, all of which produce “victories with no survivors.” The silence is imagined as the moment in which the makers of these wars step out of their uniforms, put on clean clothes, and walk with their *brothers* in the shade. Brotherhood is what the silence reveals; war is what noise and motion hide.

Theme 3: Anti-War Thought

Where it appears: Lines 15-20 (the three wars and the change of clothes).

Key insight: Neruda’s anti-war argument is not delivered as a speech; it is delivered as an *image*, soldiers walking in the shade with their brothers, doing nothing. The image carries more political weight than a slogan would.

4.4 Theme 4: Ecological Imagination

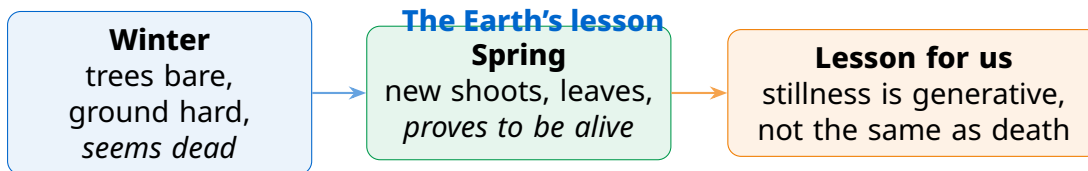
A theme the senior board paper rewards is Neruda’s ecological vision. The fishermen pause their harming of whales; the salt-gatherer notices his hurt hands; the Earth itself becomes the great teacher of the poem’s final lesson. The poem is one of the earliest pieces in the Class 12 syllabus that treats human silence as the condition for the survival of other species and of the planet. Long before the word “sustainability” became common, Neruda was sketching what we would now call an ecological ethics.

Why This Poem Reads as Ecologically Modern

Modern readers of *Keeping Quiet* hear an environmental message that may not have been the poet’s only intent in 1958 but is unmistakable in 2026. The whaling pause, the worker’s hurt hands, the Earth’s wintering and re-greening, all anticipate the language of climate ethics, biodiversity protection and the right of the worker to rest. CBSE often pairs this poem with questions on “relevance today,” and the ecological reading is the strongest answer.

4.5 Theme 5: The Earth as Teacher

The penultimate stanza, “Perhaps the Earth can teach us / as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive,” is a separate theme worth pulling out. The Earth is presented as a model of generative stillness: winter is not death; barren months are not endings; the apparent absence of life is, often, life gathering itself underground. The natural world is the poem’s argument for why stillness is safe.



4.6 Theme 6: Solidarity as a Quiet Act

A subtle final theme: solidarity in the poem is not chanted or marched. It is the simple fact that, for one shared moment, all of humanity does the same thing at the same time. The poem’s solidarity is not loud, organised or political in the conventional sense; it is the togetherness of one shared breath. “We would all be together / in a sudden strangeness” is the line that holds this theme.

Theme-Marking on the Board Paper

Many board questions ask “what is the central theme.” For *Keeping Quiet*, lead with **introspection and active silence** (Themes 1 and 2). Use anti-war thought, ecological imagination, the Earth as teacher and quiet solidarity as your supporting body paragraphs.

5 Literary Devices in the Poem

The CBSE Class 12 paper repeatedly asks students to identify and explain literary devices. *Keeping Quiet* packs a wide range of devices into a short poem. This section names every device the poem uses, anchors it to the exact words in the poem, and explains the effect it produces.

5.1 Anaphora

Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the start of successive lines or clauses. In *Keeping Quiet*, the most visible anaphora is the contraction *let's*.

The "Let's" Anaphora

Lines: *let's not speak in any language; / let's stop for one second...*

Effect: The repetition turns the proposal into a hortative ("let us do X"), pulling the reader into the silence as a participant. The hortative is gentle, not commanding.

A second anaphora, the repeated word *wars*, occurs in the fifth stanza: *Those who prepare green wars, / wars with gas, wars with fire*. The drumbeat repetition of "wars" enacts the relentlessness of the modern war machine.

