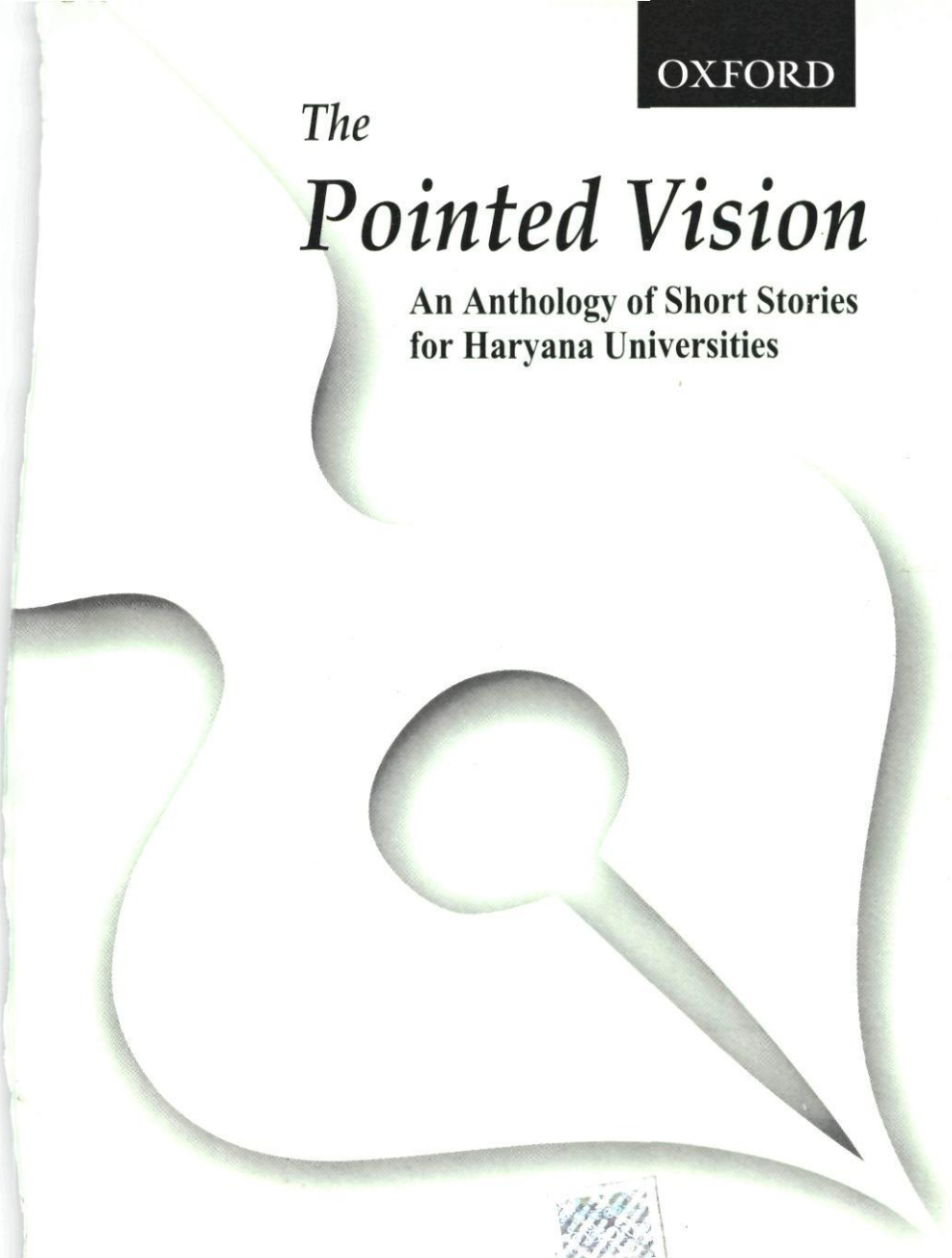


OXFORD

The

Pointed Vision

An Anthology of Short Stories
for Haryana Universities



Edited by
Dr Usha Bande
Krishan Gopal

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An Anthology of Short Stories for
B.A. Part-I (General English) Students
of Haryana Universities

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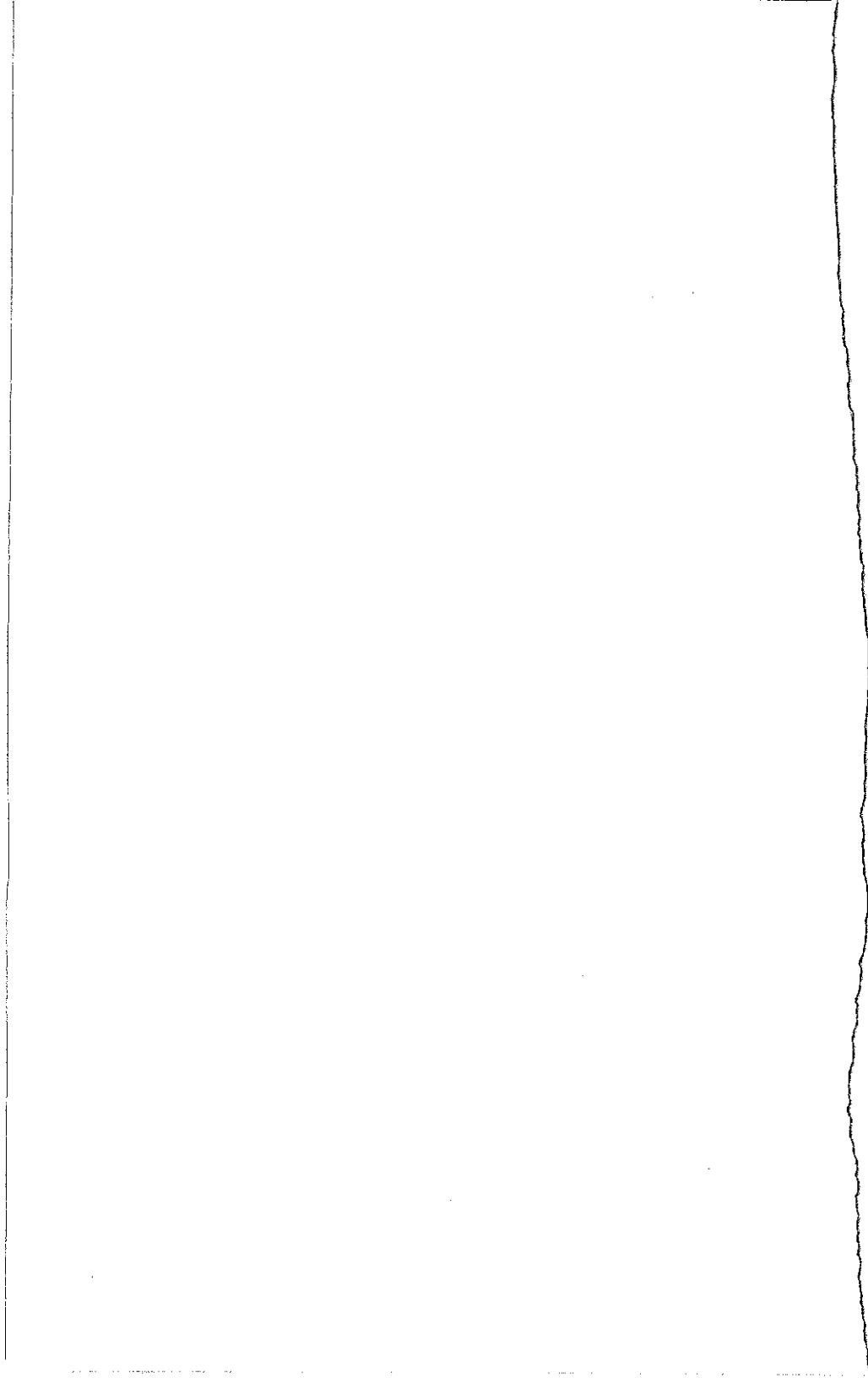
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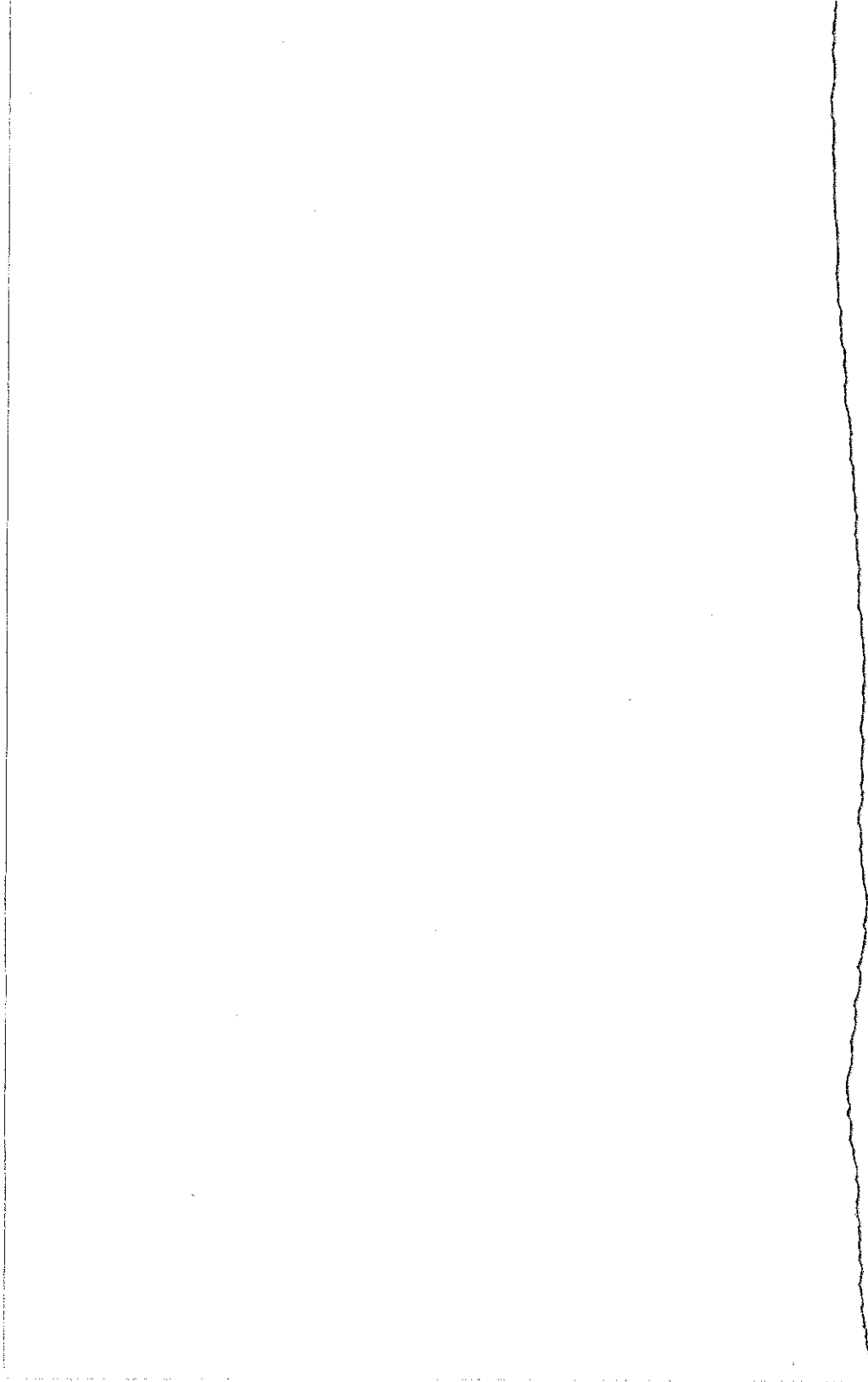


For permission to use copyright material in this volume, thanks are due to the following:

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Preface



“The story form is deeply rooted in human metabolism,” says Dr Atma Ram, an eminent educationist and writer. Although story is as old as the oral tradition, it was not until the nineteenth century that it assumed its present artistic form. The short story has been variously defined as “a story usually about imaginary characters and events, that is short enough to be read from beginning to end without stopping,” or as “a record of things happening, full of incident, accident, swift movement, unexpected development leading through suspense to a climax and a satisfying denouement.” It is the harmony of all these effects that holds the key to a good story.

With a shift in the age-old values and sensibilities, the very concept of modern short story has undergone a transformation. There is a shift in emphasis from the plot-oriented tales to characters and situations of contemporary life without imparting a direct lesson in practical ethics. Life is no longer seen as a chronologically arranged sequence of events, but a complex network of feelings, emotions, motives, and memories. The contemporary writer presents only some sinister aspect of modern life or the character of a person, exposing his psychological subtleties. Instead of elaborating the whole plot, the writer takes up the most significant and critical moment and builds on that alone. Hence, there are no multifarious relationships of characters and no multiplicity of settings. The final result is a pointed vision, a slice of life. Such a bold departure from the traditional formulae has widened the range and interest of modern short story.

However, despite its new look, the contemporary short story still remains a cultivated form. “A well contrived story is a delight to read: whether the contrivance is elementary as in O’ Henry, consummate as in Chekhov, polished out of recognition as in Turgnev or facile as in Maupassant,” says Ka Naa Subramanyam.

In the present selection containing ten short stories, an attempt has been made to present a wide spectrum of stories written by well known writers. There is humour, pathos, suspense and sometimes even a sting-in-the-tail. It is hoped that the collection will not only whet the literary appetite of the

students, but will also train them in the nuances of language. The notes, sample questions and glossaries will also help them get a better grasp over the text.

We express our thanks to all authors and publishers who have very kindly permitted us to include herein their stories.

The publishers have made every effort to trace owners of copyright of other works used in the book. The publishers would be glad to hear from those who they have not been able to trace and from whom they have had no response.

Dr Usha Bande
Krishan Gopal

The Bet

ANTON TCHEKHOV



Anton Pavlovitch Tchekhov (1860–1904) is a world-famous Russian playwright and short story writer. Born at Taganrog in South Russia as the third child in the family of a poverty-ridden grocer, Chekhov joined Moscow University for his Degree in Medicine and completed it in 1884. He started writing sketches and stories during his student career to relieve the financial burden to some extent. He never practised medicine regularly, for he found fiction and drama more congenial. His first works were humorous stories, but about 1886 he turned to serious subjects. His gaiety was not crushed by the poverty of his early years nor by his long and losing struggle against pulmonary consumption which he contracted during his student career. In 1901, Tchekhov married the actress Olga Knipper. In 1904 he went abroad for cure to Badenweiler and died there on July, 2, 1904. His body was buried in Moscow. His two chief plays are *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. Some of his best short stories are: *The Bet*, *Ward No. 6* and *The Duel*. *The Duel* is almost of a novel's length.

In his plays and stories, Tchekhov presents the sordidness, ugliness and morbidity of life in its stark reality; but at the same time there is an unfailing note of kindness, hope and sympathy. He never deludes the readers with a trick-ending; rather he heightens the effect by revealing new aspects of life in commonplace situations and unsuspected shades of character in ordinary individuals, with utmost economy of words and without moralizing. The present translation by J. Middleton Murry and S.S. Koteliansky is reprinted from "Great Short Stories of the World" (Spring Books).

It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was pacing from corner to corner of his study, recalling to his mind the party he gave in the autumn fifteen years before. There were many clever people at the party and much interesting conversation. They talked among other things of capital punishment. The guests, among them not a few scholars and journalists, for the most part disapproved of capital punishment. They found it obsolete as a means of punishment, unfitted to a Christian State, and immoral. Some of them thought that capital punishment should be replaced universally by life-imprisonment.

"I don't agree with you," said the host. "I myself have experienced neither capital punishment nor life-imprisonment, but if one may judge *a priori*, then in my opinion capital punishment is more moral and more humane than

imprisonment. Execution kills instantly, life-imprisonment kills by degrees. Who is the more humane executioner, one who kills you in a few seconds or one who draws the life out of you incessantly, for years?"

"They're both equally immoral," remarked one of the guests, "because their purpose is the same, to take away life. The State is not God. It has no right to take away that which it cannot give back, if it should so desire."

Among the company was a lawyer, a young man of about twenty-five. On being asked his opinion, he said:

"Capital punishment and life-imprisonment are equally immoral; but if I were offered the choice between them, I would certainly choose the second. It's better to live somehow than not to live at all."

There ensued a lively discussion. The banker who was then younger and more nervous suddenly lost his temper, banged his fist on the table, and turning to the young lawyer, cried out:

"It's a lie. I bet you two millions you wouldn't stick in a cell even for five years."

"If you mean it seriously," replied the lawyer, "then I bet I'll stay not five but fifteen."

"Fifteen! Done!" cried the banker. "Gentlemen, I stake two millions."

"Agreed. You stake two millions, I my freedom," said the lawyer.

So this wild, ridiculous bet came to pass. The banker, who at that time had too many millions to count, spoiled and capricious, was beside himself with rapture. During supper he said to the lawyer jokingly:

"Come to your senses, young man, before it's too late. Two millions are nothing to me, but you stand to lose three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, because you'll never stick it out any longer. Don't forget either, you unhappy man, that voluntary is much heavier than enforced imprisonment. The idea that you have the right to free yourself at any moment will poison the whole of your life in the cell. I pity you."

And now the banker, pacing from corner to corner, recalled all this and asked himself:

"Why did I make this bet? What's the good? The lawyer loses fifteen years of his life and I throw away two millions. Will it convince people that capital punishment is worse or better than imprisonment for life? No, no! all stuff and rubbish. On my part, it was the caprice of a well-fed man; on the lawyer's, pure greed of gold."

He recollected further what happened after the evening party. It was decided that lawyer must undergo his imprisonment under the strictest observation, in a garden wing of the banker's house. It was agreed that during the period he would be deprived of the right to cross the threshold, to see living people, to hear human voices, and to receive letters and newspapers.

He was permitted to have a musical instrument, to read books, to write letters, to drink wine and smoke tobacco. By the agreement he could communicate, but only in silence, with the outside world through a little window specially constructed for this purpose. Everything necessary, books, music, wine, he could receive in any quantity by sending a note through the window. The agreement provided for all the minutest details, which made the confinement strictly solitary, and it obliged the lawyer to remain exactly fifteen years from twelve o'clock of November 14th, 1870, to twelve o'clock of November 14th, 1885. The least attempt on his part to violate the conditions, to escape if only for two minutes before the time, freed the banker from the obligation to pay him the two millions.

During the first year of imprisonment, the lawyer, as far as it was possible to judge from his short notes, suffered terribly from loneliness and boredom. From his window day and night came the sound of the piano. He rejected wine and tobacco. "Wine," he wrote, "excites desires, and desires are the chief foes of a prisoner; besides, nothing is more boring than to drink good wine alone," and tobacco spoiled the air in his room. During the first year the lawyer was sent books of a light character; novels with a complicated love interest, stories of crime and fantasy, comedies, and so on.

In the second year the piano was heard no longer and the lawyer asked only for classics. In the fifth year, music was heard again, and the prisoner asked for wine. Those who watched him said that during the whole of that year he was only eating, drinking, and lying on his bed. He yawned often and talked angrily to himself. Books he did not read. Sometimes at nights he would sit down to write. He would write then a long time and tear it all up in the morning. More than once he was heard to weep.

In the second half of the sixth year, the prisoner began zealously to study languages, philosophy, and history. He fell on these subjects so hungrily that the banker hardly had time to get books enough for him. In the space of four years about six hundred volumes were bought at his request. It was while that passion lasted that the banker received the following letter from the prisoner: "My dear jailer, I am writing these lines in six languages. Show them to experts. Let them read them. If they do not find one single mistake, I beg you to give orders to have a gun fired off in the garden. By the noise I shall know that my efforts have not been in vain. The geniuses of all ages and countries speak in different languages; but in them all burns the same flame. Oh, if you knew my heavenly happiness now that I can understand them!" The prisoner's desire was fulfilled. Two shots were fired in the garden by the banker's order.

Later on, after the tenth year, the lawyer sat immovable before his table and read only the New Testament. The banker found it strange that a man who in four years had mastered six hundred erudite volumes, should have spent

nearly a year in reading one book, easy to understand and by no means thick. The New Testament was then replaced by the history of religions and theology.

During the last two years of his confinement the prisoner read an extraordinary amount, quite haphazard. Now he would apply himself to the natural sciences, then he would read Byron or Shakespeare. Notes used to come from him in which he asked to be sent at the same time a book on chemistry, a textbook of medicine, a novel, and some treatise on philosophy or theology. He read as though he were swimming in the sea among broken pieces of wreckage, and in his desire to save his life was eagerly grasping one piece after another.

The banker recalled all this, and thought:

“Tomorrow at twelve o’clock he receives his freedom. Under the agreement, I shall have to pay him two millions. If I pay, it’s all over with me. I am ruined forever...”

Fifteen years before he had too many millions to count, but now he was afraid to ask himself which he had more of, money or debts. Gambling on the Stock-Exchange, risky speculation, and the recklessness of which he could not rid himself even in old age, had gradually brought his business to decay; and the fearless, self-confident, proud man of business had become an ordinary banker, trembling at every rise and fall in the market.

