

“Coming Home to Dehra”

Ruskin Bond — Detailed Summary, Analysis and Important Questions & Answers

“Coming Home to Dehra” is a deeply autobiographical piece by Ruskin Bond. It recounts his return to Dehra at the age of eleven after the death of his father. What should have been a joyful homecoming instead becomes an experience of loss, loneliness, displacement and emotional alienation.

1. Detailed Summary

1. The journey back to Dehra

The essay begins with the narrator travelling by train towards Dehra in the winter of 1944. He is eleven years old and is returning to the place he considers home.

The journey brings back painful memories because this is his first homecoming after his father's death. He is going to meet:

- his mother, whom he has not seen for four years,
- his stepfather, whom he has met only once or twice before,
- and his grandmother.

The train passes through the sal forests near Dehra, and the narrator experiences the familiar feeling of uneasiness that comes towards the end of a journey.

2. Memories of his father

The narrator recalls the happy years he spent with his father after his parents' separation.

His father was serving in the RAF in New Delhi, and they lived in a large tent near Humayun's Tomb. At that time, the area was relatively wild, with animals such as blackbuck and nilgai.

The father and son shared a close relationship. They:

- went for long walks;
- explored old tombs and forts;
- watched films;
- collected stamps;
- bought books;
- and made plans to go to England after the war.

His father had even taught him to read and write before he entered school.

These memories establish the father as the central emotional figure in the narrator's childhood.

3. The happy period comes to an end

The narrator remembers the summer he spent with his father. Although the heat was severe, he remembers the atmosphere affectionately: the khus curtain, the smell of damp earth and the simple life they shared.

However, his father's recurrent malaria eventually forced him to enter hospital.

Because the father could not look after him during his illness, the narrator was eventually sent to a boarding school in Shimla.

He did not want to leave his father, but his father believed that boarding school would be best for him until the war ended.

4. Life at boarding school

The boarding school is described negatively.

It resembles an English public school and proudly calls itself the “Eton of the East.” The narrator describes its:

- ragging,
- flogging,
- compulsory games,
- chapel attendance,
- prefects,
- honour boards and school traditions.

The institution appears rigid and emotionally cold.

The narrator's father's letters become extremely important to him. They are the things he looks forward to most.

Whenever possible, he meets his father during holidays. One particularly happy holiday is spent at Craig-Dhu near Jakko Hill in Shimla.

They go for walks, eat ice cream, browse bookshops and make plans to go to England.

5. The death of his father

The narrator's father is transferred to Calcutta and becomes seriously ill again. He suffers from malaria, and later jaundice.

Although his last letter sounds cheerful, the father dies.

The narrator learns about the death indirectly. His teacher takes him for a walk through the deodar forest and begins speaking about God wanting his father in a “higher and better place.”

The narrator immediately understands what has happened and bursts into tears.

This is one of the most emotionally important moments in the essay.

6. The father's letters are taken away

After his father's death, the narrator keeps his father's letters beside him.

The headmaster takes the letters, supposedly for safekeeping, telling him that he can collect them before leaving the school.

However, when the narrator later asks for them, the headmaster denies having received them. He says that the narrator must be mistaken.

This deeply affects the boy. The headmaster becomes the first man who arouses feelings of hatred in him.

The lost letters are important because they represent the narrator's remaining connection with his father.

2. The Return to Dehra

7. Arrival at Dehra

When the train reaches Dehra, the narrator expects someone to be waiting for him. But nobody comes.

The railway station is crowded and chaotic, with:

- travellers,
- coolies,
- stray dogs,
- railway staff,
- and the general noise of an Indian railway station.

Eventually, the narrator is left almost alone with an elderly coolie. He allows the coolie to take his luggage and goes to the tonga stand.

8. Dehra as a place of natural beauty

The description of Dehra becomes one of the most beautiful parts of the essay.

Bond remembers Dehra as a place full of trees and greenery. He mentions:

- neem,
- mango,
- eucalyptus,
- Persian lilac,
- jacaranda,
- amaltas,

- litchi,
- guava,
- jackfruit,
- papaya.

The natural landscape provides a contrast to the narrator's emotional loneliness. Although he feels abandoned by people, nature gives him a sense of familiarity and belonging.