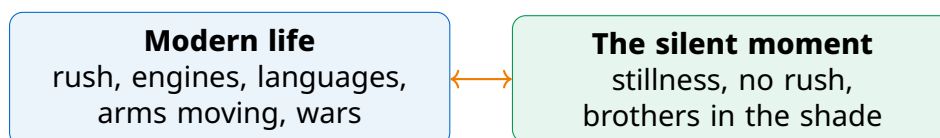
5.2 Imagery

Imagery is the poem's use of sense-based detail, things the reader can see, hear, feel. *Keeping Quiet* draws most of its power from concrete plural images.

- **Visual imagery (workers):** the fisherman in the cold sea, the salt-gatherer's hurt hands.
- **Visual imagery (soldiers):** clean clothes, walking with brothers, in the shade, doing nothing.
- **Auditory imagery:** the silence itself, set against "rush," "engines," and the implied chatter of human languages.
- **Natural imagery:** the Earth in winter, things that seem dead but later prove to be alive.

5.3 Contrast and Juxtaposition

Contrast is the explicit setting of opposites side by side; juxtaposition is the placing of two images together so each makes the other more vivid. *Keeping Quiet* is built on contrast.



Contrast

5.4 Paradox

A paradox is a statement that seems self-contradictory but reveals a truth on reflection. *Keeping Quiet* hinges on a paradox.

The Central Paradox

Surface meaning: “Stop. Do nothing. Be silent.”

Apparent contradiction: If we stop and do nothing, are we not choosing inaction, even death?

Resolution: Neruda explicitly answers, “What I want should not be confused / with total inactivity. / Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with death.” The doing-nothing is active introspection. The stillness is generative, as the Earth’s winter is generative.

5.5 Symbolism

A symbol is an image that stands in for an idea larger than itself. *Keeping Quiet* uses several.

Four Symbols in the Poem

1. **The number twelve** = a complete cycle (hours of a clock, months of a year), so the count is a complete unit of pause.
2. **Clean clothes** = a change of identity; the soldier becomes a brother, not a fighter.
3. **The shade** = a place out of the heat of action, a place of rest, of meeting.
4. **The Earth in winter** = stillness that looks like death but is generative.

5.6 Free-Verse Structure

Free verse is poetry without a fixed meter or rhyme scheme; line breaks fall according to sense and breath. *Keeping Quiet* is in free verse, and the form matters thematically: a poem whose subject is stillness and the refusal of forced rhythm chooses, fittingly, not to impose a forced rhythm on itself. The English version you read is translated from the Spanish, which means the original sound patterns are not preserved, but the line breaks and stanza shape are.

Why Free Verse Suits This Poem

1. **No imposed beat.** The poem about stillness does not enforce a marching beat on the reader.
2. **Breath units.** Each stanza is roughly the size of one thought, allowing a pause between thoughts, like a breath.
3. **Open closure.** Without rhyme, the poem does not snap shut; it trails off, leaving the silence open.

5.7 Personification

Personification is the attribution of human qualities to non-human things. In *Keeping Quiet*, the most obvious instance is the Earth itself: “Perhaps the Earth can teach us.” The Earth is given the human role of *teacher*, the one who imparts a lesson by example.

5.8 Repetition (of “twelve”)

The word *twelve* opens the poem (“Now we will count to twelve”) and closes it (“Now I’ll count up to twelve”). This is called framing repetition or, more technically, *epanalepsis*. The repetition makes the count the literal frame of the poem; the reader enters by counting and is left, at the end, still counting.

Naming Devices in the Board Paper

When a 1- or 2-mark question asks you to identify a device, give the **name** of the device, the **exact words** that contain it, and the **effect**. A three-step answer wins full marks even in 1-mark questions: *Device + Quote + Effect*.

6 Key Quotations Parsed for Board-Paper Use

This section gives you a working bank of quotations from the poem, each one paired with the question it can answer, the device it illustrates, and a one-line gloss. Treat this as your last-minute revision toolkit.

6.1 Quotation 1: The Opening Proposal

Quotation: “Now we will count to twelve / and we will all keep still.”

Use it to answer: opening-line questions, “what is the speaker proposing?” type prompts, questions on the number twelve.

Device: declarative future tense; framing repetition (twelve reappears at the close).

Gloss: The speaker invites all humanity to count up to twelve and become physically still.

6.2 Quotation 2: For Once on the Face of the Earth

Quotation: “For once on the face of the Earth, / let’s not speak in any language”

Use it to answer: anaphora questions, questions on universal scope, “why does Neruda ask us to stop speaking?” type prompts.