“That cursed bet,” murmured the old man clutching his head in despair.... “Why didn’t the man die? He’s only forty years old. He will take away my last farthing, marry, enjoy life, gamble on the Exchange, and I will look on like an envious beggar and hear the same words from him every day: ‘I’m obliged to you for the happiness of my life. Let me help you.’ No, it’s too much! The only escape from bankruptcy and disgrace—is that the man should die.”

The clock had just struck three. The banker was listening. In the house every one was asleep, and one could hear only the frozen trees whining outside the windows. Trying to make no sound, he took out of his safe the key of the door which had not be opened for fifteen years, put on his overcoat, and went out of the house. The garden was dark and cold. It was raining. A damp, penetrating wind howled in the garden and gave the trees no rest. Though he strained his eyes, the banker could see neither the ground, nor the white statues, nor the garden wing, nor the trees. Approaching the garden wing, he called the watchman twice. There was no answer. Evidently the watchman had taken shelter from the bad weather and was now asleep somewhere in the kitchen or the greenhouse.

“If I have the courage to fulfil my intention,” thought the old man, “the suspicion will fall on the watchman first of all.”

In the darkness he groped for the steps and the door and entered the hall of the garden-wing, then poked his way into a narrow passage and struck a

match. Not a soul was there. Someone's bed, with no bed-clothes on it, stood there, and an iron stove loomed dark in the corner. The seals on the door that led into the prisoner's room were unbroken.

When the match went out, the old man, trembling from agitation, peeped into the little window.

In the prisoner's room a candle was burning dimly. The prisoner himself sat by the table. Only his back, the hair on his head and his hands were visible. Open books were strewn about on the table, the two chairs, and on the carpet near the table.

Five minutes passed and the prisoner never once stirred. Fifteen years' confinement had taught him to sit motionless. The banker tapped on the window with his finger, but the prisoner made no movement in reply. Then the banker cautiously tore the seals from the door and put the key into the lock. The rusty lock gave a hoarse groan and the door creaked. The banker expected instantly to hear a cry of surprise and the sound of steps. Three minutes passed and it was as quiet inside as it had been before. He made up his mind to enter.

Before the table sat a man, unlike an ordinary human being. It was a skeleton, with tight-drawn skin, with long curly hair like a woman and a shaggy beard. The color of his face was yellow, of an earthy shade; the cheeks were sunken, the back long and narrow, and the hand upon which he leaned his hairy head was so lean and skinny that it was painful to look upon. His hair was already silvering with grey, and no one who glanced at the senile emaciation of the face, would have believed that he was only forty years old. On the table, before his bended head, lay a sheet of paper on which something was written in a tiny hand.

"Poor devil," thought the banker, "he's asleep and probably seeing millions in his dreams. I have only to take and throw this half-dead thing on the bed, smother him a moment with the pillow, and the most careful examination will find no trace of unnatural death. But first, let us read what he has written here."

The banker took the sheet from the table and read:

"Tomorrow at twelve o'clock midnight, I shall obtain my freedom and the right to mix with people. But before I leave this room and see the Sun I think it necessary to say a few words to you. On my own clear conscience and before God who sees me I declare to you that I despise freedom, life, health, and all that your books call the blessings of the world.

"For fifteen years I have diligently studied earthly life. True, I saw neither the earth nor the people, but in your books I drank fragrant wine, sang songs, hunted deer and wild boar in the forests, loved women.... And beautiful women, like clouds ethereal, created by the magic of your poet's genius, visited me by night and whispered to me wonderful tales, which made my head drunken. In

your books I climbed the summits of Elbruz and Mont Blanc and saw from there how the sun rose in the morning, and in the evening suffused the sky, the ocean and the mountain ridges with a purple gold. I saw from there how above me lightnings glimmered, cleaving the clouds; I saw green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, cities; I heard sirens singing, and the playing of the pipes of Pan; I touched the wings of beautiful devils who came flying to me to speak of God.... In your books I cast myself into bottomless abysses, worked miracles, burned cities to the ground, preached new religions, conquered whole countries....

“Your books gave me wisdom. All that unwearying human thought created in the centuries is compressed to a little lump in my skull. I know that I am cleverer than you all.

“And I despise your books, despise all wordly blessings and wisdom. Everything is void, frail, visionary and delusive as a mirage. Though you be proud and wise and beautiful, yet will death wipe you from the face of the earth like the mice underground; and your posterity, your history, and the immortality of your men of genius will be as frozen slag, burnt down together with the terrestrial globe.

“You are mad, and gone the wrong way. You take falsehood for truth and ugliness for beauty. You would marvel if suddenly apple and orange trees should bear frogs and lizards instead of fruit, and if roses should begin to breathe the odor of a sweating horse. So do I marvel at you, who have bartered heaven for earth. I do not want to understand you.

“That I may show you in deed my contempt for that by which you live, I waive the two millions of which I once dreamed as of paradise, and which I now despise. That I may deprive myself of my right to them, I shall come out from here five minutes before the stipulated term, and thus shall violate the agreement.”

When he had read, the banker put the sheet on the table, kissed the head of the strange man, and began to weep. He went out of the wing. Never at any other time, not even after his terrible losses on the Exchange, had he felt such contempt for himself as now. Coming home, he lay down on his bed, but agitation and tears kept him a long time from sleeping....

The next morning the poor watchman came running to him and told him that they had seen the man who lived in the wing climb through the window into the garden. He had gone to the gate and disappeared. The banker instantly went with his servants to the wing and established the escape of his prisoner. To avoid unnecessary rumors he took the paper with the renunciation from the table and, on his return, locked it in his safe.

Outline

A rich banker hosts a party in which many top scholars join. A lively discussion on “Capital punishment versus Life imprisonment” takes place leading to a capricious and ridiculous bet between the banker and a young lawyer. While the banker stakes two million, the lawyer offers to undergo voluntary confinement for 15 years in the garden wing of the banker’s house. All the terms and conditions governing the bet are settled to the minutest details.

During the first four years of confinement, the “prisoner” goes through six hundred erudite volumes. Later, he is obsessed with the study of languages and masters six of them. In the tenth year he concentrates solely on *The New Testament* and later, on religion and theology. Thereafter, his choice of books becomes haphazard.

When the story opens, there is only a day left for the fulfilment of the bet and the banker, instead of conceding defeat, is restless at the prospect of having to part with two million. Dark thoughts of smothering the emaciated lawyer to death fill his mind. With such heinous designs he goes inside the prisoner’s room but happens to read the prisoner’s letter lying on the table. That philosophical letter proclaiming renunciation, reveals how the prisoner had reached the heights of wisdom by imbibing the content of books. He is able to experience life by learning from others’ experiences and arrives at the reality that the world is a delusion, a mirage. In order to prove his contempt for the ways of the world in actual deed, he waives two million by deliberately violating the agreement by coming out just five minutes before the stipulated term. This letter puts the banker to shame and he goes back to weep in isolation and self-contempt.

The story shows how a poor lawyer who once dreamed of paradise in money, attains the heights of sublimity, while the rich banker suffers a decline both morally and materially. By spurning wealth when he had attained spiritual gems, the lawyer is also successful in proving *a posteriori* the *a priori* notion that years of confinement can and do have a sobering effect on the individual and can transform his life. Thus in “*The Bet*” the writer shows all the cynicism, fatalism, bitterness, pettiness and viciousness that can result from a simple jest.

Glossary

Capital punishment	punishment by death
obsolete	no longer used because something new has been invented
<i>a priori</i>	from forms of cognition independent of experience.
humane	showing kindness towards people and animals by making sure that they do not suffer more than is necessary.

execution	the act of killing somebody, especially as a legal punishment.
ensue	to happen as a result of another event; follow
ridiculous	very silly or unreasonable
capricious	showing sudden change in attitude or behaviour
rapture	a feeling of extreme pleasure and happiness
stick it out	to continue doing something to the end even when it is difficult
threshold	a floor or ground at the bottom of a doorway considered as entrance to a building or room
fantasy	product of one's imagination
classics	books which are well known and considered to be of very high quality setting standards for other books
erudite	having or showing great knowledge that is gained from academic study
theology	the study of religion and beliefs
confinement	the state of being forced to stay in a closed space, prison, etc.
haphazard	with no particular order or plan
treatise	a long and serious piece of writing on a particular subject
wreckage	the parts of a ship that remain after it has been damaged
speculation	the activity of buying and selling goods or shares in a company in the hope of making a profit, but with the risk of losing money
farthing	an old British coin worth one quarter of an old penny
greenhouse	a building with glass sides and glass roof for growing plants in
strewn about	to be spread or lying over a surface
shaggy	having long and untidy hair
skinny	very thin
senile	behaving in a confused or strange way and unable to remember things because of old age
emaciation	thin and weak, usually because of illness or lack of food
smother	to kill somebody by covering their face so that they cannot breathe
boar	a wild pig
ethereal	extremely delicate and light; seeming to belong to another, more spiritual world
abyss	very deep wide space or hole that seems to have no bottom
cleverer	more intelligent, wiser
void	a large empty space
delusive	the act of believing or making yourself believe that something is not true

posterity	all the people that will live in the future
terrestrial	connected with the planet earth
marvel	a wonderful and surprising person or thing
odor (AmE)	
odour (BrE)	Smell, especially one that is unpleasant
barter	to exchange goods, property, services, etc. for other goods, etc. without using money
waive	to choose not to demand something in a particular case even though you have a legal or official right
renunciation	the act of stating publicly that you are giving up something; the act of rejecting physical pleasures especially for religious reasons
sirens	(in ancient greek stories) any of a group of sea creatures that were part woman, part bird, whose beautiful singing made sailors sail towards them into rocks or dangerous waters
pipes of Pan	Pan is the Greek god of pastures, flocks and woods worshipped in Arcadia. He is very fond of the Syrinx, a musical instrument made of reeds of different lengths, fastened in a row.

Suggested Short-answer Questions

1. Why was the banker feeling restless on the last day of the completion of the young lawyer's fifteen-year imprisonment term?
2. Why did the banker think capital punishment more moral and humane as compared to life imprisonment?
3. Why did the lawyer reject wine and tobacco during the first year of his imprisonment?
4. How did the prisoner remove his loneliness during the first year of his term?
5. Two shots were fired in the garden by the banker's order. Why?
6. During the last two years of his confinement, the prisoner's choice of books was quite haphazard. What did this indicate?
7. "If I pay, it's all over with me. I am ruined for ever," said the banker. Why?
8. What physical changes had taken place in the lawyer during the period of confinement?
9. "If I have the courage to fulfill my intention," thought the banker, "the suspicion will fall on the watchman." What was his intention?
10. How did the lawyer show his contempt for the worldly ways in actual deed?
11. Why did the banker weep and feel contempt for himself at the end of the story?

Suggested Long-answer Questions

1. What were the terms of the bet between the banker and the lawyer?
2. What were the contents of the Renunciation Letter that the prisoner wrote to the banker?
3. Describe the ending of the story. Is it convincing?
4. Draw a pen-portrait of the banker.
5. Draw a character-sketch of the lawyer.
6. What is the message of the story 'The Bet'?

The Gift of the Magi

O. HENRY



O'Henry (1862–1910) is a prolific short story writer of America and a master of surprises. His stories with their undercurrent of humour, the interplay of chance and coincidence and twist in the tail, have held the readers spellbound and have acquired a permanent place for the author in the literary world. O'Henry was the pen name of **William Sydney Porter**. Born in Greenboro, North Carolina, William was brought up by his parental grandmother. During his boyhood, he heard his aunt narrating stories to the neighbouring children, which kindled his interest in stories. However, it took long for his art to flourish because of various personal problems. In 1884, Porter started a weekly, which failed and landed him in trouble. Later he joined the *Houston Post*, but was implicated in embezzlement and imprisoned. While serving his term in prison, he started writing short stories under the pseudonym O'Henry, the name of a cat he was fond of. Soon, O'Henry's stories caught the attention of the readers and were in high demand. 'The Gift of the Magi', written for the Christmas issue of *New York Sunday World*, captured the fancy of millions of Americans and it still remains one of the best loved stories of O'Henry. It has found place in school and college anthologies as well as in various editions of short stories. The James Dillingham Young couple is modelled on O'Henry and his wife Athol and the special care with which he portrays the petite and charming Della eloquently speaks of his love for Athol.

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out of the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a

garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out of the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mme. Sofronie, Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie."

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand. "Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove, hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit for saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The Magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me

like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White and nimble fingers tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The Magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi.

Outline

'The Gift of the Magi' is acclaimed as a charming Christmas story. Apparently, it pertains to the exchange of gifts on Christmas, a tradition established by the

Magi who brought gifts for baby Jesus, but at deeper level, it shows the futility of material gifts and eulogizes love underlying the act of giving and receiving presents. The author compares Jim and Della to the Magi who recognized the divinity of Christ. Selfless lovers like Jim and Della are also the Magi of our times because they recognize the sublime character of love. Jim and Della, the young couple of the story are motivated by their love to buy the best Christmas gifts for each other. They are not well off and whatever savings Della has are insufficient to buy anything worthwhile. Della sells her beautiful hair and buys an expensive platinum watch chain for Jim. Jim buys an expensive pair of jewelled hair combs for Della after selling his watch. They discover that their gifts are rendered unusable, but they acknowledge that the spirit behind their gifts is the real spirit of Christmas, the spirit of mutual love, understanding and sacrifice that strengthens their relation. O'Henry seems to have deployed his skill at characterization to the full to paint Della as a charming, vivacious young woman. In fact, the Della of the story is modelled on O'Henry's first wife Athol and the story is based on a real life situation.

Glossary

Magi	Three wise men from the East who brought gifts for baby Jesus. These gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh
bulldozing	bullying
imputation	charge
parsimony	frugality, economy in spending
close dealing	haggling
flop down	fall down
mendicancy	beggarly
howl	cry, to utter a long, loud, whining sound
vestibule	entrance
appertaining unto	belonging to
contracting	shrinking
does not go far	does not last long
pier-glass	a tall mirror
Queen of Sheba	Known for her wealth. Della's hair would have devalued even the treasure of the Queen of Sheba
Solomon	The great and wealthy king of Israel (10 th Century B.C.) known for his wisdom.
janitor	caretaker
faltered	hesitated
agile	active
slender	slim
cascade	(actually a waterfall) here it is used in connection with the wavy fall of her hair

sparkle	shine
ransacking	searching
prudence	wisdom
fob chain	watch chain
meretricious	gaudy or flashy
truant schoolboy	she looked like a schoolboy who absents himself from school. Truant is used for an idler who absents himself from school without reason
chorus girl	chorus is a band of singers and dancers, particularly in Greek plays; also, a company of dancers and singers. Chorus girl is a woman employed to sing and dance
quail	a bird of partridge family
wiggled off	moved away
trance	dazed condition
Babe in the manger	Baby Jesus because he was born in a manger
craved and yearned	had strong desire

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. Who were the Magi according to the Biblical story?
2. What was the total saving of Della? How did she save the amount and why did she require the money?
3. Why did Della fall down on the bed and cry?
4. Describe Jim and Della's home, the entrance and the nameplate bearing Jim's name.
5. "Della stood by the window and looked at the grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey background." What is the significance of grey here? Can you relate it to Della?
6. What present did Della buy for Jim?
7. Why was Della nervous before Jim's arrival?
8. Why does the author call Jim and Della the wisest of all people?
9. Describe Della's trip to Mme. Sofronie's shop.

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. Describe the two valuable possessions of the Youngs. How does the author show their value?
2. Describe Della's feelings and her reactions before and after Jim's return from office.
3. Justify the title of the story.
4. Of the two who made a greater sacrifice—Jim or Della? Justify your answer.
5. Give the description of the presents bought by Jim and Della.
6. Give in your own words the theme of the story.
7. Draw the character sketch of (i) Jim (ii) Della.

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8. Describe Della's hair and Jim's watch.
9. Write a brief account of Della's actions and emotions from the time she counts her cash till arrival of Jim and the final discovery.

The Postmaster

RABINDRANATH TAGORE



Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the Nobel laureate, needs no introduction. Writer, poet, philosopher, and an artist par excellence, he can rightly be called our cultural ambassador to the rest of the world. Tagore was born on May 7, 1861 in a wealthy family in Calcutta. He was tutored at home as conventional schooling did not appeal to his genius. At the age of seven, Rabindranath wrote a verse and attracted attention for his poetic gift. In 1874, his first poem *Abhilasha* (Desire) was published anonymously: for some time thereafter he wrote under the pseudonym of Bhanusingha but soon shifted to using his real name for his poems and stories. In 1901 he took the editorial charge of *Bangadarshan*, got involved with the freedom struggle, wrote a number of patriotic songs, protested against the division of Bengal on the basis of religion and attended protest meetings. In 1909 he started writing *Gitanjali* and in 1911 he composed the *Jan Gana Mana* which became our National anthem after our Independence. In 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, the first Asian to receive this honour. In 1921, he established the Vishwabharati University at Shantiniketan and donated all his money from the Nobel Prize and royalty money from his books to the University. Rabindranath travelled widely, delivering lectures, attending meetings and spreading goodwill. He holds a high place in the field of literature for his immaculate verses, plays, charming short stories, novels and thought provoking prose pieces; he has also left his mark on music and painting. His short stories are simple in construction but they show the author's deep understanding of human psyche. 'The Postmaster' is one such story that appeals to the heart.

The postmaster took up his duties first in the village of Ulapur. Though the village was small, there was an indigo factory near it, and the proprietor, an Englishman, had managed to get a post office established.

Our postmaster belonged to Calcutta. He felt like a fish out of water in this remote village. His office and living-room were in a dark thatched shed, not far from a green, slimy pond, surrounded on all sides by a dense growth.

The men employed in the indigo factory had no leisure; moreover, they were hardly desirable companions for decent folk. Nor is a Calcutta boy an adept in the art of associating with others. Among strangers he appears either

proud or ill at ease. At any rate, the postmaster had but little company; nor had he much work to do.

At times he tried his hand at writing verse. That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy—such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as the gift of a new life, if some genie of the *Arabian Nights* had in one night swept away the trees, leaves and all, and substituted for them a macadamised road, and had hidden the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.

The postmaster's salary was small. He had to cook his own meals, which he used to share with Ratan, an orphan girl of the village, who did odd jobs for him.

When in the evening, the smoke began to curl upwards from the village cow-sheds, and the cicadas chirped in every bush; when the mendicants of the Baul sect sang their shrill songs in their daily meeting place; when any poet, who had attempted to watch the movement of the leaves in the dense bamboo thickets, would have felt a ghostly shiver run down his back, the postmaster would light his little lamp, and call out 'Ratan.'

Ratan would sit outside waiting for his call, and instead of coming in at once, would reply, 'Did you call me Sir?'

'What are you doing?' the postmaster would ask.

'I must go and light the kitchen fire,' she would reply.

And the postmaster would say: 'Oh let the kitchen fire wait for a while; light me my pipe first.'

At last Ratan would enter, with puffed-out cheeks, vigorously blowing into a flame a live coal to light the tobacco. This would give the postmaster an opportunity of chatting with her. 'Well, Ratan,' perhaps he would begin, 'do you remember anything of your mother?' That was a fertile subject. Ratan partly remembered, and partly forgot. Her father had been fonder of her than her mother: him she recollected more vividly. He used to come home in the evening after his works, and one or two evenings stood out more clearly than others, like pictures in her memory. Ratan would sit on the floor near the postmaster's feet as memories crowded in upon her. She called to mind a little brother that she had—and how on some bygone cloudy day she had played at fishing with him on the edge of the pond, with a twig for a fishing-rod. Such little incidents would drive out greater events from her mind. Thus, as they talked, it would often get very late, and the postmaster would feel too lazy to do any cooking at all. Ratan would then hastily light the fire, and toast some unleavened bread, which with the cold remnants of the morning meal, was enough for their supper.

On some evenings, seated at his desk in the corner of the big empty shed, the postmaster too would call up memories of his own home, of his mother and his sister, of those for whom in his exile his heart was sad,—memories which were always haunting him, but which he could not reveal to the men of the factory, though he found himself naturally recalling them aloud in the presence of the simple little girl. And so it came about that the girl would allude to his people as mother, brother, and sister, as if she had known them all her life. Indeed, she had a complete picture of each one of them painted in her heart.

One day, at noon, during a break in the rains, there was a cool soft breeze blowing; the smell of the damp grass and leaves in the hot sun felt like the warm breathing on one's body of the tired earth. A persistent bird repeated all the afternoon the burden of its one complaint in Nature's audience chamber.

The postmaster had nothing to do. The shimmer of freshly washed leaves, and the banked-up remnants of the retreating rain-clouds were sights to see; and the postmaster was watching them and thinking to himself: 'Oh, if only some kindred soul were near—just one loving human being whom I could hold near my heart!' This was exactly, he went on to think, what that bird was trying to say, and it was the same feeling which the murmuring leaves were striving to express. But no one knows, or would believe, that such an idea might also take possession of an ill-paid village postmaster in the deep, silent midday interval in his work.