3. The Grandmother

9. Meeting his grandmother

The tonga first takes him to his grandmother's house.

He had mistakenly believed that his mother still lived there. His grandfather is dead, and his grandmother now lives alone.

Unlike the other adults, the grandmother immediately provides him with emotional support.

She is surprised that nobody has come to receive him and takes responsibility for getting him safely to his mother's house.

Her irritation with his mother and stepfather also reveals her protective affection for the boy.

4. Arrival at His Mother's House

10. The absence of his mother and stepfather

The narrator and grandmother reach the house, but the door is bolted. A servant eventually opens it.

The narrator discovers that his mother and stepfather have gone to Motichur for shikar (hunting). They had apparently expected him to arrive the following day.

This is painful because the boy has returned expecting a family reunion, but nobody is there to welcome him.

11. The discovery of his baby half-brother

The narrator also discovers something he did not know before: he has a six-month-old half-brother.

The discovery shocks him because nobody had told him about the child.

His grandmother explains the situation and takes care of him. The narrator is initially emotionally detached from the baby.

5. His Mother's Cold Reception

12. His mother returns

His mother and stepfather eventually return from their hunting trip. His mother gives him only a perfunctory kiss.

This is an important moment because the narrator compares her affection with the much deeper affection he had received from his father.

He realizes that what he had imagined as “coming home” is no longer the same.

For him, home had always meant his father. With his father gone, returning home has lost its emotional meaning.

6. The Meaning of His Father's Death

One of the most significant passages of the essay is the narrator's reflection on death.

He explains that when someone witnesses a person's death and burial, it becomes easier to understand the finality of death. But he did not witness his father's death. He only heard about it.

Therefore, to the eleven-year-old boy, his father did not seem completely dead. Instead, he seemed to have “vanished.”

The narrator subconsciously expects his father to return, just as he had often returned when the boy needed him.

This explains why the grief remains unresolved.

7. Final Scene

The stepfather barely notices the narrator. He pours himself a whisky and soda, while the mother does the same.

The narrator is left alone in his room. Interestingly, he does not entirely dislike this solitude. He values his privacy, just as his mother and stepfather value theirs.

He opens the large window of his room and looks out into the garden. The final image is of:

- evening breeze,
- marigolds,
- wild blue everlasting flowers,
- litchi trees,
- and an unkempt garden.

The ending is quiet rather than dramatic. The narrator has returned physically to Dehra, but emotionally he remains separated from the people who are supposed to constitute his family.

8. Central Idea of the Essay

The central idea of “Coming Home to Dehra” is that home is not merely a geographical place; it is created by emotional relationships and memories.

For the young narrator, **home means his father**. Therefore, after his father's death, returning to Dehra does not provide the happiness he had imagined.

The title itself is therefore somewhat ironic. He is “coming home” physically, but he discovers that his emotional home has disappeared.

9. Major Themes

A. Loss and Grief

The strongest theme is the loss of the narrator's father. His grief is complicated because he never witnessed his father's death, so he cannot completely accept the finality of the loss. His father becomes someone who has “vanished” rather than died.

B. Childhood and Innocence

The story is narrated through the perspective of an eleven-year-old. The child does not completely understand:

- divorce,
- remarriage,
- death,
- emotional distance,
- or adult relationships.

His observations are therefore innocent but often very perceptive.

C. The Meaning of Home

The essay questions what actually constitutes a home. The narrator returns to Dehra, but:

- his mother is emotionally distant,
- his stepfather is indifferent,
- his father is dead,
- his grandfather is dead,
- and even his mother's house is unfamiliar.

Thus, physical home and emotional home become two different things.

D. Father-Son Relationship

The relationship between the narrator and his father is the emotional centre of the essay. His father is:

- affectionate,
- caring,
- intellectually encouraging,
- adventurous,
- and emotionally close to him.

Their shared activities create the narrator's happiest childhood memories.

E. Loneliness and Alienation

The narrator repeatedly experiences loneliness:

- at boarding school,
- after his father's death,
- at the railway station,
- at his mother's house.

Even when surrounded by people, he feels emotionally isolated.

F. Memory and Nostalgia

Much of the essay consists of memories. The narrator remembers:

- Delhi,
- his father,
- Shimla,
- Craig-Dhu,
- Dehra,
- his grandparents,
- trees and gardens.