Device: anaphora (*let’s...let’s...*); rhetorical appeal to the planet as a whole.

Gloss: The pause is to be planetary, not local; the silence must extend across every language.

6.3 Quotation 3: A Sudden Strangeness

Quotation: “we would all be together / in a sudden strangeness.”

Use it to answer: questions on the effect of silence, questions on togetherness, theme questions on quiet solidarity.

Device: oxymoron-adjacent phrase (*together + strangeness*); rich abstract noun *strangeness*.

Gloss: Stillness in company is so rare today that being together silently would feel exotic.

6.4 Quotation 4: The Salt-Gatherer’s Hurt Hands

Quotation: “the man gathering salt / would look at his hurt hands.”

Use it to answer: imagery questions, theme questions on labour and self-awareness, “what does silence reveal?” prompts.

Device: concrete visual imagery; symbolic compression (the hurt hands stand for all unnoticed bodily damage of work).

Gloss: For the first time, the worker would slow down enough to notice the pain his body has been carrying.

6.5 Quotation 5: Victories With No Survivors

Quotation: “Those who prepare green wars, / wars with gas, wars with fire, / victories with no survivors”

Use it to answer: anti-war theme questions, anaphora questions, “why does Neruda list three kinds of war?” prompts.

Device: anaphora on *wars*; oxymoron (*victories with no survivors*); listing.

Gloss: Modern war produces total destruction; a victory in which no one survives is no victory at all.

6.6 Quotation 6: Walk About With Their Brothers

Quotation: “would put on clean clothes / and walk about with their brothers / in the shade, doing nothing.”

Use it to answer: symbolism questions (clean clothes, shade), brotherhood questions, “what would the silence look like?” prompts.

Device: symbolism (clean clothes = change of role; shade = rest, away from heat); imagery of brotherhood.

Gloss: The makers of war, in the silence, would step out of uniform and walk with their fellow human beings.

6.7 Quotation 7: The Clarification

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

Use it to answer: paradox questions, “is this poem about laziness?” type prompts, the philosophical core of the poem.

Device: direct authorial clarification inside the poem; idiom (*no truck with death*).

Gloss: The silence Neruda asks for is the silence of introspection, not the silence of death.

6.8 Quotation 8: The Huge Silence

Quotation: “perhaps a huge silence / might interrupt this sadness / of never understanding ourselves”

Use it to answer: theme questions on introspection, “what does Neruda hope the silence will achieve?” prompts.

Device: a positive, weighted noun for silence (*huge silence*); the verb *interrupt*, which casts noise as the real illness.

Gloss: A great silence might break the sadness of a humanity that never stops long enough to know itself.

6.9 Quotation 9: The Earth’s Lesson

Quotation: “Perhaps the Earth can teach us / as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive.”

Use it to answer: ecological theme questions, “why does the poem turn to the Earth?” prompts, symbolism questions.

Device: personification (*Earth can teach*); contrast (*seems dead vs proves to be alive*).

Gloss: Nature itself shows that stillness is generative, not final.

6.10 Quotation 10: The Quiet Exit

Quotation: “Now I’ll count up to twelve / and you keep quiet and I will go.”

Use it to answer: questions on the closing lines, framing repetition, “why does the speaker leave?” prompts.

Device: framing repetition of *twelve*; direct address to the reader (*you keep quiet*).

Gloss: The speaker steps aside, leaving the reader inside the silence to keep counting.

Quotation Memorisation Trick

Memorise these ten quotations in order. They map exactly onto the ten main reference points of any well-structured Long Answer essay on this poem.

Cheat-sheet of devices in this poem

Device	Quotation	Effect
Anaphora	<i>let's...let's...</i>	gentle hortative tone
Anaphora	<i>wars...wars...wars</i>	drumbeat of war
Contrast	rush, engines vs stillness	modern vs proposed
Paradox	<i>do nothing yet life</i>	silence is generative
Oxymoron	<i>victories with no survivors</i>	condemns total war
Symbol	<i>twelve</i>	complete cycle of pause
Symbol	<i>clean clothes, shade</i>	change of role, rest
Personification	<i>the Earth can teach us</i>	nature as teacher
Imagery	fishermen, salt-gatherer, soldiers	concrete plural figures
Repetition	<i>twelve</i> (open + close)	frames the silence

7 Background and Context: Pablo Neruda

A board-paper question on the poem will often ask about Pablo Neruda or about the literary and political tradition he belongs to. This section gives you the biographical and literary background, the bare facts you can drop into a question on the poet, and the broader context of twentieth-century Latin American poetry.