The postmaster sighed, and called out 'Ratan.' Ratan was then stretched at full length beneath the guava-tree, busily engaged in eating unripe guavas. At the voice of her master, she ran up breathlessly, saying: 'Did you call me, Dada?' 'I was thinking of teaching you to read,' said the postmaster. And then for the rest of the afternoon he taught her the alphabet.

Thus, in a very short time, Ratan had got as far as the double consonants.

It seemed as though the rains would never end. Canals, ditches, and hollows were all flooded with water. Day and night the patter of rain was heard, and the croaking of frogs. The village roads became impassable, and marketing had to be done in punts.

One heavily clouded morning, the postmaster's little pupil had been waiting long outside the door to be called, but as the usual summons did not come, she took up her dog-eared book, and slowly entered the room. She found her master lying on his bed, and thinking he was resting, she was about to retire on tiptoe, when she suddenly heard her name—'Ratan!' She turned at once and asked: 'Were you asleep, Dada?' The postmaster in a weak voice replied: 'I am not well. Feel my head; is it very hot?'

In the loneliness of his exile, and in the gloom of the rains, he needed a little tender nursing. He longed to call to mind the touch on his forehead of

soft hands with tinkling bracelets, to imagine the presence of loving womanhood, the nearness of mother and sister. And the exile was not disappointed. Ratan ceased to be a little girl. She at once stepped into the post of mother, called in the village doctor, gave the patient his pills at the proper intervals, sat up all night by his pillow, cooked his gruel for him, and every now and then asked: 'Are you feeling a little better Dada?'

It was some time before the postmaster, though still weak, was able to leave his sickbed. 'No more of this,' said he with decision, 'I must apply for a transfer from this place.' He wrote off at once to Calcutta an application for a transfer, on the ground of the unhealthiness of the spot.

Relieved from her duties as nurse, Ratan again took up her former place outside the door. But she no longer heard the same old call. She would sometimes furtively peep inside to find the postmaster sitting on his chair, or stretched on his bed, and gazing absently into the air. While Ratan was awaiting her call, the postmaster was awaiting a reply to his application. The girl read her old lessons over and over again—her great fear was lest, when the call came, she might be found wanting in the double consonants. After a week's waiting, one evening her summons came. With an overflowing heart Ratan rushed into the room and cried, as she used to cry: 'Did you call me, Dada?'

The postmaster said: 'I am going away tomorrow, Ratan.'

'Where are you going, Dada?'

'I am going home.'

'When will you come back?'

'I am not coming back.'

Ratan asked *no more*. The postmaster, of his own accord, went on to tell her that his application for a transfer had been rejected, so he had resigned his post and was going home.

For a long time neither of them spoke. The lamp burned dimly, and from a leak in one corner of the thatch water dripped steadily into an earthen vessel on the floor beneath.

After a while Ratan rose, and went off to the kitchen to prepare the meal; but she was not so quick about it as before. Many new things to think of had entered her little brain. When the postmaster had finished his supper, the girl suddenly asked him 'Dada, will you take me home with you?'

The postmaster laughed. 'What an idea!' said he. But he did not think it necessary to explain to the girl wherein lay the absurdity of such a course.

That whole night, awake and asleep, the postmaster's laughing reply haunted her—'What an idea!'

When he woke up in the morning, the postmaster found his bath ready. He had continued his Calcutta habit of bathing in water drawn and kept in pictures, instead of taking a plunge in the river as was the custom of the village.

For some reason or other, the girl could not ask him the time of his departure, she had therefore fetched the water from the river long before sunrise, so that it should be ready as soon as he might want it. After the bath came a call for Ratan. She entered without a sound, and looked silently into her master's face for orders. The master said: 'You need not be anxious about my going away, Ratan: I shall tell my successor to look after you.' These words were kindly meant, no doubt: But inscrutable are the ways of a woman's heart!

Ratan had borne many a scolding from her master without complaint, but these kind words she could not bear. She burst out weeping, and said: 'No, no, you need not tell anybody anything at all about me; I don't want to stay here any longer.'

The postmaster was dumbfounded. He had never seen Ratan like this before.

The new man duly arrived, and the postmaster gave over charge, and prepared to depart. Just before starting he called Ratan and said: 'Here is something for you: I hope it will keep you for some little time.' He brought out from his pocket the whole of his month's salary, retaining only a trifle for the journey. Then Ratan fell at his feet and cried: 'O, Dada pray don't give me anything, don't in any way trouble about me,' and then she ran away out of sight.

The postmaster heaved a sigh, took up his bag, put his umbrella over his shoulder, and accompanied by a man carrying his many-coloured tin trunk, slowly made for the boat.

When he got in and the boat was under way, and the rain-swollen river, like a stream of tears welling up from the earth, swirled and sobbed at her bows, then he felt grieved at heart; the sorrow-stricken face of a village girl seemed to represent for him the great unspoken pervading grief of Mother Earth herself. At one moment he felt an impulse to go back and bring away with him that lonely waif, forsaken of the world. But the wind had just filled the sails, the boat had got well into the middle of the turbulent current, and already the village was left behind, and its outlying burning-ground had come into sight.

So the traveller, borne on the breast of the swift-flowing river, consoled himself with philosophical reflections on the world, and on death, the great parting, from which there is no return.

But Ratan had no philosophy. She was wandering about the post office with the tears streaming from her eyes. It may be that she had still a hope lurking in some corner of her heart that her Dada would return, and perhaps that is why she could not tear herself away. Alas, for our foolish human nature! Its fond mistakes are persistent. The dictates of reason take a long time to assert their sway.

The surest proofs meanwhile are disbelieved. One clings desperately to some vain hope, till a day comes when it has sucked the heart dry and then it breaks through its bonds and departs. After that comes the misery of awakening, and then once again the longing to get back into the maze of the same mistakes.

Outline

'The Postmaster' is a simple but moving story of a girl's emotional attachment to the postmaster who is posted to the remote village of Ulapur. Ratan, an adolescent village girl works for him and calls him Dada, elder brother. The postmaster belongs to Calcutta (now Kolkata) and feels lonely in the village. Besides, he has nothing in common with the indigo factory workers with whom he cannot exchange his thoughts and feelings. In order to pass his evenings he engages Ratan in conversation, asks her about her family, tells her about his mother and sister, and also starts teaching her. Ratan nurses him when he falls sick and it is during this period that the woman in her feels attached to her benefactor. He, however, does not understand the girl's sentiments for him. The postmaster leaves his job when his transfer application does not get through. His departure leaves the girl broken and desolate. The postmaster has his philosophy to comfort her but Ratan has only an aching heart. One has to read between the lines to comprehend Ratan's psychology painted with subtle touches and an undercurrent of empathy for an adolescent girl.

This story was written when Tagore was at Shahjadpur, a small village where the arrival of the new postmaster became news. In one of his letters written in February 1891, Tagore wrote the following description of the postmaster who later became the protagonist of his story:

The postmaster sometimes comes in the evenings, and tells me many a story about the postal service. The post office is on the ground floor of our estate lodge—a great convenience, for letters are received as soon as they arrive. I love to hear his tales. He has a way of relating the most impossible stuff with extreme gravity.

Glossary

indigo	a violet-blue dye obtained from the leaves of the indigo plant. It is called 'neel' in Hindi
fish out of water	out of place, hence restless and uncomfortable
remote	distant (here it has a sense of being lonely; also away from town)
slimy	muddy and covered with the greenish brown substance that is foul smelling and slippery
adept	skilled

ill at ease	uncomfortable
genie	'jinnee' or a supernatural being; plural Jinn (from the Arabic)
Arabian Nights	These are a thousand and one stories; popular among them are Aladin's Lamp, Alibaba and Forty Thieves, Sindbad's adventures.
macadamized	covered with small broken stones so as to form a smooth hard surface.
Cicadas	an insect known for its loud chirping sound
vigorously	with force
fertile	inventive, yielding rich results (here it means a subject on which much could be said)
squat	to sit on heels
make-believe	imaginary
remnants	left-over
unleavened	made without yeast therefore flat (chapattis or roti in Hindi)
allude to	refer to
persistent	insistent
kindred soul	near and dear one
sprawling	lying down carelessly
Dada	elder brother in Bengali and many other Indian languages
double consonants	In Devnagri and other Indian scripts, combined letters like ksh
impassable	difficult to walk on or cross, also impenetrable or blocked
punt	a long shallow boat with a flat bottom and square ends which is moved by pushing the end of a long pole against the bottom of a river
pallet	flat wooden bed
inscrutable	difficult to understand
swirled	moved quickly in a circular motion, eddy, churn
waif	a homeless wanderer

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. Why and with whose efforts was the post office established in Ulapur?
2. Describe the office and the residence of the postmaster, and his relations with the indigo factory workers. Why could he not be friendly with them?
3. Who did odd jobs for the postmaster and what was the nature of her work?
4. How does Ratan remember her family?
5. Describe the illness of the postmaster and his emotional condition.
6. Describe Ratan's role as a nurse during the postmaster's illness.
7. What were the various methods adopted by the postmaster to pass his time?

8. What were the postmaster's thoughts when he started his journey homeward?
9. Why did Ratan reject the postmaster's offer of money as well as his offer to get her employed with the new postmaster?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. Describe the typical evening scene in the village with reference to the postmaster's feelings.
2. Give a pen-picture of (i) Ratan's family and her childhood memories, (ii) the postmaster's family and Ratan's identification with them.
3. Give a brief account of the rainy season in the village and the various sights and sounds of nature that moved the postmaster. Could he write verses being so motivated? What were his thoughts on rain-soaked evenings?
4. "Ratan ceased to be a little girl." Explain this line with reference to Ratan's role as a nurse and the changes in her adolescent psyche.
5. What was Ratan's reaction to the postmaster's decision to leave the village? What was her state of mind later?
6. Draw a pen-picture of (i) Ratan, (ii) the postmaster.
7. "But Ratan had no philosophy...." Compare and contrast Ratan's emotional state with the postmaster's philosophical broodings.
8. What is pathos? Bring out the pathos of the story 'The Postmaster'.
9. Who do you think is the real sufferer in the story and why?
10. "The entire focus of the story *The Postmaster* is on the postmaster, his daily routine, his boredom and departure but in reality it is the story of Ratan's growing up." Do you agree with this statement? Discuss with reference to the events of the story.

Three Questions

LEO TOLSTOY



Leo Tolstoy (1825–1910), the Russian novelist and short story writer, is one of the greatest figures of world literature. He is loved and revered as much for his powerful writings as for his deeply religious and spiritual outlook. Born into an aristocratic family, Tolstoy led a life of dissipation till 1876, when he came to realize its futility. That was a time when he passed through an intense spiritual crisis and arrived eventually at intellectual conclusions which involved moral and ethical uprightness, non-resistance to evil, love of God and humanity. He made attempts to renounce his property and diverted his attention to spirituality. His prophetic power raised him to such a level of repute that the Imperial Government did not dare interfere with him, though they censored his books. His philosophy of truth, non-violence, non-resistance to evil and love of humanity impressed and influenced Mahatma Gandhi.

Tolstoy's main works are *War and Peace* (1865–72), *Anna Karenina* (1875–76), *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* (1884), *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *Resurrection*. Of his other books, *What is Art?* is a profound analysis of the nature of art, and *Confessions* is an autobiographical description of his spiritual crisis. Tolstoy's writings display his great moral conviction, eye for realistic details and visionary power. His short stories are intensely imaginative, didactic in tone and convey his philosophy in a simple diction.

It once occurred to a certain king, that if he always knew the right time to begin everything; if he knew who were the right people to listen to and whom to avoid; and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail in anything he might undertake.

And this thought having occurred to him, he had it proclaimed throughout his kingdom that he would give a great reward to anyone who would teach him what was the right time for every action, and who were the most necessary people, and how he might know what was the most important thing to do.

And learned men came to the King, but they all answered his questions differently.

In reply to the first question, some said that to know the right time for every action one must draw up in advance, a table of days, months, and years, and must live strictly according to it. Only thus, said they, could everything be done at its proper time. Others declared that it was impossible to decide

beforehand the right time for every action; but that, not letting oneself be absorbed in idle pastimes, one should always attend to all that was going on and then do what was most needful. Others, again, said that however attentive the King might be to what was going on, it was impossible for one man to decide correctly the right time for every action, but that he should have a Council of wise men who would help him to fix the proper time for everything.

But then again others said there were some things which could not wait to be laid before a Council, but about which one had at once to decide whether to undertake them or not. But in order to decide that, one must know beforehand what was going to happen. It is only magicians who know that; and, therefore, in order to know the right time for every action, one must consult magicians.

Equally various were the answers to the second question. Some said, the people the King most needed were his councillors; others, the priests; others, the doctors; while some said the warriors were the most necessary.

To the third question, as to what was the most important occupation: some replied that the most important thing in the world was science. Others said it was skill in warfare; and others, again, that it was religious worship.

All the answers being different, the King agreed with none of them, and gave the reward to none. But still wishing to find the right answers to his questions, he decided to consult a hermit widely renowned for his wisdom.

The hermit lived in a wood which he never quitted, and he received none but common folk. So the King put on simple clothes, and before reaching the hermit's cell dismounted from his horse, and, leaving his bodyguard behind, went on alone.

When the King approached, the hermit was digging the ground in front of his hut. Seeing the King, he greeted him and went on digging. The hermit was frail and weak, and each time he stuck his spade into the ground and turned a little earth, he breathed heavily.

The King went up to him and said: 'I have come to you, wise hermit, to ask you to answer three questions: How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need, and to whom should I, therefore, pay more attention than to the rest? And, what affairs are the most important, and need my first attention?'

The hermit listened to the King, but answered nothing. He just spat on his hand and recommenced digging.

'You are tired,' said the King, 'let me take the spade and work awhile for you.'

'Thanks!' said the hermit, and, giving the spade to the King, he sat down on the ground.

When he had dug two beds, the King stopped and repeated his questions. The hermit again gave no answer, but rose, stretched out his hand for the spade, and said:

'Now rest awhile—and let me work a bit.'

But the King did not give him the spade, and continued to dig. One hour passed, and another. The sun began to sink behind the trees, and the King at last stuck the spade into the ground, and said:

'I came to you, wise man, for an answer to my questions. If you can give me none, tell me so and I will return home.'

'Here comes some one running,' said the hermit, 'let us see who it is.'

The King turned round, and saw a bearded man come running out of the wood. The man held his hands pressed against his stomach, and blood was flowing from under them. When he reached the King, he fell fainting on the ground moaning feebly. The King and the hermit unfastened the man's clothing. There was a large wound in his stomach. The King washed it as best he could, and bandaged it with his handkerchief and with a towel the hermit had. But the blood would not stop flowing, and the King again and again removed the bandage soaked with warm blood, and washed and rebandaged the wound. When at last the blood ceased flowing, the man revived and asked for something to drink. The King brought fresh water and gave it to him. Meanwhile the sun had set, and it had become cool. So the King, with the hermit's help, carried the wounded man into the hut and laid him on the bed. Lying on the bed the man closed his eyes and was quiet; but the King was so tired with his walk and with the work he had done, that he crouched down on the threshold, and also fell asleep—so soundly that he slept all through the short summer night. When he awoke in the morning, it was long before he could remember where he was or who was the strange bearded man lying on the bed and gazing intently at him with shining eyes.

'Forgive me!' said the bearded man in a weak voice, when he saw that the King was awake and was looking at him.

'I do not know you, and have nothing to forgive you for,' said the King.

'You do not know me, but I know you. I am that enemy of yours who swore to revenge himself on you, because you executed his brother and seized his property. I knew you had gone alone to see the hermit, and I resolved to kill you on your way back. But the day passed and you did not return. So I came out from my ambush to find you, and I came upon your bodyguard and they recognized me and wounded me. I escaped from them, but should have bled to death had you not dressed my wounds. I wished to kill you, and you have saved my life. Now, if I live, and if you wish it, I will serve you as your most faithful slave and will bid my sons do the same. Forgive me!'

The King was very glad to have made peace with his enemy so easily, and to have gained him for a friend, and he not only forgave him, but said he would send his servants and his own physician to attend to him, and promised to restore his property.

Having taken leave of the wounded man, the King went out into the porch and looked around for the hermit. Before going away he wished once more to beg an answer to the questions he had put. The hermit was outside, on his knees, sowing seeds in the beds that had been dug the day before.

The King approached him, and said:

'For the last time, I pray you to answer my questions, wise man.'

'You have already been answered!' said the hermit still crouching on his thin legs, and looking up at the King, who stood before him.

'How answered? What do you mean?' asked the King.

'Do you not see,' replied the hermit, 'If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday and had not dug these beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you and you would have repented for not having stayed with me. So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business. Afterwards, when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you were attending to him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without having made peace with you. So he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important business. Remember then: there is only one time that is important—Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most necessary man is he with whom you are, for no man knows whether he will ever have dealings with anyone else, and the most important affair is, to do him good, because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life!'

Outline

Written in 1903, 'Three Questions' is one of the stories Tolstoy contributed in aid of the Jews left destitute after the massacres and outrages in Krishiniv and elsewhere in Russia. These outrages, possibly, preempted the yet more terrible Jewish massacres of 1905 that shook Tolstoy to the very core.

Through a crisp narrative, the story reveals the importance of the present in life. It is 'now' that matters in our dealings, for the past is irretrievably gone and the future is still hidden.

The most important time is the present; the most important person is the one we are dealing with at that moment; and the most important thing is to do good to our fellow beings.

This moral is conveyed through the story of a king who wants a kind of formula for success in life: the most appropriate time to do a thing, the right person to deal with and the most important action. Various answers come his way but he is not satisfied. He goes to a hermit as a seeker to learn the answers.

The hermit does not say anything directly, but elaborates on the incidents of the day to provide convincing answers to the questions.

Glossary

<i>Council</i>	a formally constituted advisory body
<i>hermit</i>	a person living alone as a religious discipline
<i>ambush</i>	(here) to wait in a concealed position with the intention of launching a surprise attack
<i>porch</i>	a covered shelter projecting in front of the entrance of a house
<i>beds</i>	an area of ground where flowers and plants are grown
<i>occurred</i>	came to mind
<i>undertake</i>	to take in hand to do
<i>proclaimed</i>	announced officially
<i>warrior</i>	a soldier
<i>quit</i>	leave
<i>moaning</i>	murmuring due to pain, mournful sound
<i>feebly</i>	weakly
<i>resolved</i>	determined

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. What are the three questions of the king?
2. What does he do to get an appropriate answer?
3. Is the king satisfied with the answers of the various learned men? If not, why?
4. Where does the king go to seek answers to his questions and why?
5. Describe the manner in which the king approaches the hermit.
6. Did the hermit pay immediate attention to the king's questions? If not, how did he behave?
7. Describe how the king passed his day with the hermit.
8. Who was the wounded man? Why had he turned the king's enemy?
9. What were the king's feelings after learning the identity of the wounded man?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. List in brief the various answers given by the learned men to the king's three questions.
2. Analyse the character of the king with reference to three things: his questions, his day with the hermit, and his manner of dealing with the wounded man.
3. Describe how the king takes care of the wounded man.
4. Describe how the king and his enemy passed that particular day. What happened at the end of the day?

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5. How did the hermit answer the king's questions through the incidents of the previous day?
6. Draw a character sketch of the hermit.
7. Why is the 'present' the most important time in life? Elaborate.
8. Write a brief note on the moral of the story.

The Refugees

PEARL S. BUCK



Pearl Sydenstricker Buck (1892–1973) was born in West Virginia, but grew up in China where her parents were missionaries. After her education at Randolph-Macon College, Virginia, she returned to China as a missionary. In 1917, she married Lossing Buck, a Cornell graduate also working in China. In 1935, she divorced him to marry her publisher Richard Walsh. Author of about seventy books, Pearl S. Buck became, in 1938, the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Her fame chiefly rests on her many novels portraying the life of the Chinese peasants and the downtrodden. *The Good Earth* (1931) which won her the Pulitzer Prize was one of the most popular novels of the twentieth century and it played a major role in shaping the Western attitude towards China. Her short stories are collected in *The First Wife* (1933), *Today and Forever* (1941), and *Far and Near* (1948). She was an active supporter of the African-American civil rights movements and ban on nuclear testing. Towards the end of her career, she moved to the small New England town of Danby where she died in 1973. Buck spent half her life in the East and half in the West. Her tombstone records her name in Chinese.

They walked through the new capital, alien and from a far country, yes, although their own lands were only a few hundred miles perhaps from this very street upon which they now walked. But to them it was very far. Their eyes were the eyes of those who have been taken, suddenly and by some unaccountable force, from the world they have always known and always thought safe until this time. They who had been accustomed only to country roads and fields, walked now along the proud street of the new capital, their feet treading upon the new concrete sidewalk, and although the street was full of things they had never seen before, so that there were even automobiles and such things of which they had never even heard, still they looked at nothing, but passed as in a dream, seeing nothing.