Memory becomes a way of preserving a past that can no longer be recovered.

G. Nature and Belonging

Nature is extremely important in Bond's writing. The forests, trees, gardens, hills, rain, earth and breeze create a sense of continuity. People change and disappear, but nature remains. This makes Dehra itself an important presence in the essay.

H. Emotional Neglect

The narrator experiences emotional neglect from adults. His mother does not welcome him warmly. His stepfather barely notices him. The school authorities treat his grief institutionally

rather than emotionally. This makes his father's earlier affection appear even more valuable.

10. Significance of the Title

Why is the title “Coming Home to Dehra” significant? The title has literal, emotional and ironical meanings.

Literal meaning: The narrator physically returns to Dehra after his time at boarding school.

Emotional meaning: He expects Dehra to be his home and hopes to regain a sense of belonging.

Ironical meaning: He discovers that the home he remembers no longer exists. His father, the person who made home meaningful, is dead. Dehra remains geographically familiar, but emotionally it has changed.

11. Character Analysis

The Narrator

The narrator is sensitive, observant, imaginative, affectionate, independent, and deeply attached to his father. His sensitivity is evident in the way he remembers small details: the smell of khus, damp earth, trees, letters and gardens.

The Father

The father is presented as the narrator's emotional ideal. He teaches him to read and write; spends time with him; encourages reading; shares his interests; takes him on walks; writes regularly; and makes future plans with him. His death creates the central emotional crisis of the essay.

The Mother

The mother is portrayed as emotionally distant. Her reception of the narrator is not openly hostile, but it lacks the warmth he had hoped for. Her brief kiss contrasts sharply with his father's affection.

The Stepfather

The stepfather is indifferent and detached. He is willing to tolerate the boy as long as the boy does not interfere with his life. His behaviour contributes to the narrator's feeling that he does not really belong in the household.

The Grandmother

The grandmother is one of the warmest figures in the essay. She is practical, outspoken, affectionate, protective, and concerned about the narrator. Her irritation at his mother's absence reveals her genuine concern for him.

The Headmaster

The headmaster represents institutional coldness. His treatment of the father's letters is particularly significant. Whether he deliberately keeps or simply forgets the letters, his denial becomes a deeply painful experience for the young narrator.

12. Important Symbols

The Father's Letters symbolize love, memory, emotional connection, and the narrator's continuing relationship with his father. Their loss represents another form of loss after the father's death.

The Train symbolizes transition: from childhood with his father to a new and uncertain life.

The Railway Station symbolizes uncertainty and emotional abandonment. The narrator expects someone to receive him, but nobody comes.

The Trees and Garden represent continuity, memory and belonging. Nature remains familiar even when human relationships have changed.

The Window at the end suggests a quiet separation between the narrator and the world around him. He retreats into his own private space and observes the garden from there.

13. Important Exam Questions and Answers

Q1. Who is the author of “Coming Home to Dehra”?

“Coming Home to Dehra” is an autobiographical essay by Ruskin Bond, one of India's best-known English writers. The essay draws upon his childhood experiences and explores memory, loss, childhood, family and the meaning of home.

Q2. Why was the narrator returning to Dehra?

The narrator was returning to Dehra after spending time at a boarding school in Shimla. His parents had separated earlier, and he had been living with his father. After his father's death, he was to return to his mother and stepfather in Dehra.

Q3. Why was the narrator so attached to his father?

The narrator shared a close and affectionate relationship with his father. They walked together, explored historical places, watched films, collected stamps, bought books and made plans to go to England. His father had also taught him to read and write. Thus, the father represented love, companionship, security and home.

Q4. Why was the narrator sent to boarding school?

His father suffered from recurring illnesses, particularly malaria, and was unable to look after him. Someone at Air Headquarters advised his father to send him to boarding school. Consequently, in June 1943, he was sent to a preparatory school in Shimla.

Q5. How does the narrator describe his boarding school?

He describes it as a rigid and emotionally cold institution. It considered itself the “Eton of the East” and followed traditions such as ragging, flogging, compulsory games, chapel attendance and elaborate school hierarchies. The narrator found it “stupid and heartless,” particularly after his father's death.

Q6. How did the narrator learn about his father's death?