7.1 Who Was Pablo Neruda?

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) was a Chilean poet, diplomat and political figure, widely regarded as one of the most important poets writing in Spanish in the twentieth century. He was born Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto in Parral, Chile, and adopted the pen name “Pablo Neruda” as a teenager. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971 “for a poetry that with the action of an elemental force brings alive a continent’s destiny and dreams.”

Quick Bio: Pablo Neruda

- **Born:** 12 July 1904, Parral, Chile.
- **Died:** 23 September 1973, Santiago, Chile.
- **Real name:** Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto. “Pablo Neruda” is a pen name.
- **Language:** wrote in Spanish; this poem is read in English translation.
- **Major works:** *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924), *Residence on Earth* (1933, 1935), *Canto General* (1950), *Odes to Common Things* (1954-1957), *Extravagaria* (1958, the collection from which *Keeping Quiet* is taken).
- **Honours:** Nobel Prize for Literature, 1971; International Stalin Peace Prize, 1953.
- **Public roles:** Chilean consul in Burma, Argentina, Spain and Mexico at various points; later a Senator and a member of the Chilean Communist Party.

7.2 Neruda as a Political Voice in a Prose-Poetry Blend

Neruda is unusual among major lyric poets for the closeness of his poetry to public political life. He served as a diplomat in several countries, witnessed the Spanish Civil War first-hand, mourned the murder of his friend Federico García Lorca, lived in exile during the Chilean government's crackdown on the Communist Party in the late 1940s, and returned to a frontline political role in the Allende government in the early 1970s. His poems range from the famously sensual love poems of his youth to the political and continental sweep of *Canto General* to the quieter, almost prose-like meditations of *Extravagaria*, the collection in which *Keeping Quiet* appears.

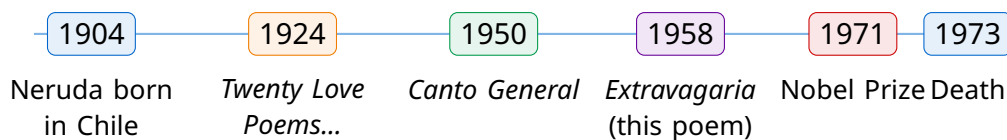
Why *Extravagaria* Is the Quietest Neruda

The 1958 collection *Extravagaria* is sometimes called Neruda's most playful, most personal book. Its title plays on the Spanish word *extravagancia* (extravagance, eccentricity). The poems are shorter, more reflective, less politically heated than the wartime collections, but they carry the same political conscience in a quieter voice. *Keeping Quiet* is the most famous English-translated poem from this book.

7.3 Latin American Poetry: A Bigger Picture

Twentieth-century Latin American poetry, written largely in Spanish and Portuguese, became a worldwide literary force in the post-war period. Major figures alongside Neruda include the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (the first Latin American Nobel laureate, 1945), the Peruvian poet César Vallejo, the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz (1990) and the Brazilian Carlos Drummond de Andrade. These poets wrote in the shadow of two World Wars, the Spanish Civil War, the Cold War and a succession of Latin American military regimes. *Keeping Quiet*, with its quiet anti-war argument and its planetary scope, belongs to this larger conversation about how poetry should respond to violent times.

Pablo Neruda: a brief timeline



7.4 Why This Particular Poem

Neruda's most famous poems are his love lyrics and his sweeping political epics. *Keeping Quiet* is unusual within his work because it is short, philosophical, gentle, and addressed to all of humanity rather than to a beloved or to a continent. Yet it has the same Neruda voice: plainspoken, image-rich, politically aware without being didactic. This is why CBSE chose it for Class 12: short enough to teach in two periods, deep enough to test in many ways, representative of a major Latin

American voice, and aligned with the syllabus's concern for international literature and peace education.

8 Board-Exam Pattern Points

This section maps the poem onto the actual structure of the CBSE Class 12 English (Core) board paper so that you know exactly what to expect and how to answer.

8.1 Where the Poem Appears in the Paper

The poem can be tested in any of three sections.