There were several hundred of them passing at this moment. If they did not look at anything nor at anyone, neither did any look at them. The city was full of refugees, many thousands of them, fed after a fashion, clothed somehow, sheltered in mats in great camps outside the city wall. At any hour of the day lines of ragged men and women and a few children could be seen making

their way towards the camps, and if any city-dweller noticed them it was to think with increased bitterness:

'More refugees—will there never be an end to them? We will all starve trying to feed them even a little!'

This bitterness, which is the bitterness of fear, made small shopkeepers bawl out rudely to the many beggars who came hourly to beg at the doors, and it made men ruthless in paying small fares to the rickshaw-pullers, of which there were ten times as many as could be used, because the refugees were trying to earn something thus. Even usual pullers of rickshaws, who followed this as their profession, cursed the refugees because, being starved, they would pull for anything given them, and so fares were low for all, and all suffered. With the city full of refugees, then, begging at every door, swarming into every unskilled trade and service, lying dead on the streets at every frozen dawn, why should one look at this fresh horde coming in now at twilight of a winter's day?

But these were no common men and women, no riff-raff from some community always poor and easily starving in a flood time. No, these were men and women of which any nation might have been proud. It could be seen they were all from one region, for they wore garments woven out of the same dark blue cotton stuff, plain and cut in an old-fashioned way, the sleeves long and the coats long and full. The men wore smocked aprons, the smocking done in curious, intricate, beautiful designs. The women had bands of the same plain blue stuff wrapped like kerchiefs about their heads. Both men and women were tall and strong in frame, although the women's feet were bound. Every man carried a load of two baskets slung on a pole across his shoulder. In these baskets were clothes and quilts made of the blue cotton stuff and padded. Clothing and bedding were clean and strongly made. In both the baskets, on top of every folded quilt, with a bit of mat between, was an iron cauldron. These cauldrons had doubtless been taken from the earthen ovens of the village when the people saw the time had come when they must move. But in no basket was there a vestige of food, nor was there a trace of food having been cooked in them recently.

This lack of food was confirmed when one looked closely into the faces of the people. In the first glance in the twilight they seemed well enough, but when one looked more closely one saw they were the faces of people starving and moving now in despair to a last hope. They saw nothing of the strange sights of a new city because they were too near death to see anything. No new sight could move their curiosity. They were men and women who had stayed by their land until starvation drove them forth. Thus they passed, unseeing, silent, alien, as those who know themselves to be dying are alien to the living.

The last one of this long procession of silent men and women was a little wizened old man. Even he carried a load of two baskets. In one basket there

was the quilt with a cauldron on it, while in the other basket, there was only the quilt but no cauldron. Although the load was light, it was too much for the old man. It was evident that in usual times he would be beyond the age of work, and was perhaps unaccustomed to such labour in recent years. His breath whistled as he staggered along, and he strained his eyes to watch those who were ahead of him lest he be left behind, and his old wrinkled face was set in a sort of gasping agony.

Suddenly he could go no more. He set his burden down with great gentleness and sank upon the ground, his head sunk between his knees, his eyes closed, panting desperately. Starved as he was, a little blood rose in dark patches on his cheeks. A ragged vendor selling hot noodles set his stand near, and shouted his trade cry, and the light from the stand fell on the old man's drooping figure. A man passing stopped and muttered, looking at him:

'I swear I can give no more this day if I am to feed my own even nothing but noodles—but here is this old man. Well, I will give him the bit of silver I earned today against tomorrow and trust to tomorrow again. If my own old father had been alive I would have given it to him.'

He fumbled and brought out of his ragged girdle a bit of a silver coin, and after a moment's hesitation and muttering, he added to it a copper penny.

'There, old father,' he said with a sort of bitter heartiness, 'let me see you eat noodles!'

The old man lifted his head slowly. When he saw the silver he would not put out his hand. He said:

'Sir, I did not beg of you. Sir, we have good land and we have never been starving like this before, having such good land. But this year the river rose and men starve even on good land at such times. Sir, we have no seed left, even. We have eaten our seed. I told them, we cannot eat the seed. But they were young and hungry and they ate it.'

'Take it,' said the man, and he dropped the money into the old man's smocked apron and went on his way, sighing.

The vendor prepared his bowl of noodles and called out:

'How many will you eat, old man?'

Then was the old man stirred. He felt eagerly in his apron and when he saw the two coins there, the one copper and the other silver, he said:

'One small bowl is enough.'

'Can you eat only one small bowl, then?' asked the vendor, astonished.

'It is not for me,' the old man answered.

The vendor stared astonished, but being a simple man he said no more but prepared the bowl, and when it was finished he called out, 'Here it is!' And he waited to see who would eat it.

Then the old man rose with a great effort and took the bowl between his shaking hands and he went to the other basket. There, while the vendor

watched, the old man pulled aside the quilt until one could see the shrunken face of a small boy lying with his eyes fast closed. One would have said the child was dead except that when the old man lifted his head so his mouth could touch the edge of the little bowl he began to swallow feebly until the hot mixture was finished. The old man kept murmuring to him:

'There, my heart—there, my child—'

'Your grandson?' said the vendor.

'Yes,' said the old man. 'The son of my only son. Both my son and his wife were drowned as they worked on our land when the dikes broke.'

He covered the child tenderly and then, squatting on his haunches, he ran his tongue carefully around the little bowl and removed the last trace of food. Then, as though he had been fed, he handed the bowl back to the vendor.

'But you have the silver bit!' cried the ragged vendor, yet more astonished when he saw the old man ordered no more.

The old man shook his head. 'That is for seed,' he replied. 'As soon as I saw it, I knew I would buy seed with it. They ate up all the seed, and with what shall the land be sown again?'

'If I were not so poor myself,' said the vendor, 'I might even have given you a bowl. But to give something to a man who has a bit of silver—'. He shook his head, puzzled.

'I do not ask you, brother,' said the old man. 'Well I know you cannot understand. But if you had land you would know it must be put to seed again or there will be starvation yet another year. The best I can do for this grandson of mine is to buy a little seed for the land—yes, even though I die, and others plant it, the land must be put to seed.'

He took up his load again, his old legs trembling, and straining his eyes down the long, straight street, he staggered on.

Outline

'The Refugees' brings out the tragedy of those diligent poor folk who are uprooted from their land because of natural calamities like floods. Even as they look for work, or a temporary prop from some good samaritan, they are generally dubbed as beggars in the alien land. The old man of this story is a symbol of the prowess of men of strong character who can weather such tragic phases in their lives to herald the dawn of prosperity once again. In the story, the money thrown to the old man becomes a sacred trust. He keeps it to purchase seeds so that he can go back to his native land and work for his tiny grandson, the only other survivor of his family. Any nation can be proud of such men.

Glossary

<i>alien</i>	foreign
<i>sidewalk</i>	pavement
<i>after a fashion</i>	somehow or the other, but not satisfactorily
<i>bawl out</i>	shout loudly
<i>ruthless</i>	without pity
<i>horde</i>	(derogatory) a large group of people
<i>riff-raff</i>	disreputable or ill-behaved people of the lower classes
<i>smocked aprons</i>	aprons with ornamentation done by gathering the cloth tightly with stitches
<i>intricate</i>	very complicated or detailed
<i>throng</i>	a large, densely packed crowd
<i>kerchiefs</i>	a piece of fabric used to cover the head
<i>the women's feet were bound</i>	refers to the cruel custom of binding women's feet with cloth to make them smaller, supposedly enhancing their beauty in the process
<i>vestige</i>	trace, sign
<i>wizened</i>	shrivelled or wrinkled with age
<i>vendor</i>	a seller in the street
<i>muttered</i>	speak something in a low voice not meant to be heard.
<i>noodles</i>	paste of flour and water prepared in long narrow strips and used in soups, etc.
<i>fumbled</i>	felt about uncertainly with the hands
<i>ragged girdle</i>	a torn belt or cord fastened around the waist
<i>dike</i>	a long wall of earth, built to keep water back and prevent flooding

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. ' . . . suddenly and by some unaccountable force . . . ' What could have forced the refugees to leave their land?
2. Were the refugees really alien to the new capital?
3. Name any two things in the new capital which the refugees had never seen before.
4. Why did the refugees look at nothing and pass as in a dream?
5. 'Neither did any look at them.' Why?
6. What was the reaction of city-dweller who noticed the refugees?
7. Why did the regular rickshaw-pullers curse the refugees?
8. What showed that the refugees were all from one region?
9. What load did the old man carry in the two baskets on his sling?
10. What money did a man passing by give to the old refugee?

11. Why did the old man order only one small bowl of noodles?
12. What was the old man's reply when the vendor reminded him: 'But you have the silver bit!'
13. Which line suggests that even the vendor was moved to pity at the sight of the old man?
14. The passer-by's generosity in giving money to the old man has been termed as 'bitter heartiness'. Why?
15. 'When he saw the silver, he would not put out his hand.' What trait of the old man's personality is reflected by this?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. Is 'The Refugees' a didactic story? What message does it convey?
2. Could one call the old refugee man a beggar? Comment.
3. 'These were men and women of which any nation might have been proud,' says the narrator about the refugees. Why?
4. Describe the physical and mental condition of the refugees in the new capital.
5. What are the most important concerns of the old starved man and how does he show them in his behaviour?

Life of Ma Parker

KATHERINE MANSFIELD



Katherine Mansfield, born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp (1888–1923), was New Zealand's most famous writer. She was born in Wellington in a middle-class family and her first text was published at the age of nine. She obtained her higher education in London and finally settled there in 1908. Had her father not denied her the opportunity, she could have been a fine professional cellist.

After an unhappy marriage with George Brown lasting a few days, Katherine fell in love with John Middleton Murry, the noted socialist and literary critic, whom she married in 1918. She was found to have tuberculosis in the same year and died at Fontainebleau in 1923. Her last words were, 'I love the rain. I want the feeling of it on my face.' Her family memoirs were collected in *Bliss and Other Short Stories* (1920) while she reached the height of her achievement in *The Garden Party* (1922). Her other notable works are *The Dove's Nest* (1923), *Something Childish* (1924) and *The Aloe* (1924). Her collected short stories were published in 1945. She was greatly influenced by Anton Chekhov, sharing his warm humanity and attention to small details of human behaviour. Her stories are noted for their use of stream of consciousness and sharp portraits of characters.

When the literary gentleman whose flat old Ma Parker cleaned every Tuesday, opened the door to her that morning, he asked after her grandson. Ma Parker stood on the doormat inside the dark little hall, and she stretched out her hand to help her gentleman shut the door before she replied. 'We buried 'im yesterday, sir,' she said quietly.

'Oh, dear me! I'm sorry to hear that,' said the literary gentleman in a shocked tone. He was in the middle of his breakfast. He wore a very shabby dressing-gown and carried a crumpled newspaper in one hand. But he felt awkward. He could hardly go back to the warm sitting-room without saying something—something more. Then because these people set such store by funerals, he said kindly, 'I hope the funeral went off all right.'

'Beg parding, sir?' said old Ma Parker huskily.

Poor old bird! She did look dashed. 'I hope the funeral was a—a—success,' said he. Ma Parker gave no answer. She bent her head and hobbled off to the kitchen, clasping the old fish-bag that held her cleaning things and

an apron and a pair of felt shoes. The literary gentleman raised his eyebrows and went back to his breakfast.

'Overcome, I suppose,' he said aloud, helping himself to the marmalade.

Ma Parker drew the two jetty spears out of her toque and hung it behind the door. She unhooked her worn jacket and hung that up too. Then she tied her apron and sat down to take off her boots. To take off her boots or to put them on was an agony to her, but it had been an agony for years. In fact, she was so accustomed to the pain that her face was drawn and screwed up ready for the twinge before she'd so much as untied the laces. That over, she sat back with a sigh and softly rubbed her knees . . .

'Gran! Gran!' Her little grandson stood on her lap in his button boots. He'd just come in from playing in the street.

'Look what a state you've made your gran's skirt into—you wicked boy!'

But he put his arms round her neck and rubbed his cheek against hers.

'Gran, gi' us a penny!' he coaxed.

'Bee off with you; Gran ain't got no pennies.'

'Yes, you 'ave.'

'No, I ain't.'

'Yes, you 'ave. Gi' us one!'

Already she was feeling for the old, squashed, black leather purse.

'Well, what'll you give your gran?'

He gave a shy little laugh and pressed closer. She felt his eyelid quivering against her cheek. *'I ain't got nothing,'* he murmured . . .

The old woman sprang up, seized the iron kettle off the gas stove and took it over to the sink. The noise of the water drumming in the kettle deadened her pain, it seemed. She filled the pail, too, and the washing-up bowl.

It would take a whole book to describe the state of that kitchen. During the week the literary gentleman 'did' for himself. That is to say, he emptied the tea leaves now and again into a jam jar set aside for that purpose, and if he ran out of clean forks he wiped over one or two on the roller towel. Otherwise, as he explained to his friends, his 'system' was quite simple, and he couldn't understand why people made all this fuss about housekeeping.

'You simply dirty everything you've got, get a hag in once a week to clean up, and the thing's done.'

The result looked like a gigantic dustbin. Even the floor was littered with toast crusts, envelopes, cigarette ends. But Ma Parker bore him no grudge. She pitied the poor young gentleman for having no one to look after him. Out of the smudgy little window you could see an immense expanse of sad-looking sky, and whenever there were clouds they looked very worn, old clouds, frayed at the edges, with holes in them, or dark stains like tea.

While the water was heating, Ma Parker began sweeping the floor. 'Yes,' she thought, as the broom knocked, 'What with one thing and another I've had my share. I've had a hard life.'

Even the neighbours said that of her. Many a time, hobbling home with her fish-bag, she heard them, waiting at the corner, or leaning over the area railings, say among themselves, 'She's had a hard life, has Ma Parker.' And it was so true she wasn't in the least proud of it. It was just as if you were to say she lived in the basement-back at Number 27. A hard life! . . .

At sixteen, she'd left Stratford and come up to London as kitchen-maid. Yes, she was born in Stratford-on-Avon. Shakespeare, sir? No, people were always asking her about him. But she'd never heard his name until she saw it on the theatres.

Nothing remained of Stratford except that 'sitting in the fireplace of an evening you could see the stars through the chimney', and 'Mother always 'ad 'er side of bacon 'anging from the ceiling'. And there was something—a bush, there was—at the front door, that smelt ever so nice. But the bush was very vague. She'd only remembered it once or twice in the hospital, when she'd been taken bad.

That was a dreadful place—her first place. She was never allowed out. She never went upstairs except for prayers morning and evening. It was a fair cellar. And the cook was a cruel woman. She used to snatch away her letters from home before she'd read them, and throw them in the range, because they made her dreamy . . . And the beetles! Would you believe it?—until she came to London she'd never seen a black beetle. Here Ma always gave a little laugh, as though—not to have seen a black beetle! Well! It was as if to say you'd never seen your own feet.

When that family was sold up, she went as 'help' to a doctor's house and after two years there, on the run from morning till night, she married her husband. He was a baker.

'A baker, Mrs Parker!' the literary gentleman would say. For occasionally he laid aside his tomes and lent an ear, at least, to this product called life. 'It must be rather nice to be married to a baker!'

Mrs Parker didn't look so sure.

'Such a clean trade,' said the gentleman.

Mrs Parker didn't look convinced.

'And didn't you like handing the new loaves to the customers?'

'Well, sir,' said Mrs Parker, 'I wasn't in the shop above a great deal. We had thirteen little ones and buried seven of them. If it wasn't the 'ospital, it was the infirmary, you might say!'

'You might, indeed, Mrs Parker!' said the gentleman, shuddering, and taking up his pen again.

Yes, seven had gone, and while the six were still small, her husband was taken ill with consumption. It was flour on the lungs, the doctor told her at the time . . . Her husband sat up in bed with his shirt pulled over his head, and the doctor's finger drew a circle on his back.

'Now, if we were to cut him open here, Mrs Parker,' said the doctor, 'you'd find his lungs chock-a-block with white powder. Breathe, my good fellow!' And Mrs Parker never knew for certain whether she saw or whether she fancied she saw a great fan of white dust come out of her poor dear husband's lips . . .

But the struggle she'd had to bring up those six little children and keep herself to herself. Terrible it had been! Then, just when they were old enough to go to school, her husband's sister came to stop with them to help things along, and she hadn't been there more than two months when she fell down a flight of steps and hurt her spine. And for five years Ma Parker had another baby—and such a one for crying!—to look after. Then young Maudie went wrong and took her sister Alice with her; the two boys emigrated, and young Jim went to India with the army, and Ethel, the youngest, married a good-for-nothing little waiter who died of ulcers the year little Lennie was born. And now little Lennie—my grandson . . .

The piles of dirty cups, dirty dishes, were washed and dried. The ink-black knives were cleaned with a piece of potato and finished off with a piece of cork. The table was scrubbed, and the dresser and the sink that had sardine tails swimming in it . . .

He'd never been a strong child—never from the first. He'd been one of those fair babies that everybody took for a girl. Silvery fair curls he had, blue eyes, and a little freckle like a diamond on one side of his nose. The trouble she and Ethel had to rear that child! The things out of the newspapers they tried him with! Every Sunday morning Ethel would read aloud while Ma Parker did her washing.

'Dear Sir,—Just a line to let you know my little Myrtil was laid out for dead . . . After four bottils . . . gained 8 lb in 9 weeks, and is still putting it on.'

And then the egg-cup ink would come off the dresser and the letter would be written, and Ma would buy a postal order on her way to work next morning. But it was no use. Nothing made little Lennie put it on. Taking him to the cemetery, even, never gave him a colour; a nice shake-up in the bus never improved his appetite.

But he was gran's boy from the first . . .

'Whose boy are you?' said old Ma Parker, straightening up from the stove and going over to the smudgy window. And a little voice, so warm, so close, it half stifled her—it seemed to be in her breast under her heart—laughed out, and said, 'I'm gran's boy!'

At that moment there was a sound of steps, and the literary gentleman appeared, dressed for walking.

'Oh, Mrs Parker, I'm going out.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And you'll find your half-crown in the tray of the ink stand.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Oh, by the way, Mrs Parker,' said the literary gentleman quickly, 'you didn't throw away any cocoa last time you were here—did you?'

'No, sir.'

'Very strange. I could have sworn I left a teaspoonful of cocoa in the tin,' he broke off. He said softly and firmly, 'You'll always tell me when you throw things away—won't you, Mrs Parker?' And he walked off very well pleased with himself, convinced, in fact, he'd shown Mrs Parker that under his apparent carelessness, he was as vigilant as a woman.

The door banged. She took her brushes and clothes into the bedroom. But when she began to make the bed, smoothing, tucking, patting, the thought of little Lennie was unbearable. Why did he have to suffer so? That's what she couldn't understand. Why should a little angel child have to ask for his breath and fight for it? There was no sense in making a child suffer like that.

. . . From Lennie's little box of a chest there came a sound as though something was boiling. There was a great lump of something bubbling in his chest that he couldn't get rid of. When he coughed the sweat sprang out on his head; his eyes bulged, his hands waved and the great lump bubbled as a potato knocks in a saucepan. But what was more awful than all, was, when he didn't cough he sat against the pillow and never spoke or answered, or even made as if he heard. Only he looked offended.

'It's not your poor old gran's doing it, my lovely,' said old Ma Parker, patting back the damp hair from his little scarlet ears. But Lennie moved his head and edged away. Dreadfully offended with her he looked—and solemn. He bent his head and looked at her sideways as though he couldn't have believed it of his gran.

But at the last . . . Ma Parker threw the counterpane over the bed. No, she simply couldn't think about it. It was too much—she'd had too much in her life to bear. She'd borne it up till now, she'd kept herself to herself, and never once had she been seen to cry. Never by a living soul. Not even her own children had seen Ma break down. She'd kept a proud face always. But now! Lennie gone—what had she? She had nothing. He was all she'd got from life, and now he was took too. Why must it all have happened to me? she wondered, 'What have I done?' said old Ma Parker. 'What have I done?'

As she said those words she suddenly let fall her brush. She found herself in the kitchen. Her misery was so terrible that she pinned on her hat, put on

her jacket and walked out of the flat like a person in a dream. She did not know what she was doing. She was like a person so dazed by the horror of what has happened that he walks away—anywhere, as though by walking away he could escape . . .

It was cold in the street. There was a wind like ice. People went flitting by, very fast; the men walked like scissors; the women trod like cats. And nobody knew—nobody cared. Even if she broke down, if at last, after all these years, she were to cry, she'd find herself in the lock-up as like as not.

But at the thought of crying it was as though little Lennie leapt in his gran's arms. Ah, that's what she wants to do, my dove. Gran wants to cry. If she could only cry now, cry for a long time, over everything, beginning with her first place and the cruel cook, going on to the doctor's, and then the seven little ones, death of her husband, the children's leaving her, and all the years of misery that led up to Lennie. But to have a proper cry over all these things would take a long time. All the same, the time for it had come. She must do it. She couldn't put it off any longer; she couldn't wait anymore . . . Where could she go?