His class teacher took him for a walk through the deodar forest and began talking about God wanting his father in a “higher and better place.” The narrator immediately understood that his father had died and burst into tears.

Q7. Why were his father's letters important to him?

The letters were the narrator's most precious connection with his father after being sent to boarding school. After his father's death, they became even more valuable because they preserved his father's presence and affection. Their disappearance therefore caused the narrator another painful loss.

Q8. Why did the headmaster's behaviour upset the narrator?

The headmaster had taken the father's letters for safekeeping and promised that the narrator could collect them later. However, when the narrator returned for them, the headmaster denied having received them. This made the narrator feel betrayed and angry and caused him to experience hatred towards the headmaster.

Q9. What happened when the narrator arrived at Dehra railway station?

He expected someone from his family to receive him, but nobody was there. After the crowd disappeared, he was left with an elderly coolie. The coolie helped him with his luggage, and the narrator went to the tonga stand and travelled to his grandmother's house.

Q10. How is Dehra described in the essay?

Dehra is presented as a lush and beautiful place. Bond describes its fertile soil, heavy rainfall, tree-lined roads and gardens containing mango, litchi, guava, neem, eucalyptus, jacaranda and other trees. The natural beauty of Dehra contrasts with the narrator's emotional loneliness.

Q11. What did the narrator discover when he reached his mother's house?

He discovered that his mother and stepfather had gone hunting to Motichur. He also learned, unexpectedly, that he had a six-month-old half-brother. The adults had apparently forgotten the exact date of his arrival.

Q12. Why was the narrator disappointed by his mother's reception?

The narrator had imagined returning home as a happy reunion. However, his mother gave him only a perfunctory kiss. He was accustomed to the much greater affection of his father. Her restrained reception therefore made him realize how much he had lost with his father's death.

Q13. Why does the narrator describe his father's death as a “vanishing”?

The narrator had not witnessed his father's death or funeral. Therefore, he could not fully comprehend the finality of death. To his childhood imagination, his father seemed to have simply disappeared. He could still imagine him alive and subconsciously expected him to return whenever he needed him.

Q14. What does the essay suggest about the meaning of “home”?

The essay suggests that home is not simply a physical location. It is created by love, affection, security and emotional relationships. For the narrator, home was primarily associated with his father. After his father's death, returning to Dehra could not recreate the home he remembered.

Q15. Discuss the role of the grandmother in the essay.

The grandmother provides the narrator with warmth and practical support when the rest of the family fails to welcome him properly. She is surprised that nobody has received him at the station and personally takes him to his mother's house. Her irritation with her daughter's behaviour demonstrates her concern for the boy. She therefore represents a small but important source of emotional security.

14. Long-Answer Questions

Q1. “Coming Home to Dehra is essentially a story of loss.” Discuss.

Loss is the central emotional experience of the essay. The narrator has already experienced the separation of his parents, and later he loses his beloved father. He is then separated from his father's letters when the headmaster refuses to return them. His return to Dehra brings further emotional disappointment because his mother and stepfather do not even meet him at the station, and his mother greets him with only a brief kiss. He also loses the sense of being the centre of anyone's attention, since the household now includes a baby half-brother he never knew about.

Bond's treatment of the father's death is especially moving. Because the boy never saw his father's death or burial, he cannot accept it as final; his father has merely “vanished.” This leaves his grief unresolved and quietly present throughout the homecoming. The title is ironic: he comes home physically, but the person who made it home is gone. The essay's quiet ending, with the boy alone at his window looking at the garden, leaves the reader with a lasting sense of loneliness and loss.

Q2. Examine how Ruskin Bond explores the idea of “home” in the essay.

For the narrator, home is not a building or town but a relationship. During his years with his father, even a tent near Humayun's Tomb felt like home, because of the walks, books, stamps, films and plans they shared. After his father's death, Dehra, though full of familiar trees and gardens, offers no such warmth. His mother is distant, his stepfather indifferent, and nobody meets him at the station.

Only the grandmother and the natural surroundings offer comfort. Nature provides continuity when people do not, and the closing image of the garden suggests that the boy takes consolation from his surroundings and his own private space. Bond thus shows that home is built from love and memory, and that when those are lost, physical return cannot restore it.