- **Section B (Reading, Literature):** extract-based questions of 1 mark each, drawn from any short cluster of lines. Typical ask: identify poet, identify device, gloss the line, explain a single word.
- **Short Answer Type questions (3-4 marks):** 40-50 word responses on a single aspect, a single device, a single image, the speaker's purpose at a particular moment.
- **Long Answer Type questions (5-6 marks):** 120-150 word responses on a theme, comparison with another poem, or the overall argument of the poem.

8.2 Typical Question Stems

The board paper recycles a small set of question patterns. Memorise these stems and you will recognise the question type instantly.

Recurring Question Stems for This Poem

- "Why does Neruda ask us to count up to twelve and keep still?"
- "Why should we not confuse what Neruda wants with total inactivity?"
- "What does the poet mean by 'green wars, / wars with gas, wars with fire'?"
- "Why does Neruda turn to the Earth in the second-last stanza? What lesson does the Earth teach?"
- "Identify and explain the literary devices used in the poem *Keeping Quiet*."
- "Bring out the central paradox of *Keeping Quiet*."
- "How does Neruda use silence as a path to introspection?"
- "Comment on the relevance of *Keeping Quiet* for today's world."

8.3 Model Answer Skeleton: Short Answer (3 marks)

Question: Why should we not confuse what Neruda wants with total inactivity?

Model answer (40-50 words): Neruda explicitly clarifies that his proposed silence is not inactivity but introspection. "Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with

death." The pause is meant to let us understand ourselves; it is a generative stillness, like the Earth's winter, not the surrender of life.

8.4 Model Answer Skeleton: Long Answer (5-6 marks)

Question: "Keeping Quiet is a quiet but radical critique of modern life." Discuss with reference to the text.

Model answer outline:

1. **Opening (2 sentences):** Name the poem, the poet, the central proposal (counting to twelve, falling still). State that the poem is a planetary plea for introspection and against violence.
2. **Critique of speed and machinery (stanza 3):** "without rush, without engines" names the modern markers of hurry; the silence is presented as an exotic moment because modern life has forgotten stillness.
3. **Critique of war (stanza 5):** green wars, gas wars, fire wars and "victories with no survivors" name twentieth-century violence; the silence would put soldiers in clean clothes, walking with brothers.
4. **Critique of self-ignorance (stanza 7):** we are so single-minded about keeping our lives moving that we never understand ourselves; the silence might interrupt this sadness.
5. **The constructive turn (stanza 8):** the Earth itself models the lesson; what seems dead is in fact alive.
6. **Closing (2 sentences):** The critique is gentle, never preachy. The poem leaves us, literally, in silence: "you keep quiet and I will go."

8.5 Comparison Questions

The paper sometimes asks students to compare *Keeping Quiet* with another poem on peace, introspection or the natural world. Plausible comparison anchors: *My Mother at Sixty-Six* (Kamala Das) for the way both poems treat quiet as a vehicle for deep emotion, or *A Thing of Beauty* (Keats) for the way both poems look to nature as a source of consolation. For comparison answers, do not just describe both poems separately; pick one shared theme or one shared device, and write paragraph-by-paragraph in parallel.

Marking-Scheme Notes That Past Years Reveal

CBSE marking schemes for this poem have consistently rewarded students for: (i) naming the device by its correct technical name, (ii) quoting at least one short phrase from the poem, (iii) writing inside the word limit, (iv) using the present tense for analysis ("the speaker proposes," not "the speaker proposed"), and (v) flagging the central paradox between silence and inactivity. The mark scheme penalises retelling the poem stanza by stanza; analysis beats narration.

Word-Limit Discipline

3-mark answers: aim for 40-50 words.

5-mark answers: aim for 120-150 words.

Going over the word limit costs marks because the answer becomes narration rather than analysis.

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9 Expected Extract-Based Comprehension Questions

The board paper's extract-based section quotes 4 to 6 lines and asks 1-mark sub-questions. This section gives you four sample extracts likely to appear in your paper, each with model 1-mark answers. Use these as a template for the kind of close reading the paper rewards.

9.1 Extract 1: The Opening Two Stanzas

Extract: "Now we will count to twelve / and we will all keep still. / For once on the face of the Earth, / let's not speak in any language; / let's stop for one second, / and not move our arms so much."