'She's had a hard life, has Ma Parker.' Yes, a hard life, indeed! Her chin began to tremble: there was no time to lose. But where? Where?

She couldn't go home; Ethel was there. It would frighten Ethel out of her life. She couldn't sit on a bench anywhere; people would come arsking her questions. She couldn't possibly go back to the gentleman's flat; she had no right to cry in strangers' houses. If she sat on some steps, a policeman would speak to her.

Oh, wasn't there anywhere where she could hide and keep herself to herself and stay as long as she liked, not disturbing anybody, and nobody worrying her? Wasn't there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out—at last?

Ma Parker stood, looking up and down. The icy wind blew out her apron into a balloon. And now it began to rain. There was nowhere.

Outline

'Life of Ma Parker' is a poignant story of Ma Parker—a poor old lady who has had more than the usual share of suffering. She hobbles to the house of the literary gentleman where she works as a domestic help for half a crown. Her entire life is a saga of suffering—first as a kitchen-maid in a cellar in London, in the company of a cruel cook; then at a doctor's; then her marriage with a baker and the consequent birth of thirteen children of whom seven die, and the struggle she undergoes to bring up the other six; then the death of her husband because of tuberculosis, the departure of her do-nothing young

children, and finally the death of her only hope and prop—her little grandson Lennie—which acts as the last straw on the camel's back. In the midst of her work, the memories of her little angel-like Lennie haunt her. Yet there is neither time nor place for tears for 'this product called life'. Who could have imagined that she was born in Stratford-upon-Avon!

Glossary

<i>asked after</i>	ask for information about
<i>set such store</i>	to attach great importance to
<i>beg parding</i>	beg your pardon
<i>huskily</i>	in a deep, low and rough voice
<i>hobbled</i>	walked unsteadily and awkwardly
<i>felt shoes</i>	shoes made of wool or hair compressed into a fabric
<i>dashed</i>	devastated
<i>marmalade</i>	jelly made from citrus fruits, especially oranges
<i>toque</i>	a close-fitting brimless hat for women
<i>twinge</i>	a sudden, short, feeling of pain
<i>coaxed</i>	persuaded by fondling, flattery, etc.
<i>squashed</i>	crushed, worn out
<i>did for himself</i>	helped himself in small household jobs
<i>roller towel</i>	an endless towel on a roller
<i>hag</i>	an ugly old woman
<i>littered</i>	made untidy by leaving things around
<i>smudgy</i>	soiled, dirty
<i>frayed</i>	worn out at the ends
<i>arsking</i>	asking
<i>bacon</i>	pig-meat
<i>tomes</i>	large books, especially those dealing with serious topics
<i>infirmary</i>	a place for treatment of the sick and infirm, a hospital
<i>consumption</i>	tuberculosis
<i>chock-a-block</i>	choked, blocked, obstructed
<i>keep herself to herself</i>	keep body and soul together
<i>had another baby ... to look after</i>	Ma Parker's sister-in-law broke her spine and became helpless, like a baby
<i>went wrong</i>	went astray, followed life given to vices
<i>emigrated</i>	went to live permanently in another country
<i>dresser</i>	a large piece of furniture with shelves in the top and cupboards below, for displaying and storing cups, plates, etc.
<i>sardine</i>	small, young sea fish
<i>freckle</i>	a small, pale brown spot on a person's skin, especially face

<i>the things out of the newspapers they tried with him!</i>	they gave him medicines advertised in newspapers
<i>cemetery</i>	area of land used for burials
<i>half-crown</i>	an old British coin worth 2½ shillings
<i>vigilant</i>	watchful
<i>counterpane</i>	bedspread
<i>dove</i>	(here) a term of endearment; my darling, my innocent child

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. 'What'll you give your gran?' Ma Parker asked her grandson. What did he give her in return for the penny?
2. '... he could not understand why people made all this fuss about housekeeping.' Explain the figure of speech used in this line.
3. 'Out of the smudgy little window you could see an immense expanse of sad-looking sky, and whenever there were clouds they looked worn, old clouds, frayed at the edges, with holes in them, or dark stains like tea.' What light does this remark throw on the way the literary gentleman lived?
4. Who was Ma Parker? Describe her daily routine.
5. Was there any connection between Ma Parker and William Shakespeare? Did she ever learn about Shakespeare?
6. What was Ma Parker's experience at her first workplace?
7. 'It must be rather nice to be married to a baker!' said the literary gentleman. Was it really nice actually?
8. '... And for five years Ma Parker had another baby—and such a one for crying!' Who is referred to here and why in this manner?
9. Did Ma Parker ever cry?
10. List the main events in the life of Ma Parker.

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. 'She's had a hard life, has Ma Parker.' Describe Ma Parker's life in the light of this comment.
2. What was the state of the literary gentleman's kitchen?
3. What do you know about Lennie, Ma Parker's grandson?
4. Provide a character sketch of the literary gentleman.
5. Give reasons why Ma Parker could not cry (a) at home, (b) on a bench anywhere, (c) in the gentleman's flat, (d) on some steps.

6. How does the story end? Does this ending have any significance? What is the significance of the icy wind blowing out Ma Parker's apron into a balloon and of the falling rain?

The Dying Detective

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was born in Edinburgh in an Irish Catholic family. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University and afterwards practised at Southsea from 1882 to 1890. Because of the sluggish practice, he started writing stories to pass time and made a new career for himself when his stories were accepted by magazines. Although others had written detective stories before, Conan Doyle was the first to create a detective who solved crimes and problems by scientific reasoning and deduction. His influence on police methods and criminology all over the world is well known. He originated the use of plaster of Paris for preserving delicate clues, the examination of dust from clothes for identification and the analysis of different kinds of tobacco ash. He invented the naval lifejacket and persuaded the army to adopt the steel helmet. He worked in close association with Sir Winston Churchill. A great sportsman, he played football, cricket and billiards. Boxing, skiing and motor-racing were his other interests. When he died in 1930, Sir Winston Churchill said of him, 'I had a great admiration for him. Of course I read every Sherlock Holmes story. But the works I like even more than the detective stories are the great historical novels which, like Sherlock Holmes, have certainly found a permanent place in English literature.' The stories held an instant attraction for the Victorian readers because they offered some excitement to them. In fact, Holmes and Watson became so real that many believed the two men actually existed, and that Holmes might really be found at 221B, Baker Street, London.

Mrs Hudson, the landlady of Sherlock Holmes, was a long-suffering woman. Not only was her first-floor flat invaded at all hours by throngs of singular and often undesirable characters, but her remarkable lodger showed an eccentricity and irregularity in his life which must have sorely tried her patience. His incredible untidiness, his addiction to music at strange hours, his occasional revolver practice within doors, his weird and often malodorous scientific experiments, and the atmosphere of violence and danger which hung around him made him the very worst tenant in London. On the other hand, his payments were princely. I have no doubt that the house might have been purchased at the price which Holmes paid for his rooms during the years that I was with him.

The landlady stood in the deepest awe of him, and never dared to interfere with him, however outrageous his proceedings might seem. She was fond of him, too, for he had a remarkable gentleness and courtesy in his dealings with women. He disliked and distrusted the sex, but he was always a chivalrous opponent. Knowing how genuine was her regard for him, I listened earnestly to her story when she came to my rooms in the second year of my married life and told me of the sad condition to which my poor friend was reduced.

'He's dying, Dr Waston,' said she. 'For three days he has been sinking, and I doubt if he will last the day. He would not let me get a doctor. This morning when I saw his bones sticking out of his face and his great bright eyes looking at me I could stand no more of it. "With your leave or without it, Mr Holmes, I am going for a doctor this very hour," said I. "Let it be Watson, then," said he. I wouldn't waste an hour in coming to him, sir, or you may not see him alive.'

I was horrified, for I had heard nothing of his illness. I need not say that I rushed for my coat and my hat. As we drove back I asked for the details.

'There is little I can tell you, sir. He has been working at a case down at Rotherhithe, in an alley near the river, and he has brought this illness back with him. He took to his bed on Wednesday afternoon and has never moved since. For these three days neither food nor drink has passed his lips.'

'Good God! Why did you not call in a doctor?'

'He wouldn't have it, sir. You know how masterful he is. I didn't dare to disobey him. But he's not long for this world, as you'll see for yourself the moment that you set eyes on him.'

He was indeed a deplorable spectacle. In the dim light of a foggy November day the sick-room was a gloomy spot, but it was that gaunt, wasted face staring at me from the bed which sent a chill to my heart. His eyes had the brightness of fever, there was a hectic flush upon either cheek, and dark crusts clung to his lips; the thin hands upon the coverlet twitched incessantly, his voice was croaking and spasmodic. He lay listlessly as I entered the room, but the sight of me brought a gleam of recognition to his eyes.

'Well, Watson, we seem to have fallen upon evil days,' said he, in a feeble voice, but with something of his old carelessness of manner.

'My dear fellow!' I cried, approaching him.

'Stand back! Stand right back!' said he, with the sharp imperiousness which I had associated only with moments of crisis. 'If you approach me, Watson, I shall order you out of the house.'

'But why?'

'Because it is my desire. Is that not enough?'

Yes, Mrs Hudson was right. He was more masterful than ever. It was pitiful, however, to see his exhaustion.

'I only wished to help,' I explained.

'Exactly! You will help best by doing what you are told.'

'Certainly, Holmes.'

He relaxed the austerity of his manner.

'You are not angry?' he asked, gasping for breath.

Poor devil, how could I be angry when I saw him lying in such a plight before me?

'It's for your own sake, Watson,' he croaked.

'For *my* sake?'

'I know what is the matter with me. It is a coolie disease from Sumatra—a thing that the Dutch know more about than we, though they have made little of it up to date. One thing only is certain. It is infallibly deadly, and it is horribly contagious.'

He spoke now with a feverish energy, the long hands twitching and jerking as he motioned me away.

'Contagious by touch, Watson—that's it, by touch. Keep your distance and all is well.'

'Good heavens, Holmes! Do you suppose that such a consideration weighs with me for an instant? It would not affect me in the case of a stranger. Do you imagine it would prevent me from doing my duty to so old a friend?'

Again I advanced, but he repulsed me with a look of furious anger.

'If you will stand there I will talk. If you do not you must leave the room.'

I have so deep a respect for the extraordinary qualities of Holmes that I have always deferred to his wishes, even when I least understood them. But now all my professional instincts were aroused. Let him be my master elsewhere, I at least was his in a sick-room.

'Holmes,' said I, 'you are not yourself. A sick man is but a child, and so I will treat you. Whether you like it or not, I will examine your symptoms and treat you for them.'

He looked at me with venomous eyes.

'If I am to have a doctor whether I will or not, let me at least have someone in whom I have confidence,' said he.

'Then you have none in me?'

'In your friendship, certainly. But facts are facts, Watson, and after all you are only a general practitioner with very limited experience and mediocre qualifications. It is painful to have to say these things, but you leave me no choice.'

I was bitterly hurt.

'Such a remark is unworthy of you, Holmes. It shows me very clearly the state of your own nerves. But if you have no confidence in me I would not intrude my services. Let me bring Sir Jasper Meek or Penrose Fisher, or any of the best men in London. But someone you *must* have, and that is final. If you think that I am going to stand here and see you die without either helping you myself or bringing anyone else to help you, then you have mistaken your man.'

'You mean well, Watson,' said the sick man, with something between a sob and a groan. 'Shall I demonstrate your own ignorance? What do you know, pray, of Tapanuli fever? What do you know of the black Formosa corruption?'

'I have never heard of either.'

'There are many problems of disease, many strange pathological possibilities, in the East, Watson.' He paused after each sentence to collect his failing strength. 'I have learned so much during some recent researches which have a medico-criminal aspect. It was in the course of them that I contracted this complaint. You can do nothing.'

'Possibly not. But I happen to know that Dr Ainstree, the greatest living authority upon tropical disease, is now in London. All remonstrance is useless, Holmes. I am going this instant to fetch him.' I turned resolutely to the door.

Never have I had such a shock! In an instant, with a tiger-spring, the dying man had intercepted me. I heard the sharp snap of a twisted key. The next moment he had staggered back to his bed, exhausted and panting after his one tremendous outflame of energy.

'You won't take the key from me by force, Watson. I've got you, my friend. Here you are, and here you will stay until I will otherwise. But I'll humour you.' (All this in little gasps, with terrible struggles for breath between.) 'You've only my own good at heart. Of course I know that very well. You shall have your way, but give me time to get my strength. Not now, Watson, not now. It's four o'clock. At six you can go.'

'This is insanity, Holmes.'

'Only two hours, Watson. I promise you will go at six. Are you content to wait?'

'I seem to have no choice.'

'None in the world, Watson. Thank you, I need no help in arranging the clothes. You will please keep your distance. Now, Watson, there is one other condition that I would make. You will seek help, not from the man you mention, but from the one that I choose.'

'By all means.'

'The first three sensible words that you have uttered since you entered this room, Watson. You will find some books over there. I am somewhat

exhausted; I wonder how a battery feels when it pours electricity into a non-conductor? At six, Watson, we resume our conversation.'

But it was destined to be resumed long before that hour, and in circumstances which gave me a shock hardly second to that caused by his spring to the door. I had stood for some minutes looking at the silent figure in the bed. His face was almost covered by the clothes and he appeared to be asleep. Then, unable to settle down to reading, I walked slowly round the room, examining the pictures of celebrated criminals with which every wall was adorned. Finally, in my aimless perambulation, I came to the mantelpiece. A litter of pipes, tobacco-pouches, syringes, penknives, revolver cartridges, and other debris was scattered over it. In the midst of these was a small black and white ivory box with a sliding lid. It was a neat little thing, and I had stretched out my hand to examine it more closely, when—

It was a dreadful cry that he gave—a yell which might have been heard down the street. My skin went cold and my hair bristled at that horrible scream. As I turned I caught a glimpse of a convulsed face and frantic eyes. I stood paralysed, with the little box in my hand.

'Put it down! Down, this instant, Watson—this instant, I say!' His head sank back upon the pillow and he gave a deep sigh of relief as I replaced the box upon the mantelpiece. 'I hate to have my things touched, Watson. You know that I hate it. You fidget me beyond endurance. You, a doctor—you are enough to drive a patient into an asylum. Sit down, man, and let me have my rest!'

The incident left a most unpleasant impression upon my mind. The violent and causeless excitement, followed by this brutality of speech, so far removed from his usual suavity, showed me how deep was the disorganization of his mind. Of all ruins, that of a noble mind is the most deplorable. I sat in silent dejection until the stipulated time had passed. He seemed to have been watching the clock as well as I, for it was hardly six before he began to talk with the same feverish animation as before.

'Now, Watson,' said he. 'Have you any change in your pocket?'

'Yes.'

'Any silver?'

'A good deal.'

'How many half-crowns?'

'I have five.'

'Ah, too few! Too few! How very unfortunate, Watson! However, such as they are you can put them in your watch-pocket. And all the rest of your money in your left trouser-pocket. Thank you. It will balance you so much better like that.'

This was raving insanity. He shuddered, and again made a sound between a cough and a sob.

'You will now light the gas, Watson, but you will be very careful that not for one instant shall it be more than half on. I implore you to be careful, Watson. Thank you, that is excellent. No, you need not draw the blind. Now you will have the kindness to place some letters and papers upon this table within my reach. Thank you. Now some of that litter from the mantelpiece. Excellent, Watson! There is a sugar-tongs there. Kindly raise that small ivory box with its assistance. Place it here among the papers. Good! You can now go and fetch Mr Culverton Smith, of 13, Lower Burke Street.'

To tell the truth, my desire to fetch a doctor had somewhat weakened, for poor Holmes was so obviously delirious that it seemed dangerous to leave him. However, he was as eager now to consult the person named as he had been obstinate in refusing.

'I never heard the name,' said I.

'Possibly not, my good Watson. It may surprise you to know that the man upon earth who is best versed in this disease is not a medical man, but a planter. Mr Culverton Smith is a well-known resident of Sumatra, now visiting London. An outbreak of the disease upon his plantation, which was distant from medical aid, caused him to study it himself, with some rather far-reaching consequences. He is a very methodical person, and I did not desire you to start before six because I was well aware that you would not find him in his study. If you could persuade him to come here and give us the benefit of his unique experience of this disease, the investigation of which has been his dearest hobby, I cannot doubt that he could help me.'

I give Holmes's remarks as a consecutive whole, and will not attempt to indicate how they were interrupted by gaspings for breath and those clutchings of his hands which indicated the pain from which he was suffering. His appearance had changed for the worse during the few hours that I had been with him. Those hectic spots were more pronounced, the eyes shone more brightly out of darker hollows, and a cold sweat glimmered upon his brow. He still retained, however, the jaunty gallantry of his speech. To the last gasp he would always be the master.

'You will tell him exactly how you have left me,' said he. 'You will convey the very impression which is in your own mind—a dying man—a dying and delirious man. Indeed, I cannot think why the whole bed of the ocean is not one solid mass of oysters, so prolific the creatures seem. Ah, I am wandering! Strange how the brain controls the brain! What was I saying, Watson?'

'My directions for Mr Culverton Smith.'

'Ah, yes, I remember. My life depends upon it. Plead with him, Watson. There is no good feeling between us. His nephew, Watson—I had suspicions

of foul play and I allowed him to see it. The boy died horribly. He has a grudge against me. You will soften him, Watson. Beg him, pray, get him here by any means. He can save me—only he!

'I will bring him in a cab, if I have to carry him down to it.'

'You will do nothing of the sort. You will persuade him to come. And then you will return in front of him. Make any excuse so as not to come with him. Don't forget, Watson. You won't fail me. You never did fail me. No doubt there are natural enemies which limit the increase of the creatures. You and I, Watson, we have done our part. Shall the world, then, be overrun by oysters? No, no; horrible! You'll convey all that is in your mind.'

I left him full of the image of this magnificent intellect babbling like a foolish child. He had handed me the key, and with a happy thought I took it with me lest he should lock himself in. Mrs Hudson was waiting, trembling and weeping, in the passage. Behind me as I passed from the flat I heard Holmes's high, thin voice in some delirious chant. Below, as I stood whistling for a cab, a man came on me through the fog.

'How is Mr Holmes, sir?' he asked.

It was an old acquaintance, Inspector Morton, of Scotland Yard, dressed in unofficial tweeds.

'He is very ill,' I answered.

He looked at me in a most singular fashion. Had it not been too fiendish, I could have imagined that the gleam of the fanlight showed exultation in his face.

'I heard some rumour of it,' said he.

The cab had driven up, and I left him.

Lower Burke Street proved to be a line of fine houses lying in the vague borderland between Notting Hill and Kensington. The particular one at which my cabman pulled up had an air of smug and demure respectability in its old-fashioned iron railings, its massive folding-door, and its shining brass-work. All was in keeping with a solemn butler who appeared framed in the pink radiance of a tinted electric light behind him.

'Yes, Mr Culverton Smith is in. Dr Watson! Very good, sir, I will take up your card.'

My humble name and title did not appear to impress Mr Culverton Smith. Through the half-open door I heard a high, petulant, penetrating voice.

'Who is this person? What does he want? Dear me, Staples, how often have I said that I am not to be disturbed in my hours of study?'

There came a gentle flow of soothing explanation from the butler.

'Well, I won't see him, Staples. I can't have my work interrupted like this. I am not at home. Say so. Tell him to come in the morning if he really must see me.'

Again the gentle murmur.

'Well, well, give him that message. He can come in the morning, or he can stay away. My work must not be hindered.'

I thought of Holmes tossing upon his bed of sickness, and counting the minutes, perhaps, until I could bring help to him. It was not a time to stand upon ceremony. His life depended upon my promptness. Before the apologetic butler had delivered his message I had pushed past him and was in the room.

With a shrill cry of anger a man rose from a reclining chair beside the fire. I saw a great yellow face, coarse-grained and greasy, with heavy, double-chin, and two sullen, menacing grey eyes which glared at me from under tufted and sandy brows. A high bald head had a small velvet smoking-cap poised coquettishly upon one side of its pink curve. The skull was of enormous capacity, and yet, as I looked down, I saw to my amazement that the figure of the man was small and frail, twisted in the shoulders and back like one who has suffered from rickets in his childhood.

'What's this?' he cried, in a high, screaming voice. 'What is the meaning of this intrusion? Didn't I send you word that I would see you tomorrow morning?'

'I am sorry,' said I, 'but the matter cannot be delayed. Mr Sherlock Holmes—'

The mention of my friend's name had an extraordinary effect upon the little man. The look of anger passed in an instant from his face. His features became tense and alert.

'Have you come from Holmes?' he asked.

'I have just left him.'

'What about Holmes? How is he?'

'He is desperately ill. That is why I have come.'

The man motioned me to a chair, and turned to resume his own. As he did so I caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror over the mantelpiece. I could have sworn that it was set in a malicious and abominable smile. Yet I persuaded myself that it must have been some nervous contraction which I had surprised, for he turned to me an instant later with genuine concern upon his features.

