

# 1

## Casabianca

### Contexts

The poem 'Casabianca' is based on an actual incident during a battle that was fought between the British and the French navies in August 1798. This battle took place on the Mediterranean Coast off the Nile Delta of Egypt, due to which it came to be known as the Battle of Nile. The poem is about a tragic incident associated with this battle that took place on 1 August, 1798, when the British fleet captured a French ship *L'Orient* and set it on fire.

When the ship was set on fire, some French soldiers managed to escape, but many others chose to give away their lives by staying on the burning ship. A twelve-year old boy named Casabianca, who was the son of the admiral in charge of *L'Orient*, was one of those who stayed on the ship. Soon, all the soldiers on the ship died, and Casabianca was left all alone, standing in the midst of their corpses. But the boy stayed on obeying the command of his father who had instructed him not to leave the ship without his permission. Meanwhile, Casabianca's father also died, but the boy was not aware of it. Presuming that his father must be somewhere around, he kept calling him, asking for his permission to leave. Not knowing that his father was dead, he decided to wait despite the raging flames of fire surrounding him. Finally, the fire engulfed him and the entire ship, resulting in its explosion. Thus, Casabianca died like a brave martyr dedicated to the service of his nation.

Because of its emotional appeal, natural rhythm and heroic tone, 'Casabianca' is regarded as one of the best known poems penned by the poet Felicia Dorothea Hemans. The poem retells a young boy's story in a melodramatic manner, and its essence stays with the readers for a long time. The poet has written this poem not only to tell the story of Casabianca's heroic sacrifice, but also to simply convey through it the destructive nature of war.

### Paraphrase

Casabianca is standing on a burning ship, all alone. Everyone has run away, and the flames of fire are shining over the dead bodies of the soldiers martyred in the battle. Nevertheless, Casabianca stands on the ship looking beautiful and bright. It seems as if he is born to rule the storms. He inherits heroism from his forefathers and looks proud and brave. Despite the growing fire, he stands at his post, determined not to move without his father's permission. Little does he know that his father is dead and is lying in the lower part of the ship.

Casabianca calls aloud to ask his father if his duty is over. But he does not know that his father, the commander of the ship, is not aware of his situation. So, Casabianca shouts again and again to ask his father if he can go. However, all he can hear or see are the sound of the

gunshots and the sight of the rushing flames all around him. He feels the heat of fire upon his brow and in his waving hair. Standing at the place of his death, he looks around bravely yet disappointed. For the last time, he shouts to ask his father if he should stay when the fire covers the sails and the shrouds. Soon the flames cover the ship from all sides, including the flag flying high. It also engulfs the boy. In no time, the ship explodes, and the boy vanishes. The mast, helm, and pennon fair all play their part, yet the noblest thing that dies in the explosion is the young, disciplined, faithful boy.

## Perspectives

- ▶ Casabianca does not leave his post despite the fire, and fights on bravely till his death. The poem sets the tone of courage and heroism and makes the boy the hero.
  - Do you think the boy performed a heroic act by staying on the ship, or he should have saved himself to serve his nation in future?
- ▶ Though the poem glorifies the gallantry of a child, it also indirectly criticises the destructive nature of war as it takes away the life of such a faithful heart.
  - What according to you was the cause of the boy's death – war or the boy's sense of duty and obedience towards his father?

## Higher Order Thinking Skills

1. Why does the poet use the words 'a gallant child' for Casabianca?
2. What is the message of the poem?
3. Why did Casabianca stay on the burning deck? What does this tell us about him? Could he have saved his life as well as the life of his father?
4. What is the theme of the poem?

## Language in Use

### Appreciation

- ▶ 'Casabianca' is a poem that tells the story of a young boy. The form and the choice of words make the poem evocative. Phrases like 'flames rolled on', 'flame that lit the battles wreck', 'wreathing fires', 'wrapt the ship', etc. create images of fire in a reader's mind. Similarly, phrases like 'Beautiful and bright', 'born to rule' and 'childlike form' create the image of the boy, Casabianca. 'Battle's wreck' and 'burning deck' create the image of the destroyed ship.

When a story or a poem uses descriptive language in such a way that the reader is able to sense or feel what is happening, it is called the use of imagery. The use of visual imagery in the poem makes us feel as though we were on the ship with Casabianca.

- ▶ The opening line of the poem 'The boy stood on the burning deck' makes us feel sad for the boy and wonder why the boy is standing there or why the deck is burning. The last lines of the poem set a dark mood: 'But the noblest thing which perished there/Was that young faithful heart'.
- ▶ The poet personifies fire in the poem. With the words, 'he felt their breath' and 'wreathing fires made way', the poet has given human-like qualities to fire. This makes us feel the intensifying flame.
- ▶ The use of alliteration, 'boy and burning', 'beautiful and bright' and 'father and faint', makes the poem rhythmic.

Read the poem 'Casabianca'. Draw a picture to depict the poem. Around the picture, write the words from the poem that helped you draw the picture.

### Learn by Doing

Work in groups of six. Carry out some research on the Battle of Nile. Make a PowerPoint presentation based on the data you have collected.

You can find out about the following aspects of the battle and incorporate them in your presentation.

- Why did the battle took place?
- What happened in the battle?
- What its were consequences were?
- Stories based on the account of people who took part in this battle