- **Q: Name the poet and the poem.** *Pablo Neruda; Keeping Quiet.*
- **Q: Why does the speaker say "for once"?** *Because this kind of total silence has rarely, if ever, happened on Earth before; it would be a first.*
- **Q: Identify a literary device in lines 4-5.** *Anaphora: the repetition of "let's" at the start of two successive lines.*
- **Q: Why must we "not move our arms so much"?** *Because the arms are the instruments of action and, in Neruda's political register, also of violence.*

9.2 Extract 2: The Fishermen and the Salt-Gatherer

Extract: "Fishermen in the cold sea / would not harm whales / and the man gathering salt / would look at his hurt hands."

- **Q: Why does the fisherman pause?** *Because in the silence, the fisherman would no longer be hunting; he would spare the whales.*
- **Q: What does the salt-gatherer realise?** *For the first time, he would notice his own hurt hands, the bodily cost of his labour.*
- **Q: What theme do these images carry?** *Ecological compassion towards other species, and self-awareness in the worker about his own body.*

- **Q: Identify the device used in “hurt hands”.** *Visual imagery / concrete detail; the cracked, salt-burnt hands stand for all unnoticed bodily damage of work.*

9.3 Extract 3: The Three Wars

Extract: “Those who prepare green wars, / wars with gas, wars with fire, / victories with no survivors, / would put on clean clothes / and walk about with their brothers / in the shade, doing nothing.”

- **Q: What are “green wars”?** *Wars fought over forests, jungles or natural resources.*
- **Q: Explain “victories with no survivors.”** *Modern war is so destructive that even the winning side ends up without survivors; it is a self-cancelling victory.*
- **Q: What do “clean clothes” symbolise?** *A change of role: the soldier steps out of uniform and into the role of a brother.*
- **Q: What does “in the shade, doing nothing” suggest?** *Rest, the suspension of violence, and a quiet meeting between former enemies.*

9.4 Extract 4: The Earth as Teacher

Extract: “Perhaps the Earth can teach us / as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive. / Now I’ll count up to twelve / and you keep quiet and I will go.”

- **Q: What lesson can the Earth teach us?** *That what seems dead, like winter, drought or barrenness, is often life gathering itself underground; stillness is generative.*
- **Q: Identify the device in “Perhaps the Earth can teach us.”** *Personification: the Earth is given the human role of teacher.*
- **Q: Why does the speaker count again at the end?** *To frame the poem: the count opens and closes the silence, making the poem itself a complete cycle.*
- **Q: Why does the speaker say “I will go”?** *So that the reader is left inside the silence; the poem steps aside instead of staying to explain.*

Three-Step Answer for Extract Questions

For every extract-based 1-mark question, give a three-step answer if the word limit allows: *name the device + quote a few words from the extract + state the effect.* Examiners reward all three.

10 Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

A short section that names the errors examiners flag most often when they mark answers on this poem.

10.1 Mistake 1: Reading the Poem as a Call for Inactivity

The single most common mistake, already flagged above. The poem explicitly says, “What I want should not be confused / with total inactivity. / Life is what it is about; / I want no truck with death.” Read the silence as introspective and generative, not withdrawn.

Tone Misreading

Do not write “Neruda is asking us to stop living” or “the poem glorifies idleness.” The poem is the opposite: it asks us to pause *in order to understand life better*, not to drop out of it.

10.2 Mistake 2: Listing Devices Without Effect

Many students name the device but forget to explain what it does in this particular poem. “There is a paradox” is a 0-mark sentence; “the paradox between ‘doing nothing’ and ‘Life is what it is about’ forces the reader to see silence as a positive activity, not a withdrawal” wins the mark.

10.3 Mistake 3: Missing the Earth’s Role

Students often write about the first six stanzas at length and skip the seventh and eighth. The Earth stanza is the philosophical resting point of the poem; without it, the silence has no example. Always quote “Perhaps the Earth can teach us” in a 5-mark thematic answer.

Quote the Earth’s Lesson

When writing about stillness, peace or hope in this poem, always quote “as when everything seems dead / and later proves to be alive.” This single phrase is the poem’s strongest defence of stillness and is often the key to the highest-band 5-mark answers.