'I am sorry to hear this,' said he. 'I only know Mr Holmes through some business dealings which we have had, but I have every respect for his talents and his character. He is an amateur of crime, as I am of disease. For him the villain, for me the microbe. There are my prisons,' he continued, pointing to a row of bottles and jars which stood upon a side table. 'Among those gelatine cultivations some of the very worst offenders in the world are now doing time.'

'It was on account of your special knowledge that Mr Holmes desired to see you. He has a high opinion of you, and thought that you were the one man in London who could help him.'

The little man started, and the jaunty smoking-cap slid to the floor.

'Why?' he asked. 'Why should Mr Holmes think that I could help him in his trouble?'

'Because of your knowledge of Eastern diseases.'

'But why should he think that this disease which he has contracted is Eastern?'

'Because, in some professional inquiry, he has been working among Chinese sailors down in the docks.'

Mr Culverton Smith smiled pleasantly and picked up his smoking-cap.

'Oh, that's it—is it?' said he. 'I trust the matter is not so grave as you suppose. How long has he been ill?'

'About three days.'

'Is he delirious?'

'Occasionally.'

'Tut, tut! This sounds serious. It would be inhuman not to answer his call. I very much resent any interruption to my work, Dr Watson, but this case is certainly exceptional. I will come with you at once.'

I remembered Holmes's injunction.

'I have another appointment,' said I.

'Very good. I will go alone. I have a note of Mr Holmes's address. You can rely upon my being there within half an hour at most.'

It was with a sinking heart that I reentered Holmes's bedroom. For all that I knew the worst might have happened in my absence. To my enormous relief, he had improved greatly in the interval. His appearance was as ghastly as ever, but all trace of delirium had left him and he spoke in a feeble voice, it is true, but with even more than his usual crispness and lucidity.

'Well, did you see him, Watson?'

'Yes; he is coming.'

'Admirable, Watson! Admirable! You are the best of messengers.'

'He wished to return with me.'

'That would never do, Watson. That would be obviously impossible. Did he ask what ailed me?'

'I told him about the Chinese in the East End.'

'Exactly! Well, Watson, you have done all that a good friend could. You can now disappear from the scene.'

'I must wait and hear his opinion, Holmes.'

'Of course you must. But I have reasons to suppose that this opinion would be very much more frank and valuable if he imagines that we are alone. There is just room behind the head of my bed, Watson.'

'My dear Holmes!'

'I fear there is no alternative, Watson. The room does not lend itself to concealment, which is as well, as it is the less likely to arouse suspicion. But just there, Watson, I fancy that it could be done.' Suddenly he sat up with a rigid intencness upon his haggard face. 'There are the wheels, Watson. Quick, man, if you love me! And don't budge, whatever happens—whatever happens, do you hear? Don't speak! Don't move! Just listen with all your ears.' Then in an instant his sudden access of strength departed, and his masterful, purposeful talk droned away into the low, vague murmurings of a semi-delirious man.

From the hiding-place into which I had been so swiftly hustled I heard the footfalls upon the stair, with the opening and the closing of the bedroom door. Then, to my surprise, there came a long silence, broken only by the heavy breathings and gasping of the sick man. I could imagine that our visitor was standing by the bedside and looking down at the sufferer. At last that strange hush was broken.

'Holmes!' he cried. 'Holmes!' in the insistent tone of one who awakens a sleeper. 'Can't you hear me, Holmes?' There was a rustling, as if he had shaken the sick man roughly by the shoulder.

'Is that you, Mr Smith?' Holmes whispered. 'I hardly dared hope that you would come.'

The other laughed.

'I should imagine not,' he said. 'And yet, you see, I am here. Coals of fire, Holmes—coals of fire!'

'It is very good of you—very noble of you. I appreciate your special knowledge.'

Our visitor sniggered.

'You do. You are, fortunately, the only man in London who does. Do you know what is the matter with you?'

'The same,' said Holmes.

'Ah! You recognize the symptoms?'

'Only too well.'

'Well, I shouldn't be surprised, Holmes. I shouldn't be surprised if it *were* the same. A bad lookout for you if it is. Poor Victor was a dead man on the fourth day—a strong, hearty young fellow. It was certainly, as you said, very surprising that he should have contracted an out-of-the-way Asiatic disease in the heart of London—a disease, too, of which I had made such a very special study. Singular coincidence, Holmes. Very smart of you to notice it, but rather uncharitable to suggest that it was cause and effect.'

'I knew that you did it.'

'Oh, you did, did you? Well, you couldn't prove it, anyhow. But what do you think of yourself spreading reports about me like that, and then crawling

to me for help the moment you are in trouble? What sort of a game is that—eh?

I heard the rasping, laboured breathing of the sick man. 'Give me the water!' he gasped.

'You're precious near your end, my friend, but I don't want you to go till I have had a word with you. That's why I give you water. There, don't slop it about! That's right. Can you understand what I say?'

Holmes groaned.

'Do what you can for me. Let bygones be bygones,' he whispered. 'I'll put the words out of my head—I swear I will. Only cure me, and I'll forget it.'

'Forget what?'

'Well, about Victor Savage's death. You as good as admitted just now that you had done it. I'll forget it.'

'You can forget it or remember it, just as you like. I don't see you in the witness-box. Quite another shaped box, my good Holmes, I assure you. It matters nothing to me that you should know how my nephew died. It's not him we are talking about. It's you.'

'Yes, yes.'

'The fellow who came for me—I've forgotten his name—said that you contracted it down in the East End among the sailors.'

'I could only account for it so.'

'You are proud of your brains, Holmes, are you not? Think yourself smart, don't you? You came across someone who was smarter this time. Now cast your mind back, Holmes. Can you think of no other way you could have got this thing?'

'I can't think. My mind is gone. For heaven's sake help me!'

'Yes, I will help you. I'll help you to understand just where you are and how you got there. I'd like you to know before you die.'

'Give me something to ease my pain.'

'Painful, is it? Yes, the coolies used to do some squealing towards the end. Takes you as cramp, I fancy.'

'Yes, yes; it is cramp.'

'Well, you can hear what I say, anyhow. Listen now! Can you remember any unusual incident in your life just about the time your symptoms began?'

'No, no; nothing.'

'Think again.'

'I'm too ill to think.'

'Well, then, I'll help you. Did anything come by post?'

'By post?'

'A box by chance?'

'I'm fainting—I'm gone!'

'Listen, Holmes!' There was a sound as if he was shaking the dying man, and it was all that I could do to hold myself quiet in my hiding-place. 'You must hear me. You *shall* hear me. Do you remember a box—an ivory box? It came on Wednesday. You opened it—do you remember?'

'Yes, yes, I opened it. There was a sharp spring inside it. Some joke—'

'It was no joke, as you will find to your cost. You fool, you would have it and you have got it. Who asked you to cross my path? If you had left me alone I would not have hurt you.'

'I remember,' Holmes gasped. 'The spring! It drew blood. This box—this on the table.'

'The very one, by George! And it may as well leave the room in my pocket. There goes your last shred of evidence. But you have the truth now, Holmes, and you can die with the knowledge that I killed you. You knew too much of the fate of Victor Savage, so I have sent you to share it. You are very near your end, Holmes. I will sit here and I will watch you die.'

Holmes's voice had sunk to an almost inaudible whisper.

'What is that?' said Smith. 'Turn up the gas? Ah, the shadows begin to fall, do they? Yes, I will turn it up, that I may see you the better.' He crossed the room and the light suddenly brightened. 'Is there any other little service that I can do you, my friend?'

'A match and a cigarette.'

I nearly called out in my joy and my amazement. He was speaking in his natural voice—a little weak, perhaps, but the very voice I knew. There was a long pause, and I felt that Culverton Smith was standing in silent amazement looking down at his companion.

'What's the meaning of this?' I heard him say at last, in a dry, rasping tone.

'The best way of successfully acting a part is to be it,' said Holmes. 'I give you my word that for three days I have tasted neither food nor drink until you were good enough to pour me out that glass of water. But it is the tobacco which I find most irksome. Ah, here *are* some cigarettes.' I heard the striking of a match. 'That is very much better. Halloa! halloa! Do I hear the step of a friend?'

There were footfalls outside, the door opened, and Inspector Morton appeared.

'All is in order and this is your man,' said Holmes.

The officer gave the usual cautions.

'I arrest you on the charge of the murder of one Victor Savage,' he concluded.

'And you might add of the attempted murder of one Sherlock Holmes,' remarked my friend with a chuckle. 'To save an invalid trouble, inspector,

Mr Culverton Smith was good enough to give our signal by turning up the gas. By the way, the prisoner has a small box in the right-hand pocket of his coat which it would be as well to remove. Thank you. I would handle it gingerly if I were you. Put it down here. It may play its part in the trial.'

There was a sudden rush and a scuffle, followed by the clash of iron and a cry of pain.

'You'll only get yourself hurt,' said the inspector. 'Stand still, will you?' There was the click of the closing handcuffs.

'A nice trap!' cried the high, snarling voice. 'It will bring *you* into the dock, Holmes, not me. He asked me to come here to cure him. I was sorry for him and I came. Now he will pretend, no doubt, that I have said anything which he may invent which will corroborate his insane suspicions. You can lie as you like, Holmes. My word is always as good as yours.'

'Good heavens!' cried Holmes. 'I had totally forgotten him. My dear Watson, I owe you a thousand apologies. To think that I should have overlooked you! I need not introduce you to Mr Culverton Smith, since I understand that you met somewhat earlier in the evening. Have you the cab below? I will follow you when I am dressed, for I may be of some use at the station.'

'I never needed it more,' said Holmes, as he refreshed himself with a glass of claret and some biscuits in the intervals of his toilet. 'However, as you know, my habits are irregular, and such a feat means less to me than to most men. It was very essential that I should impress Mrs. Hudson with the reality of my condition, since she was to convey it to you, and you in turn to him. You won't be offended, Watson? You will realize that among your many talents dissimulation finds no place, and that if you had shared my secret you would never have been able to impress Smith with the urgent necessity of his presence, which was the vital point of the whole scheme. Knowing his vindictive nature, I was perfectly certain that he would come to look upon his handiwork.'

'But your appearance, Holmes—your ghastly face?'

'Three days of absolute fast does not improve one's beauty, Watson. For the rest, there is nothing which a sponge may not cure. With vaseline upon one's forehead, belladonna in one's eyes, rouge over the cheekbones, and crusts of beeswax round one's lips, a very satisfying effect can be produced. Malingering is a subject upon which I have sometimes thought of writing a monograph. A little occasional talk about half-crowns, oysters, or any other extraneous subject produces a pleasing effect of delirium.'

'But why would you not let me near you, since there was in truth no infection?'

'Can you ask, my dear Watson? Do you imagine that I have no respect for your medical talents? Could I fancy that your astute judgement would

pass a dying man who, however weak, had no rise of pulse or temperature? At four yards, I could deceive you. If I failed to do so, who would bring my Smith within my grasp? No, Watson, I would not touch that box. You can just see if you look at it sideways where the sharp spring like a viper's tooth emerges as you open it. I dare say it was by some such device that poor Savage, who stood between this monster and a reversion, was done to death. My correspondence, however, is, as you know, a varied one, and I am somewhat upon my guard against any packages which reach me. It was clear to me, however, that by pretending that he had really succeeded in his design I might surprise a confession. That pretence I have carried out with the thoroughness of the true artist. Thank you, Watson, you must help me on with my coat. When we have finished at the police-station I think that something nutritious at Simpson's would not be out of place.'

Outline

'The Dying Detective' opens with Sherlock Holmes lying seriously ill for three days, suffering from an unknown contagious disease from Sumatra for which Watson is supposed too inexperienced to help. In his delirium, Holmes asks Dr Watson to plead and fetch Culverton Smith, a 'specialist' of Eastern diseases at any cost, but he himself should be the forerunner. Before the much-awaited specialist arrives, Watson is asked to hide behind the head of Holmes' bed and not budge at all. Smith arrives with mischief up his sleeve, and is quite delighted at Holmes' condition, as the latter is the only person who knows that Smith had killed his nephew Victor Savage, although it could not be proved earlier. Seeing Holmes dying, Smith confesses that he had sent Holmes an ivory box carrying a killer spring by post. In the process of exchanging this dialogue, Smith pockets the ivory box to remove the only piece of evidence against him. The climax comes when he turns on the gas to be better able to see Holmes dying. This is, in fact, a signal for Inspector Morton, who loses no time in appearing on the scene and arresting Smith on the charge of Savage's murder and Holmes' attempted murder. Thus, the whole drama of Holmes' illness turns out to be a pretence and a nice trap to extract a confession from a known culprit.

Glossary

<i>lodger</i>	person paying for rooms, etc. in somebody's house
<i>if he will last the day</i>	if he will live through the day
<i>Rotherhithe</i>	a district of London, near the docks
<i>deplorable</i>	very bad and unacceptable

<i>spectacle</i>	an unusual or surprising sight
<i>gaunt</i>	lean, as from hunger, ill-health or suffering
<i>flush</i>	a red colour which appears on the face when excited
<i>coverlet</i>	bedcover
<i>twitched</i>	sudden, quick, uncontrollable movement of a muscle
<i>croaking</i>	a low, harsh sound, like the one a frog makes
<i>spasms</i>	sudden convulsive movements
<i>listlessly</i>	without energy or enthusiasm
<i>austerity</i>	strictness
<i>unofficial tweeds</i>	(here) plain clothes
<i>coolie</i>	(here) an old-fashioned term for an unskilled worker in Eastern countries
<i>infallibly</i>	unmistakably
<i>perambulation</i>	a slow walk
<i>mantelpiece</i>	shelf above a fireplace
<i>delirious</i>	in an excited state and unable to speak or think clearly, usually because of fever
<i>jaunty</i>	lively
<i>fiendish</i>	cruel and unpleasant
<i>smug</i>	looking or feeling too pleased about something
<i>demure</i>	quiet and serious
<i>butler</i>	the main servant in a large house
<i>petulant</i>	irritated
<i>coquettishly</i>	(here) playfully
<i>rickets</i>	a disease which causes bones to become soft and badly formed
<i>abominable</i>	extremely unpleasant and causing disgust
<i>gentle flow</i>	describes the murmur of the butler's voice
<i>sullen</i>	silent and bad-tempered
<i>malicious</i>	moved by hatred or ill-will
<i>tut, tut</i>	an expression of disapproval
<i>dissimulation</i>	hiding one's true feelings or intentions
<i>malodorous</i>	bad-smelling
<i>deferred to</i>	gave way, yielded
<i>imperious</i>	commanding, haughty
<i>remonstrance</i>	protest (against)
<i>suavity</i>	the quality of being gracious in manner or utterance, elegance
<i>prolific</i>	producing numerous offspring
<i>microbe</i>	bacteria
<i>snigger</i>	half-suppressed cynical laugh
<i>claret</i>	a kind of wine
<i>rasping</i>	make a harsh, grating sound

<i>fidget</i>	to make nervous
<i>coals of fire</i>	(heap coals of fire on somebody's head) return good for evil and so induce remorse
<i>chuckle</i>	low, quiet laugh with closed mouth indicating satisfaction or amusement
<i>belladonna</i>	a poisonous drug which enlarges the pupils of the eyes
<i>rouge</i>	a red powder used by women to give colour to their cheeks
<i>malingering</i>	pretending to be ill
<i>monograph</i>	a detailed written study of a single subject
<i>extraneous</i>	not belonging to what is being dealt with, coming from outside
<i>reversion</i>	the return of land or property to somebody
<i>Simpson's</i>	a London restaurant

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. Why does Mrs Hudson visit Dr Watson?
2. What type of tenant is Sherlock Holmes?
3. Why does Sherlock Holmes ask Watson to stand back when the latter goes to enquire about him?
4. What disease does Sherlock Holmes say he is suffering from?
5. What remark by Holmes hurts Watson bitterly when he wants to examine him?
6. What does Sherlock Holmes do when Watson turns to go and fetch Dr Ainstree?
7. What is Sherlock Holmes' reaction when Watson lifts a small ivory box from the mantelpiece?
8. What makes Watson believe that Sherlock Holmes is 'obviously delirious'?
9. Why does Sherlock Holmes forbid Watson to accompany Culverton Smith?
10. What conversation takes place between Watson and Inspector Morton?
11. Why does Culverton Smith want to kill Sherlock Holmes?
12. How does Sherlock Holmes simulate the ghastly face?
13. What does Holmes ask Watson to do when he returns to the sick-room?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. 'At four yards, I could deceive you', Sherlock Holmes tells Watson. Explain.
2. Describe how Holmes tricks Watson into believing he is really ill. Why does he do so?
3. Explain how Sherlock Holmes manages to get Culverton Smith arrested.

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4. 'The best way of acting a part is to be it,' reveals Holmes. Describe the means he adopts to simulate a dying, delirious man.
5. What do we come to know about Culverton Smith at the end of the story?
6. Why does Sherlock Holmes keep Watson in the dark about his feigned illness?

Under the Banyan Tree

R.K. NARAYAN



R.K. Narayan (1906–2001) became a household name after the telecast of *Malgudi Days*. Narayan's full name was Rasipuram Krishnaswami Ayyar Narayanswami. In his early years he signed his name as R.K. Narayanswami. However, he shortened it to R.K. Narayan on Graham Greene's suggestion.

Born in Chennai in 1906, Narayan was first educated there and later at Maharaja's College, Mysore. Most of his works are set in an imaginary town called Malgudi. Starting with his first work, *Swami and Friends* (1935), he dexterously captured everything Indian within the canvas of his fictional town. Malgudi, says a critic, is 'perhaps the single most endearing character R.K. Narayan has created.'

He published numerous novels, six collections of short stories, two travel books, four collections of essays, a memoir and translations of Indian epics and myths. Narayan passed away on May 13, 2001 and left the literary world impoverished.

His short story collections are: *An Astrologer's Day*, *Lawley Road*, *Malgudi Days*, *A Horse and Two Goats*, *The Grandmother's Tale*, and *Under the Banyan Tree* and *Other Stories*.

The village Somal, nestling away in the forest tracts of Mempi, had a population of less than three hundred. It was in every way a village to make the heart of a rural reformer sink. Its tank, a small expanse of water, right in the middle of the village, served for drinking, bathing, and washing the cattle, and it bred malaria, typhoid, and heaven knew what else. The cottages sprawled anyhow and the lanes twisted and wriggled up and down and strangled each other. The population used the highway as the refuse ground and in the backyard of every house drain water stagnated in green puddles.

Such was the village. It is likely that the people of the village were insensitive, but it is more than likely that they never noticed their surroundings because they lived in a kind of perpetual enchantment. The enchanter was Nambi the storyteller. He was a man of about sixty or seventy. Or was he eighty or one hundred and eighty? Who could say? In a place so much cut off as Somal (the nearest bus-stop was ten miles away), reckoning could hardly be in the familiar measures of time. If anyone asked Nambi what his age was

he referred to an ancient famine or an invasion or the building of a bridge and indicated how high he had stood from the ground at the time.

He was illiterate, in the sense that the written word was a mystery to him; but he could make up a story, in his head, at the rate of one a month; each story took nearly ten days to narrate.

His home was the little temple which was at the very end of the village. No one could say how he had come to regard himself as the owner of the temple. The temple was a very small structure with red-striped walls, with a stone image of the Goddess Shakti in the sanctum. The front portion of the temple was Nambi's home. For aught it mattered any place might be his home; for he was without possessions. All that he possessed was a broom with which he swept the temple; and he had also a couple of dhoties and upper cloth. He spent most of the day in the shade of the banyan which spread out its branches in front of the temple. When he felt hungry he walked into any house that caught his fancy and joined the family at dinner. When he needed new clothes they were brought to him by the villagers. He hardly ever had to go out in search of company; for the banyan shade served as a clubhouse for the village folk. All through the day people came seeking Nambi's company and squatted under the tree. If he was in a mood for it he listened to their talk and entertained them with his own observations and anecdotes. When he was in no mood he looked at the visitors sourly and asked, 'What do you think I am? Don't blame me if you get no story at the next moon. Unless I meditate how can the Goddess give me a story? Do you think stories float in the air?' And he moved out to the edge of the forest and squatted there, contemplating the trees.

On Friday evenings the village turned up at the temple for worship, when Nambi lit a score of mud lamps and arranged them around the threshold of the sanctuary. He decorated the image with flowers, which grew wildly in the backyard of the temple. He acted as the priest and offered to the Goddess fruits and flowers brought in by the villagers.

