ENGLISH LITERATURE - STD 9

SMALL PAIN IN MY CHEST

Reference I  : The soldier boy was sitting calmly underneath that tree.
As I approached it, I could see him beckoning to me,
The battle had been long and hard and lasted through the night.
And scores of figures on the ground ...... still by morning’s light.

Q.1.  What is meant by ‘sitting calmly’ and ‘beckoning’? What does it show about the condition of the soldier?
Ans.  The soldier boy was sitting peacefully under a tree and by ‘beckoning’ is meant that he signalled to the narrator to come closer to him to give him a sip of water. The soldier is fatigued and therefore sitting under a tree amidst a number of dead soldiers, who had fought throughout the night.

Q.2.  How can you conclude that ‘battle had been long and hard’?
Ans.  According to the poet, this poem is based on the Vietnam war, a prolonged struggle which began in 1955 and ended in 1975. The war started as an insurgency in South Vietnam sponsored by the North Vietnamese government. It results in direct military intervention in South Vietnam by North Vietnam. There was active participation of military forces of the United on the side of South Vietnam, where most of the fighting took place.

Q.3.  A little later the narrator says that the soldier ‘smiled as best as he could’. Which part of the soldier is portrayed by his smiling?
Ans.  The soldier smiled as best as he could to hide his pain and asked the narrator if he could help him as he needed a sip of water. Soldiers have to endure appalling conditions on the battlefield. They have to remain without food and water for many days. The soldiers power to endure pain can be highlighted here.

Q.4.  Why was the soldier having a pain in his chest? Why does he call it ‘small’?
Ans.  The soldier in the poem is suffering from physical injuries as the narrator can make out from a large stain of blood on the soldier’s shirt.
A small pain in the soldier’s chest is symbolic of a big pain in the conscience of humanity at not being able to give up wars.

Reference II  : ‘Must be fatigue’, he weakly smiled. ‘I must be getting old,
I see the sun is shining bright and yet I’m feeling cold,
We climbed the hill, two hundred strong, but as we cleared the crest,
The night exploded and I felt this small pain in my chest’.

Q.1.  Explain why the soldier, feels cold despite the sun shining brightly.
Ans.  The sun is the source of life. It is shining bright but the soldier is feeling cold. As the soldier is dying, the sun for him is becoming dim even though it is morning. It symbolizes the darkness that is entering the soldier’s life.

Q.2.  Give the meaning of ‘the night exploded’. What was the result of that?
Ans.  The meaning of the above phrase is that an explosion took place at night. It seemed that the soldier was injured in the explosion and he felt the pain because of the injury he suffered.
Q.3. A little later, the soldier ‘smiled a smile’ which the narrator calls the ‘brightest’ he had seen. What does this show us about the soldier?
Ans. The soldier smiled a smile that was the brightest inspite of the advancing darkness in his life. His bright smile shows that he is grateful for the help he received from a stranger. It shows the spirit of a soldier who gives up his life for a cause, with a smile on his face.

Q.4. Why does the soldier consider it ‘silly’ to be defeated by a small pain?
Ans. The soldier regrets that though he was a man of huge size and full of energy and enthusiasm, he was defeated by a small pain in his chest.

Q.5. What does the soldier think about the reaction of his wife and mother have on seeing him suffering a pain in his chest?
Ans. He does not know what his wife would think of him, a strong and grown up man but too weak to battle it out and sitting there defeated. He then thought of his mother, while holding him close to her chest, would never had imagined that one day her son would be sitting on the battlefield, defeated by a pain in his chest.

Reference III: I don’t recall what happened then, I think I must have cried;
I put my arms around him and I pulled him to my side
And, as I held him close to me, I could feel our wounds were pressed
The large one in my heart against the small one in his chest.

Q.1. What does the narrator realise when he pulls the soldier towards himself?
Ans. The narrator said that he could not recall what happened. Perhaps he thought he would have cried. He put his arms around the dead soldier and as he pulled him towards himself, he could feel their wounds were pressed against each other.

Q.2. Why does the narrator say that he has a large wound in his heart compared to the small one in the soldier’s chest?
Ans. The narrator has a larger wound than the soldier’s because it symbolises the greater guilt on the part of humanity at not being able to give up wars.

Q.3. Small Pain In My Chest is an anti-war poem. What message does it give to the readers?
Ans. War has long figures as a theme in poetry; some of the world’s oldest ……… poems are about great armies and heroic battles. War has an adverse impact on the lives of soldiers. Without referring to the action in the war, Michael Mack has brought out the suffering of the soldiers. On the battlefield it is horror and chaos, fear and trauma. The soldiers gradually run out of energy and the battlefield takes its toll sooner or later. The poet says he feels deeply hurt to see the agony of the soldiers on the battlefield. The poem indirectly advises people to shun hatred and warfare.

Q.4. How can we say that Small Pain In My Chest is a symbolic poem?
Ans. A small pain in the soldier’s chest is a big pain in the conscience of humanity. In his physical agony, the soldier asks for a sip of water. In fact he is asking for some understanding and concern for the human being, who suffers for no fault of his. The soldier looks around to get some aid but the only thing he finds are deep craters in the earth, the relics of destruction. He has been fighting day and night without rest. He is fatigued and needs some rest before he gets eternal rest.
The sun is the source of light. It is shining brightly but the soldier is feeling cold. The time of the day is morning. As the soldier is dying, the sun for him is becoming dim even though it is morning. It symbolizes the darkness that is entering the soldier’s life.

Q.5. **What is the style of the poem Small Pain In My Chest? Which figure of speech is used often in the poem.**

**Ans.** The poem is in the form of a ballad. A ballad is a narrative poem, intended to be sung. It comprises small stanzas and has a refrain. It gives the poem the musical quality. The figure of speech often used in this poem is **Alliteration** which refers to the repeated use of the similar consonant sounds in a line.

For example

- myself move lucky
- see the sun is shining
- smiled a smile
- seems silly
- what would my wife

Q.6. **Do you like the way the poem ends? Give two reasons to substantiate your opinion.**

(Any valid answer)