10.4 Mistake 4: Confusing the Speaker With Neruda’s Politics

The speaker of the poem is not a campaign rally. Although Neruda was a political poet in much of his work, *Keeping Quiet* is in a gentler, philosophical register. Do not present the poem as a Marxist manifesto or a UN speech. Treat it as a reflective meditation that carries political implications, not as a political speech in line breaks.

10.5 Mistake 5: Mistranslating “No Truck With Death”

The idiom *no truck with X* means *no dealings with X, no business with X*. Some students misread it as a literal truck or vehicle. “Truck” here is a noun meaning “deal-

ing" or "transaction" (from older English usage). The line means *I want no business at all with death*, which is exactly the point of the surrounding stanza.

Geometry of the Poem

The poem has **eight stanzas**, not one block of text. Question papers sometimes quote across stanza boundaries; in your answer, respect the stanza shape by noting where the speaker is in the argument. Stanza 6 is the philosophical pivot; stanza 8 is the Earth's lesson; the closing two lines are the speaker's exit.

11 Quick Revision Summary

The final section is a compact, single-shot recap you can read the night before the paper. Everything here links back to a longer discussion earlier in the document.

11.1 The Poem in One Line

A poet invites all of humanity to count slowly up to twelve and fall silent on the face of the Earth, so that fishermen spare whales, workers see their hurt hands, soldiers walk with their brothers in the shade, and we, for once, stop long enough to understand ourselves without confusing this silence with death.

11.2 Spinal Facts

- **Poet:** Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), Chilean.
- **Title:** Keeping Quiet.
- **Source:** the 1958 Spanish collection *Extravagaria*; read in NCERT in English translation.
- **Form:** free verse; multiple short stanzas.
- **Central image:** all humanity counting to twelve and falling still.
- **Closing image:** the Earth in winter, seeming dead but later proving to be alive; the speaker steps aside.

11.3 Themes in One Sentence Each

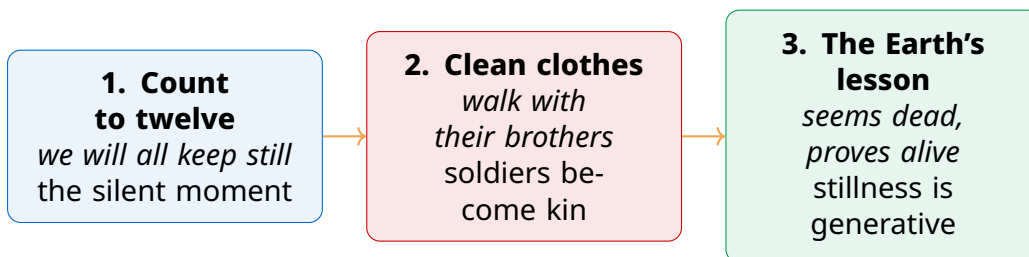
- **Stillness as introspection:** silence is the condition for self-understanding.
- **Paradox of active silence:** doing nothing on the surface is doing the deepest work underneath; silence is not death.
- **Anti-war and brotherhood:** the silence reveals that the soldiers of green wars, gas wars and fire wars are brothers.
- **Ecological imagination:** the silence spares whales, honours the worker's body, and learns from the Earth's seasons.

- **The Earth as teacher:** winter’s seeming death proves to be a gathering of life.
- **Quiet solidarity:** all of us in one shared silent moment.

11.4 Devices in One Sentence Each

- **Anaphora:** *let’s...let’s...; wars...wars...wars.*
- **Contrast / Juxtaposition:** modern rush vs the proposed stillness.
- **Paradox:** *do nothing, yet life is what it is about.*
- **Oxymoron:** *victories with no survivors.*
- **Symbol:** *twelve, clean clothes, shade, the Earth in winter.*
- **Personification:** *the Earth can teach us.*
- **Imagery:** fishermen, the salt-gatherer’s hurt hands, soldiers in clean clothes.
- **Framing repetition:** *twelve* opens and closes the poem.
- **Free-verse structure:** short stanzas, breath-like pauses, no fixed meter.

11.5 Last-Minute Triad to Memorise



Three images = whole poem

A Final Memory Aid

TCE = Twelve, Clean clothes, Earth.

Twelve → Clean clothes (soldiers become brothers) → Earth (seems dead, proves alive).

Three words, in order, and the whole poem unfolds from them.

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