On the nights he had a story to tell he lit a small lamp and placed it in a niche in the trunk of the banyan tree. Villagers as they returned home in the evening saw this, went home, and said to their wives, 'Now, now, hurry up with the dinner, the storyteller is calling us.' As the moon crept up behind the hillock, men, women, and children gathered under the banyan tree. The storyteller would not appear yet. He would be sitting in the sanctum, before the Goddess, with his eyes shut, in deep meditation. He sat thus as long as he liked and when he came out, with his forehead ablaze with ash and vermilion, he took his seat on a stone platform in front of the temple. He opened the story with a question. Jerking his finger towards a vague, faraway destination, he asked, 'A thousand years ago, a stone's throw in that direction, what do you think there was? It was not the weed-covered waste it is now, for donkeys

to roll in. It was not the ash-pit it is now. It was the capital of the king . . . ' The king would be Dasaratha, Vikramaditya, Asoka, or anyone that came into the old man's head; the capital was called Kapila, Kridapura, or anything. Opening thus, the old man went on without a pause for three hours. By then brick by brick the palace of the king was raised. The old man described the dazzling durbar hall where sat a hundred vassal kings, ministers, and subjects; in another part of the palace all the musicians in the world assembled and sang; and most of the songs were sung over again by Nambi to his audience; and he described in detail the pictures and trophies that hung on the walls of the palace . . .

It was story-building on an epic scale. The first day barely conveyed the setting of the tale, and Nambi's audience as yet had no idea who were coming into the story. As the moon slipped behind the trees of Mempi Forest, Nambi said, 'Now friends, Mother says this will do for the day.' He abruptly rose, went in, lay down, and fell asleep long before the babble of the crowd ceased.

The light in the niche would again be seen two or three days later, and again and again throughout the bright half of the month. Kings and heroes, villains and fairy-like women, gods in human form, saints and assassins, jostled each other in that world which was created under the banyan tree. Nambi's voice rose and fell in an exquisite rhythm, and the moonlight and the hour completed the magic. The villagers laughed with Nambi, they wept with him, they adored the heroes, cursed the villains, groaned when the conspirator had his initial success, and they sent up to the gods a heartfelt prayer for a happy ending . . .

On the day when the story ended, the whole gathering went into the sanctum and prostrated before the Goddess . . .

By the time the next moon peeped over the hillock Nambi was ready with another story. He never repeated the same kind of story or brought in the same set of persons, and the village folk considered Nambi a sort of miracle, quoted his words of wisdom, and lived on the whole in an exalted plane of their own, though their life in all other respects was hard and drab.

And yet it had gone on for years and years. One moon he lit the lamp in the tree. The audience came. The old man took his seat and began the story. ' . . . When King Vikramaditya lived, his minister was . . . ' He paused. He could not get beyond it. He made a fresh beginning. 'There was the king . . . ' he said, repeated it, and then his words trailed off into a vague mumbling. 'What has come over me?' he asked pathetically. 'Oh, Mother, great Mother, why do I stumble and falter? I know the story. I had the whole of it a moment ago. What was it about? I can't understand what has happened.' He faltered and looked so miserable that his audience said, 'Take your own time. You are perhaps tired.'

'Shut up!' he cried. 'Am I tired? Wait a moment; I will tell you the story presently.' Following this there was utter silence. Eager faces looked up at him. 'Don't look at me!' he flared up. Somebody gave him a tumbler of milk. The audience waited patiently. This was a new experience. Some persons expressed their sympathy aloud. Some persons began to talk among themselves. Those who sat in the outer edge of the crowd silently slipped away. Gradually, as it neared midnight, others followed this example. Nambi sat staring at the ground, his head bowed in thought. For the first time he realized that he was old. He felt he would never more be able to control his thoughts or express them cogently. He looked up. Everyone had gone except his friend Mari the blacksmith. 'Mari, why aren't you also gone?'

Mari apologized for the rest: 'They didn't want to tire you; so they have gone away.'

Nambi got up. 'You are right. Tomorrow I will make it up. Age, age. What is my age? It has come on suddenly.' He pointed at his head and said, 'This says, "Old fool, don't think I shall be your servant anymore. You will be my servant hereafter." It is disobedient and treacherous.'

He lit the lamp in the niche next day. The crowd assembled under the banyan faithfully. Nambi had spent the whole day in meditation. He had been fervently praying to the Goddess not to desert him. He began the story. He went on for an hour without a stop. He felt greatly relieved, so much so that he interrupted his narration to remark, 'Oh, friends. The Mother is always kind. I was seized with a foolish fear . . .' and continued the story. In a few minutes he felt dried up. He struggled hard: 'And then . . . and then . . . what happened?' He stammered. There followed a pause lasting an hour. The audience rose without a word and went home. The old man sat on the stone brooding till the cock crew. 'I can't blame them for it,' he muttered to himself. 'Can they sit down here and mope all night?' Two days later he gave another instalment of the story, and that, too, lasted only a few minutes. The gathering dwindled. Fewer persons began to take notice of the lamp in the niche. Even these came only out of a sense of duty. Nambi realized that there was no use in prolonging the struggle. He brought the story to a speedy and premature end.

He knew what was happening. He was harrowed by the thoughts of his failure. I should have been happier if I had dropped dead years ago, he said to himself. Mother, why have you struck me dumb . . . ? He shut himself up in the sanctum, hardly ate any food, and spent the greater part of the day sitting motionless in meditation.

The next moon peeped over the hillock, Nambi lit the lamp in the niche. The villagers as they returned home saw the lamp, but only a handful turned up at night. 'Where are the others?' the old man asked. 'Let us wait.' He

waited. The moon came up. His handful of audience waited patiently. And then the old man said, 'I won't tell the story today, nor tomorrow unless the whole village comes here. I insist upon it. It is a mighty story. Everyone must hear it.' Next day he went up and down the village street shouting. 'I have a most wonderful tale to tell tonight. Come one and all; don't miss it . . .' This personal appeal had a great effect. At night a large crowd gathered under the banyan. They were happy that the storyteller had regained his powers. Nambi came out of the temple when everyone had settled and said: 'It is the Mother who gives the gifts; and it is she who takes away the gifts. Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. He is struck dumb when she has nothing to say. But what is the use of the jasmine when it has lost its scent? What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone? Goddess be thanked . . . These are my last words on this earth; and this is my greatest story.' He rose and went into the sanctum. His audience hardly understood what he meant. They sat there till they became weary. And then some of them got up and stepped into the sanctum. There the storyteller sat with eyes shut. 'Aren't you going to tell us a story?' they asked. He opened his eyes, looked at them, and shook his head. He indicated by gesture that he had spoken his last words.

When he felt hungry he walked into any cottage and silently sat down for food, and walked away the moment he had eaten. Beyond this he had hardly anything to demand of his fellow beings. The rest of his life (he lived for a few more years) was one great consummate silence.

Outline

'Under the Banyan Tree' is taken from the collection *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*. It is an interesting story about a storyteller, Nambi, who enraptures his village audience with gripping tales. The author gives a graphic picture of the village, Somal, Nambi's daily routine, and his story-telling sessions. As if by some mutual, unannounced agreement, the villagers take upon themselves to cater to Nambi's needs for food and clothes in return for the entertaining tales. Nambi is old and eccentric but alert. The turning point in Nambi's life comes when he fails to concoct a story and falls silent. Narayan has painted Nambi and his storytelling sessions with an undercurrent of humour. One feels desolate, however, along with the villagers, to see Nambi fall silent, losing his art of storytelling forever.

Glossary

<i>nestling</i>	situated in a position that is sheltered
<i>tracts</i>	region

<i>sprawled</i>	spread ungracefully
<i>twisted</i>	took a curved course
<i>wriggled</i>	twisted and turned
<i>perpetual</i>	everlasting, uninterrupted
<i>enchantment</i>	charm, delight
<i>enchanter</i>	a person who charms or bewitches, especially a magician
<i>reckoning</i>	estimation
<i>sanctum</i>	(here) the inner room of the temple where the idol is kept
<i>ought</i>	anything
<i>sourly</i>	unpleasantly
<i>anecdote</i>	story or short account of an entertaining incident
<i>epic scale</i>	grand scale
<i>babble</i>	chatter
<i>jostle</i>	to push roughly against others in a crowd
<i>prostrated</i>	lay flat on the ground, especially in submission
<i>cogently</i>	clearly and forcefully
<i>mope</i>	to sit around listlessly, with no particular purpose; sulk
<i>dwindle</i>	to decline, to become less
<i>harrowed</i>	distressed, upset
<i>dotard</i>	a person who is feeble-minded from old age
<i>consummate</i>	complete

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. What do you understand by the word 'enchanter'? Why does the author call Nambi an 'enchanter'?
2. Why does Nambi stop telling stories at the end?
3. How has Narayan portrayed village life?
4. How old is Nambi? What is his method of telling his age?
5. What is the frequency with which Nambi can create a story and how long does his narration last?
6. Where does Nambi live? Describe his daily routine and the ritual performed on Friday evenings.
7. How do the villagers look upon Nambi? What is their opinion of the man?
8. Why does Nambi say, '... Age, age. What is my age? It has come on suddenly'?
9. Describe the second day of Nambi's failure to tell the story.
10. Describe Nambi's life after he stops telling stories? Do the villagers reject him?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. Nambi, the storyteller, seems to have divine power. Why do the villagers like to listen to his stories?
2. Describe the village Somal.
3. How does Nambi announce that he has a tale ready? Describe the congregation of villagers and the style of Nambi's narration.
4. Describe Nambi's life in the village during his heydays as a storyteller and afterwards.
5. Draw a character sketch of Nambi.
6. What is irony? How does Narayan use it in this story?
7. 'It was story-building on an epic scale.' What do you understand by this statement? Elaborate.
8. Nambi's behaviour appeared eccentric at times. Elaborate using at least two examples of his whimsical behaviour.
9. Write a note on the three failed storytelling sessions, commenting on Nambi's shame and the reaction of the villagers.

That Pagli

D.R. SHARMA



D.R. Sharma (born 1937) is a Panchkula-based writer, who retired as Professor of English from the Department of Evening Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh. He went abroad on a Fulbright-Smithmundt Award in 1970 and later was a visiting lecturer at Brigham Young University for three years. He has published 40 research papers and 400 articles in leading journals and dailies. Besides editing three books, namely, *A Handbook of American Literature, Ideas and Impressions* and *The Assistant*, he has also written two collections of short stories—*Pastoral Connections* (1982) and *Traps and Discoveries* (1984), a novel, *Miracles Happen* (1985), and a collection of essays, *Memories and Meditations* (1988). His stories are simple and soaked in feeling, are persuasive and sensitive and present fascinating vignettes of rural Punjab.

Whenever someone died in our village—in upper, middle, or lower *mohalla*—men streamed individually to the house of the deceased, whereas women called their neighbours and marched together in small groups to condole with their bereaved counterpart. When the dead body was washed and clothed for the last journey to the cremation ground, all the assembled women invariably mentioned the deceased's name, reminisced about him, and then burst out crying. On all tragic scenes the hapless family was in charge of Kesar the magic-man, Gurcharan the priest and Munshiji who closed the school and shared the grief of survivors. Whereas the other two grocers padlocked their shops whenever death occurred in the village, Dhania pulled the shutters only when someone with clout collapsed.

The day Subedar Shamsheer Bahadur died, Dhania was the first grocer to shut his shop and join the mass of mourners. Those who heard the news in the fields immediately returned with their ploughs and bullocks. Munshiji choked while announcing the midday suspension of classes, and Gurcharan was seen rushing with big mats to Subedar's house. On the way he muttered: 'Imagine, even the lion is dead.' Some said the village glory had vanished while others declared that the entire hamlet had been orphaned. Trailing my tote-bag crammed with books, a writing tablet, and a slate, I got home and told my mother what I had heard.

'It's both sad and good,' she said.

'How?'

'Sad for his sons, and good for a cow like Pagli.'

'Will Pagli be all right now?'

'No, her spirit is crushed.'

Pagli was our naughty cow. Whenever she returned in the evening along with other village cattle, Raghbir the cowherd said his job was over. He took upon himself the nerve-shattering pressure of controlling our problem cow during the day. 'Yes, if she misbehaves between morning and evening as long as she is in the herd, I'm answerable, but not after I corral her back home,' he explained his position.

I grew up hearing incredible stories about Pagli's ingenuity and rebelliousness. Even my headman brother confessed that he had failed to tame the beautiful beast. She defied everyone after the crimson sunset, outran all the three of our handymen; never stopped even once to recognize my mother—with whom otherwise she was exceptionally cordial—and romped to the patch of wilderness on the southern rim of ours and Subedar Shamsher's fields. In the past few years, while Subedar was still in Lahore on active duty with his infantry regiment, Pagli had had a field day. She grazed leisurely at night in the green fields—wheat crop in winter and corn in summer—and returned to her hitching post at the manger in the pre-dawn darkness. First she fed her calf who bleated right on seeing her, and later she filled the jar when my mother milked her. While pressing down Pagli's teats and directing the high pressure milky sprinkler into the jar, my mother always advised Pagli to stop being naughty. Whenever she said, 'Don't be a naughty girl now that you're a mother,' Pagli coughed a little, twisted her neck, dilated her eyeballs, swished her tail, and indulgently licked her calf all over. Seemingly she promised to put an end to her waywardness and come back straight home to please her son and my mother. But the moment she saw the bridge and some cowboy ready to lasso her, she just outflowed all traps and strategies. Milkhi, our toughest ploughman, first ran almost neck to neck with her, but when she fully rolled her tail into a circle she became an arrow, leaving Milkhi far behind to lament and warn her.

Despite her capricious nature and evening wildness particularly, I loved the crazy cow. Her horns were short and sharp which I loved to fondle and polish every Sunday morning. Her skin was smooth tan, her head high, and her tail long and bushy. In sheer animal beauty she excelled all other cows in the village. Whenever on a holiday I jogged with my dogs towards the mango grove where all the huddled cattle stood or sat to let Raghbir munch his midday meal, Pagli would get up to welcome me. My pets growled in a friendly way when I rubbed her rump, the silky flaps of her ears, and especially the flannel-soft fleshline under her neck. I always saw a twinkle in her eyes when I said:

'See you in the evening.' My pets were so fond of her that whenever I commanded them to howl and flush Pagli out of the thicket, they just smiled and wagged their tails but never stirred. Once or twice, after ascertaining that I was the fastest running boy in the village, I tried to barricade Pagli with a lariat as soon as she arrived this side of the bridge, but she probably didn't approve of my contrivance. She just tricked me by swiftly turning aside from the noose and then galloping away towards the forested patch. Once I stood unarmed at the bridge-foot which she obviously appreciated. She pulled herself out of the crowd and came to receive a pat on the rump. Like two good friends we began to walk home-ward: I was exultant at my strategy of non-violence and she was uncommonly cooperative. When we reached the threshold she parted company to go her usual way, and when I held out a shrill threat and tried to catch her, she leaped like a kangaroo and vanished. Thereafter I stopped meddling with her schedule and met her either on holidays at her rest point, or in the mornings at the manger. At times I felt Pagli was as fond of me as of her gambolling calf. Twice or thrice I asked my mother if I could milk Pagli. When she said I could, I tried, but no milk came out of the teats. I didn't know the technique, and when my mother first pressured and squeezed them, how torrentially they filled the pail! I often crouched beside my mother to receive the milky shower right in my open mouth. When I answered all of Munshiji's riddles, he wondered and remarked: 'Surely, Deva, you must be drinking your cow's milk.'

Pagli fattened on the nocturnal plunder, judiciously damaging Subedar's crops more than ours. Surjit and Balwinder, Subedar's sons, couldn't spend their nights on the vigil. When their father retired on pension and took charge of the fields, he heard with concern the extent of devastation caused by our crafty cow. Trailing his double-barrelled gun one day he stalked to register a virulent protest with my headman brother.

'You better watch your cow, Nambardar.'

'She's beyond our control, Subedar Sahib.'

'Then I can try.'

'How?'

'With this,' he said with a finger on the trigger.

'Can a Hindu be a cow-killer?'

'Not a gutless one; but I'm determined to do something.'

'We are equally desperate, but Pagli is headstrong.'

'All right, henceforth I won't protest but you shall.'

Subedar Shamsheer had returned from Lahore with ten steel boxes, one gun, and two Alsations at whose sight my mongrels straightened their tails, and hid them between their hind legs. A week after arrival he brought a white mare and inspected his fields. When he noted Pagli's havoc in his two fields

adjoining ours, he thundered and fired at the birds. Thereafter he hastened back to devise his savage strategy to paralyse Pagli.

Next morning Balbir came running to tell me that Subedar had asked Banta the ironsmith to forge a special javelin—longer in the handle and sharper in the blade. With that, Balbir said, Subedar had resolved to defend his crops against our pampered and predatory beast.

In a few days, Subedar's prestige escalated in and around our village. Whenever he rode his mare I saw the gun buckled snugly on his back and his Alsations sniffing and trotting ahead of him. Since he had lived in Lahore and worked with the fair-skinned British officers, he chose to slight my headman brother on several pretexts. He had picked up a few words of English like 'yes, yes' and 'no, no' with which he always frightened the illiterate villagers, and my Punjabi-speaking brother. By promising sundowners he later alienated from us constable Bhajan Singh. Instead of cycling to our courtyard the cop began to alight at Subedar's *baithak*, a newly thatched hut with brick walls where the pensioner was reported to be hosting his guests.

'You know with what?' Balbir asked me.

'With Amli's Orange or Jasmine?'

'No, man, not with hooch but with English stuff.'

'English?'

'Yes, Solan from Pathankot'.

In a month or two when Subedar switched to Amli's Dhatura, Bhajan Singh resumed his earlier schedule of directly riding to our house while working the handle-bell of his Hercules. He didn't come alone but with tales about Subedar's pension figures, his rise and retirement from infantry, his vindictive plans to cripple Pagli, his disdainful allusion to the headman, and his orgies with the dung-cleaning and fuel-gathering women of the village.

Subedar's methodology to disable Pagli soon acquired a sensational proportion. When Kesar heard that he called it barbaric and Gurcharan prayed it didn't happen. But neither of the two dared dissuade him against a brutal recourse. They said they were scared of his pink skin and uniform, and his insolent Alsations. Their account made me blue, and whenever I saw Subedar despotically perched on the saddle with gun on his back and javelin in his hand I froze in my shoes. When he appeared like that, fortified like a ferocious bandit, I knew he was on a Pagli-baiting mission.

But poor Pagli refused to be daunted by Subedar's manoeuvres. She stuck to her evening escapades as meticulously as Subedar clung to his resolution to lame her. Whenever he found her merrily nibbling at his crop, he said 'yes, yes' to his hunting monsters who sprang and howled her into stillness. When she noticed the charger with the executioner on its back, she unflapped her ears and dashed to the bushy refuge, wildly kicking back the chasing hounds.

After a few brushes with Pagli, the dogs only barked and whirled around her but never ventured to bite her. Despite repeated 'yes, yes' from Subedar they hesitated to tear Pagli's flesh for at that grim moment of self-defence she made an intelligent use of her pointed horns as well as strong and agile legs.

When Subedar realized his ignominy at the hands of his adversary, he grew nakedly revengeful. As long as he stayed around his fields, Pagli made a meal of sundry leaves but missed the delectable fare of forbidden fodder in Subedar's fields. The moment he left with his entourage Pagli would cautiously peer through the leaves and then furtively emerge out of the hideout. Despite her vulnerability she returned home at the usual hour, though of late she looked somewhat dazed and exhausted.

Every morning when I was barely through with my taste of the milky fountain or just rubbing the tender nozzle of the calf and the brisket of his mother, Balbir would walk in with his daily diary on the Subedar-versus-Pagli confrontation.

'You know what he said last night?'

'No.'

'He told Dhania that he would act now.'

'What does he mean? Shooting?'

'No, spiking.'

Balbir also mentioned Subedar was disappointed with his Alsations. With his background in the army he knew the importance of diet in shaping one's temper. 'This morning he asked his sons to kill wasps and coat them with chilli powder,' Balbir added.

'My God! What for?'

'To sharpen his dogs' fangs and appetite.'

That day I cut school and made a special trip to meet Pagli. I found her chewing the cud when she got up to feel my hand. 'You better be careful tonight,' I said after ascertaining that she was all right. In the evening I repeated the caveat at the bridge, but she abandoned me again at the bifurcation.

That night Pagli was repeatedly spiked. Subedar got her corralled by his frenzied hounds and then charged her militarily with the spear, wounding her ribs. Subsequently followed more stabs on the back till she desperately pierced the thicket.

After the blitz she returned rather early when the calf bleated and I rushed to examine her condition. She was bleeding profusely and repenting the villainy. We disinfected her wounds with kerosene oil and asked her not to worry. We didn't send her to Raghbir's herd next morning, for there would be none to swat those flyswarms. We quickly prepared a special meal for her—comprising soggy chaff, wheat flour, and split gram. As she calmly began to sort out the forage, I waved off the winged visitors with a hand fan.

In the evening I saw Subedar in his assault gear riding to the battlefield. I cursed him with the fury of a hermit: 'Oh, you veritable demon, may Lord Hanuman bust you with his mace!'

Within a few weeks Pagli's wounds turned into scars, but her total conduct reflected a metamorphosis. In a herd of five hundred cows and buffaloes she became the lead-cattle and gradually rose in the estimation of the cowherd. 'Whereas several others I have to repeatedly hit to make them understand me this Pagli follows my instructions more obediently than even children. What a cow!' That is how Raghbir summed up Pagli's latter-day behaviour and admired her role as the guiding light among dumb beasts. My mother and I often commended her self-reformation, for she returned to post in the evening and serenely waited for her share of the fodder. Now she spent maximum time with her son licking his body or stroking his forehead with her horns. Of course her character improvement failed to fill my mother's jar to the brim, as she used to do after her triumphant forays in Subedar's fields.

In less than a year Subedar Shamsheer Bahadur's pink face began to fade. Our village *vaid*, who wanted everyone to call him a registered medical practitioner, first detected the failure of Subedar's liver and later of his lungs. Kesar had his own version of the malady: he said Subedar saw ghoulish visions in his sleep and often shouted for help at midnight.

Whatever the ailment, the infantry officer suffered long. Even his commission agent friend from Pathankot, with whom he did some business during the War, failed to check the erosion of Subedar's physique. After a prolonged agony died the 'lion' of our village.

My headman brother immediately left for Subedar's house, and my mother called Balbir's mother and then the two walked together to join the sea of mourners. I stayed back waiting for Pagli, hoping that the news would exorcise her fright and defeatism. I dreamed to see her again in her wild passions, defying all that was fresh and green in the fields, and returning home to aggressively fill the pail and lick her calf.

Outline

'That Pagli' is the lively account of Pagli—the boy-narrator's naughty cow—so named because of her waywardness. Defying the cowherd and the three handymen, Pagli grazes leisurely at night, fattening judiciously on the Subedar's crops more than on those owned by the narrator's family and returns to her hitching-post in the pre-dawn darkness to feed her calf and later yield rich milk. Any attempt to lasso the deft cow is in vain. This nocturnal plunder of fields goes on till Subedar Shamsheer Bahadur retires, and returns from Lahore to supervise his fields personally. The devastation caused to his crops

makes him devise a savage strategy to paralyse Pagli. When all other deterrents, including his Alsatians, fail to reform Pagli, the Subedar, out of a blatant sense of revenge, repeatedly spikes Pagli one night. This becomes a turning point in Pagli's life. Her wounds soon heal and she becomes a model cow. Pretty soon, as if by the power of the narrator's curses, the Subedar catches an unknown affliction and dies after a protracted illness. With deft touches, the writer has portrayed the typical village life of Punjab.

Glossary

<i>deceased</i>	someone who has died recently
<i>condole</i>	express sympathy
<i>bereaved</i>	one who has lost a relative
<i>reminisced</i>	remembered
<i>hapless</i>	unlucky, unhappy
<i>when someone with clout collapsed</i>	when some powerful or influential person died.
<i>hamlet</i>	small village
<i>tote-bag</i>	carry bag
<i>corral</i>	to put into enclosure for cattle
<i>ingenuity</i>	cleverness and skill
<i>incredible</i>	unbelievable
<i>handymen</i>	persons clever at doing certain jobs
<i>defied</i>	refused to obey
<i>romped</i>	moved about easily and quickly
<i>fête day</i>	gala time
<i>manger</i>	a trough in which food is laid out for cattle
<i>teats</i>	nipples
<i>dilated</i>	made larger, wider, further open
<i>lasso</i>	to catch cattle with a rope which has been made into a loop
<i>capricious</i>	showing sudden changes in attitude or behaviour
<i>fondle</i>	touch or stroke lovingly
<i>tan</i>	yellowish-brown
<i>rump</i>	backside
<i>flannel</i>	soft, light fabric containing cotton or wool
<i>barricade</i>	barrier of objects
<i>lariat</i>	a picketing rope
<i>contrivance</i>	a clever device, made for a particular purpose; here, the rope
<i>gambolling</i>	quick playful jumping movement
<i>nocturnal plunder</i>	destruction caused at night
<i>judiciously</i>	wisely
<i>vigil</i>	watch, especially by night

<i>virulent</i>	full of bitterness
<i>gutless</i>	having no courage
<i>Alsatian</i>	a breed of large dog, often trained to guard
<i>mongrels</i>	dogs of mixed breed
<i>javelin</i>	a light spear
<i>sundowners</i>	drinks taken at sunset
<i>alienated</i>	estranged
<i>baithak</i>	room in a home where visitors are received
<i>hooch</i>	illegally prepared liquor
<i>Amlī's Orange/ Jasmine/Amlī's Datura Solan from Pathankot Hercules</i>	local brands of hooch available at the time the story is set wine prepared in Solan Brewery and bought at Pathankot a popular bicycle brand available in the days when the story is set
<i>vindictive</i>	revengeful
<i>orgies</i>	licentious or drunken merrymaking possibly involving sexual activity
<i>made me blue</i>	depressed me
<i>insolent</i>	disobedient
<i>despotic</i>	powerful in a cruel way
<i>delectable</i>	delightful
<i>entourage</i>	followers
<i>furtively</i>	secretly, stealthily
<i>nozzle</i>	a little nose, snout
<i>brisket</i>	the part of the breast next to the ribs
<i>spiking</i>	pierce with a pointed object
<i>chewing the cud</i>	chewing the food which cows bring back from their stomach into the mouth. The idiomatic usage, ruminating in thought, is also meant
<i>caveat</i>	warning
<i>bifurcation</i>	point where something (for example, a road) splits into two parts
<i>blitz</i>	a sudden, overwhelming attack
<i>forage</i>	fodder
<i>winged visitors</i>	(here) flyswarms
<i>veritable</i>	real, rightly named
<i>mace</i>	a large heavy stick that has a head with metal points on it, used in the past as a weapon; (Hindi) <i>gada</i>
<i>metamorphosis</i>	transformation
<i>ghoulish</i>	of ghosts and demons
<i>exorcise</i>	(here) to drive away or deliver from the influence of

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. How did the boy-narrator's mother react to the news of the Subedar's death?
2. What was the Subedar's earlier strategy to control Pagli? Did it succeed?
3. Was Pagli mad, as her name suggests?
4. What change did the boy-narrator expect to see in his cow after the Subedar's death?
5. Describe the 'sheer animal beauty' of Pagli.
6. When the narrator answers all of Munshiji's riddles, what remark does Munshiji make?
7. Give an account of the 'nocturnal plunder' made by Pagli.
8. Why couldn't the Subedar's Alsatians tear Pagli's flesh?
9. What first-aid was given to wounded Pagli?
10. How did Pagli's 'character improvement' harm the narrator's family?
11. Could there be any connection between Pagli's wounding and the Subedar's ailment?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. Describe the bond between the boy-narrator and the cow.
2. Describe Pagli's behaviour before and after her wounding.
3. Analyse the character of the Subedar.
4. What metamorphosis did Pagli undergo after the assault on her?
5. Bring out the humorous instances in the story.
6. Write a note on the usual countryside scene as depicted in the story.

Am I Blue?

ALICE WALKER



Alice Melsenior Walker (born 1944) is an American poetess and fiction writer presently living in California. Her parents were poor sharecroppers, her mother's grandmother was a Cherokee Indian while her father's great-great-great-grandmother was a slave. Alice is deeply proud of her inheritances which, along with her repeated frustrations in love and marriage, have influenced her works, and led to her political activism in civil rights and women's movements. Her first volume of poetry was *Once*, while her first collection of short stories was *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. *Meridian*, her second novel, chronicles a young woman's struggle during the civil rights movement. Her novel *The Colour Purple* (1982) won her the Pulitzer Prize. This novel was later made into a film starring Oprah Winfrey and directed by Steven Spielberg. Her other famous works are *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (poems), *The Temple of My Familiar* (an epic novel), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (novel) and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (a novel which examines the connection between sexuality and spirituality). Alice's latest work is a collection of short stories called *The Way Forward is With a Broken Heart*.

Alice is a vegetarian, a gardener, a world traveller and a spiritual explorer. This plethora of work she has done despite the loss of right-eye vision as a result of a childhood injury.

'Ain't these tears in these eyes tellin' you?'

For about three years my companion and I rented a small house in the country that stood on the edge of a large meadow that appeared to run from the end of our deck straight into the mountains. The mountains, however, were quite far away, and between us and them there was, in fact, a town. It was one of the many pleasant aspects of the house that you never really were aware of this.

It was a house of many windows, low, wide, nearly floor to ceiling in the living room, which faced the meadow, and it was from one of these that I first saw our closest neighbor, a large white horse, cropping grass, flipping its mane, and ambling about—not over the entire meadow, which stretched well out of sight of the house, but over the five or so fenced-in acres that were next to the twenty-odd that we had rented. I soon learned that the horse, whose

name was Blue, belonged to a man who lived in another town, but was boarded by our neighbours next door. Occasionally, one of the children, usually a stocky teenager, but sometimes a much younger girl or boy, could be seen riding Blue. They would appear in the meadow, climb up on his back, ride furiously for ten or fifteen minutes, then get off, slap Blue on the flanks, and not be seen again for a month or more.

There were many apple trees in our yard, and one by the fence that Blue could almost reach. We were soon in the habit of feeding him apples, which he relished, especially because by the middle of summer the meadow grasses—so green and succulent since January—had dried out from lack of rain, and Blue stumbled about munching the dried stalks half-heartedly. Sometimes he would stand very still just by the apple tree, and when one of us came out he would whinny, snort loudly, or stamp the ground. This meant, of course: I want an apple.

It was quite wonderful to pick a few apples, or collect those that had fallen to the ground overnight, and patiently hold them, one by one, up to his large, toothy mouth. I remained as thrilled as a child by his flexible dark lips, huge, cubelike teeth that crunched the apples, core and all, with such finality, and his high, broad-breasted *enormity*; beside which, I felt small indeed. When I was a child, I used to ride horses, and was especially friendly with one named Nan until the day I was riding and my brother deliberately spooked her and I was thrown, head first, against the trunk of a tree. When I came to, I was in bed and my mother was bending worriedly over me; we silently agreed that perhaps horseback riding was not the safest sport for me. Since then I have walked, and prefer walking to horseback riding—but I had forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horses' eyes.

I was therefore unprepared for the expression in Blue's. Blue was lonely. Blue was horribly lonely and bored. I was not shocked that this should be the case; five acres to tramp by yourself, endlessly, even in the most beautiful of meadows—and his was—cannot provide many interesting events, and once rainy season turned to dry that was about it. No, I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well; if we are brought up around animals as children we take this for granted. By the time we are adults we no longer remember. However, the animals have not changed. They are in fact *completed* creations (at least they seem to be, so much more than we) who are not likely to change; it is their nature to express themselves. What else are they going to express? And they do. And, generally speaking, they are ignored.

After giving Blue the apples, I would wander back to the house, aware that he was observing me. Were more apples not forthcoming then? Was that to be his sole entertainment for the day? My partner's small son had decided

he wanted to learn how to piece a quilt; we worked in silence on our respective squares as I thought . . .

Well, about slavery: about white children, who were raised by black people, who knew their first all-accepting love from black women, and then, when they were twelve or so, were told they must 'forget' the deep levels of communication between themselves and 'mammy' that they knew. Later they would be able to relate quite calmly, 'My old mammy was sold to another good family.' 'My old mammy was — —.' Fill in the blank. Many more years later a white woman would say: 'I can't understand these Negroes, these blacks. What do they want? They're so different from us.'

And about the Indians, considered to be 'like animals' by the 'settlers' (a very benign euphemism for what they actually were), who did not understand their description as a compliment.

And about the thousands of American men who marry Japanese, Korean, Filipina, and other non-English-speaking women and of how happy they report they are, 'blissfully', until their brides learn to speak English, at which point the marriages tend to fall apart. What then did the men see, when they looked into the eyes of the women they married, before they could speak English? Apparently only their own reflections.

I thought of society's impatience with the young. 'Why are they playing the music so loud?' Perhaps the children have listened to much of the music of oppressed people their parents danced to before they were born, with its passionate but soft cries for acceptance and love, and they have wondered why their parents failed to hear.

I do not know how long Blue had inhabited his five beautiful, boring acres before we moved into our house; a year after we had arrived—and had also travelled to other valleys, other cities, other worlds—he was still there.

But then, in our second year at the house, something happened in Blue's life. One morning, looking out the window at the fog that lay like a ribbon over the meadow, I saw another horse, a brown one, at the other end of Blue's field. Blue appeared to be afraid of it, and for several days made no attempt to go near. We went away for a week. When we returned, Blue had decided to make friends and the two horses ambled or galloped along together, and Blue did not come nearly as often to the fence underneath the apple tree.

When he did, bringing his new friend with him, there was a different look in his eyes. A look of independence, of self-possession, of inalienable *horseness*. His friend eventually became pregnant. For months and months there was, it seemed to me, a mutual feeling between me and the horses of justice, of peace. I fed apples to them both. The look in Blue's eyes was one of unabashed 'this is *it*ness'.

It did not, however, last forever. One day, after a visit to the city, I went out to give Blue some apples. He stood waiting, or so I thought, though not beneath the tree. When I shook the tree and jumped back from the shower of apples, he made no move. I carried some over to him. He managed to half-crunch one. The rest he let fall to the ground. I dreaded looking into his eyes—because I had of course noticed that Brown, his partner, had gone—but I did look. If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that. The children next door explained that Blue's partner had been 'put with him' (the same expression that old people used, I had noticed, when speaking of an ancestor during slavery who had been impregnated by her owner) so that they could mate and she conceive. Since that was accomplished, she had been taken back by her owner, who lived somewhere else.

Will she be back? I asked.

They didn't know.

Blue was like a crazed person. Blue was, to me, a crazed person. He galloped furiously, as if he were being ridden, around and around his five beautiful acres. He whinnied until he couldn't. He tore at the ground with his hooves. He butted himself against his single shade tree. He looked always and always towards the road down which his partner had gone. And then, occasionally, when he came up for apples, or I took apples to him, he looked at me. It was a look so piercing, so full of grief, a look so *human*, I almost laughed (I felt too sad to cry) to think there are people who do not know what animals suffer. People like me who have forgotten, and daily forget, all that animals try to tell us. 'Everything you do to us will happen to you; we are your teachers, as you are ours. We are one lesson' is essentially it, I think. There are those who never once have even considered animals' rights: those who have been taught that animals actually want to be used and abused by us, as small children 'love' to be frightened, or women 'love' to be mutilated and raped . . . They are the great-grandchildren of those who honestly thought, because someone taught them this: 'Women can't think,' and 'niggers can't faint.' But most disturbing of all, in Blue's large brown eyes was a new look, more painful than the look of despair: the look of disgust with human beings, with life; the look of hatred. And it was odd what the look of hatred did. It gave him, for the first time, the look of a beast. And what that meant was that he had put up a barrier within to protect himself from further violence: all the apples in the world wouldn't change that fact.

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: 'And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.' And I thought, yes, the animals are forced

to become for us merely 'images' of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing 'contented' cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from 'happy' hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out.

Outline

In her story 'Am I Blue?', Alice Walker shows that even dumb animals experience trials and tribulations much as human beings do. The story is a touching account of what happens to a horse named Blue, confined to a five-acre incredibly beautiful but ultimately boring fenced-in meadow. There, he is 'put together' with a mare and after a few months, his brown impregnated companion is taken away. The incident leaves Blue shattered from within and utterly disgusted with the ways of human beings—he becomes merely an 'image' of freedom as horses tend to be. The story not only illustrates the law of cause and effect, but also conveys a powerful message about the oneness of life and reverence for all that is living. Racism, and even our patriarchal attitude, springs out of the very prejudices we harbour against animals. We see animals simply in terms of usefulness or function—as assets, entertainment or food. The moment we rise above such barriers, we see the sacred stream of compassion flow freely.

Glossary

<i>deck</i>	floor, surface
<i>flipping</i>	moving
<i>mane</i>	long hair on the neck of a horse
<i>ambling</i>	move at a slow, easy pace
<i>boarded by</i>	supplied with meals by
<i>stocky</i>	short, strong and stout
<i>succulent</i>	juicy, thick and fleshy
<i>whinny</i>	neigh gently
<i>snort</i>	force air violently through the nose
<i>stamp</i>	put one's foot down with force
<i>toothy</i>	with prominent teeth
<i>piece a quilt</i>	to make a quilt by putting pieces of fabric together
<i>settlers</i>	persons who have settled in a newly developed country
<i>unabashed</i>	not embarrassed
<i>put with him</i>	to mate with

<i>conceive</i>	become pregnant
<i>steaks</i>	thick slices of meat or fish for frying or grilling
<i>butted</i>	struck with the head
<i>drumstick</i>	the lower joint of the leg of a cooked fowl
<i>hamburger</i>	a round patty of minced beef, fried or grilled and typically served in a bread roll

Suggested Short-Answer Questions

1. What are the physical features of Blue before which the narrator feels small?
2. Why does the narrator prefer walking to riding on horseback?
3. What feelings were evoked in the narrator by the bored expression of the horse in summer?
4. Why does the writer call animals '*completed creations*'?
5. What change did the arrival of a brown companion bring in Blue's attitude?
6. Why did Blue stop eating apples? What more changes followed in him?
7. 'All the apples in the world would not change that fact,' says the narrator. What fact?
8. 'Looking out the window at the fog that lay like a ribbon over the meadow, I saw another horse.' What figure of speech has been used here?

Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. The writer says about animals: 'They are in fact *completed creations* (at least they seem to be, so much more than we) who are not likely to change.'
What light does this observation throw on the comparative ways of human and animals?
2. How does the writer interweave slavery and interracial marriage into the plot?
3. What prompts the narrator to say: 'I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out'?
4. What is the theme of the story 'Am I Blue'? What lesson does it convey?

Some Literary Terms



Plot: Plot signifies the plan or design of a play, poem or work of fiction. The pattern of events, situations and characters is so arranged that the curiosity of the reader is roused and interest sustained. Plot is the selected version of events in a certain order and not necessarily the actual sequence of events in a story.

It was Aristotle who first discussed plot in his *Poetics*. He calls it 'the imitation of the action', as well as 'the arrangement of the incidents'. According to him a plot should be whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It should also have unity of action, time and place.

According to E.M. Forster (1879–1970), the distinguished novelist who wrote *Aspects of the Novel*, a story is told in a time sequence but a plot has causality, that is, when we add cause or reason to a narrative of events, we get a plot. 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot.

There are many varieties of plot form—from tightly knit to loosely episodic. In general, most plots show some process of change or tension in which the character is caught up which is resolved in the end. A plot can be open-ended or it can have a surprise ending.

Character/Characterization: Characters are individuals who live in the fictional world created by the writer. They may be men, women or children. A character is thus the fictional representation of a person, having a distinct personality, with likes and dislikes, whims and fancies, moral qualities and motivations. In short, a character has a typical disposition, just like a real, living human being. He reveals his temperament through what he says (the dialogue) and what he does (the action). A character is also revealed through the remarks of the author or those of other characters in the story. A character may remain 'stable' or unchanged in his disposition from the beginning to the end of a work, or he may develop and undergo change. This change can be due to his gradual development or as a result of some crisis. The author must give consistency to a character, that is, the character should not change suddenly or act contrary to his basic nature.

E.M. Forster divides characters into flat and round. Flat characters are always of a 'type', they do not have any individuality. Round characters have

their own temperament and motivation. They are complex, like real human beings.

For characterization, the author may adopt two methods—showing or telling. In *showing* the character is revealed through his action, motivation and disposition, while in *telling* the author comments on and evaluates the motives or qualities of the character.

Irony: Irony is a humorous way of perceiving an inconsistency. It is an oblique mode of expression in which an apparently straightforward statement or event actually has a different meaning, usually the opposite. The word 'irony' comes from a character in Greek comedy called *eirōn* who characteristically spoke in understatements and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was. Ultimately, though, he triumphed over the other character known as *alazōn*. Thus, irony signifies the difference between what is said and what is actually the case.

The two basic kinds of irony are verbal and structural. At its simplest, verbal irony involves a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant. Structural irony in literature involves the use of a naïve or deluded hero whose world-view differs widely from the real circumstances recognized by the author or readers.

In verbal irony, the speaker and the audience share the speaker's intentions. In structural irony, the author's intention is known to the audience but not to the speaker.

Irony has many functions. It is often the instrument of truth. It also chides, purifies, refines and improves. Irony adds wit and gives richness to the texture of a work. R.K. Narayan is famed for his ironic vision. In 'Under the Banyan Tree' he makes use of situational irony.

Imagery: The term 'imagery' is derived from the word image, meaning a 'mental picture'. Cecil Day Lewis defines an image as 'a picture made out of words'.

Imagery draws attention to all the objects referred to in a work of literature (especially a poem), which evoke mental pictures. Imagery can be created by literal descriptions or allusions, and is usually conveyed using similes and metaphors. The term 'image' does not mean only a visual reproduction of an object. It also includes explicit and detailed mind-pictures pertaining to all the senses—seeing, touching, smelling, tasting and hearing. Imagery is also used to signify the use of figurative language. Imagery gives richness to a work. Although, imagery is usually found in poetry, its application to fiction has become quite common. Some critics also search for images and image patterns in the thematic structure of many novels and short stories.