Chapter 3: Two Stories about Flying

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Exercise 3.1 — His First Flight — Thinking about the Text

Q1 Why was the young seagull afraid to fly? Do you think all young birds are afraid to make their first flight, or are some birds more timid than others? Do you think a human baby also finds it a challenge to take its first steps?

SOLUTION

The young seagull was afraid to fly because the great expanse of the sea stretched far down beneath his ledge — "it was such a long way down — miles down". He felt certain that his wings "would never support him", so every time he ran to the brink and tried to flap his wings, fear overcame him and he ran back to his hole.

Not all young birds are equally afraid; some are naturally more timid than others. The seagull's own brothers and little sister — whose wings were even shorter than his — had already flown away the day before, which shows that he was the most timid of the family.

Yes, a human baby also finds its first steps a challenge. Like the seagull, a baby must overcome fear and learn to trust its own body before it can walk, and it too needs the encouragement of its parents.

Answer: He feared the sea was too far below and that his wings would not support him; some birds are more timid than others, and a human baby also struggles to take its first steps.

Q2 “The sight of the food maddened him.” What does this suggest? What compelled the young seagull to finally fly?

SOLUTION

It suggests that the seagull was extremely hungry — he had not eaten since the previous nightfall — and that his hunger had grown so intense that the sight of his mother tearing at a piece of fish drove him almost frantic with desire.

Hunger is what finally compelled him to fly. When his mother flew across with a piece of fish and halted just out of reach, he was "maddened by hunger" and dived at the fish. With a scream he fell into space, his wings spread out, and he found himself soaring — so his intense hunger tricked him into taking his first flight.

Answer: It suggests he was frantic with hunger; that same hunger drove him to dive at his mother's fish, which forced him to spread his wings and fly.

Q3 “They were beckoning to him, calling shrilly.” Why did the seagull’s father and mother threaten him and cajole him to fly?

SOLUTION

The parents threatened and coaxed the seagull because they wanted him to overcome his fear and learn to fly on his own — an essential skill for a bird's survival.

They tried every method: they upbraided him and threatened "to let him starve on his ledge unless he flew away", taunted him with his cowardice, and finally lured him with food, keeping the fish just out of reach. All of this was to compel him to make the effort himself, because flying was necessary for him to feed himself and live independently.

Answer: They wanted him to conquer his fear and learn the essential, survival skill of flying on his own.

Exercise 3.2 — The Black Aeroplane — Thinking about the Text

Q1 “I’ll take the risk.” What is the risk? Why does the narrator take it?

SOLUTION

The risk was flying his old Dakota straight into the huge storm clouds that stood "like black mountains" across the sky, instead of turning back to Paris.

He could not fly up and over the clouds, and he did not have enough fuel to fly around them to the north or south. Going into the storm meant risking his life.

He took the risk because he wanted to get home — he was longing to reach England, to be with his family, and to have a good big English breakfast — so he chose to fly into the storm rather than go back.

Answer: The risk was flying into the dangerous storm clouds; he took it because he was eager to get home to his family and his breakfast.

Q2 Describe the narrator’s experience as he flew the aeroplane into the storm.

SOLUTION

As soon as the narrator flew into the clouds, everything suddenly turned black and it was impossible to see anything outside the aeroplane. The old plane jumped and twisted in the air.

When he looked at the compass, it was turning round and round — it was dead. The other instruments were suddenly dead too, and the radio gave no answer when he called Paris Control. He had no radio, no compass, and could not see where he was; he was lost in the storm.

Then he saw another black aeroplane close by with no lights on its wings. Its pilot waved and signalled "Follow me". The narrator followed the strange plane obediently, and when it began to go down he followed until he suddenly came out of the clouds and saw the runway lights — he was safe.

Answer: Everything went black, the plane tossed about, his compass and instruments and radio all went dead, and he was lost until a strange black aeroplane guided him safely out of the storm.

Q3 Why does the narrator say, “I landed and was not sorry to walk away from the old Dakota…”?

SOLUTION

The old Dakota had almost caused the narrator's death. Inside the storm its compass and instruments failed, the radio went dead, and he was lost with only a few minutes of fuel left.

The flight had been terrifying and he had nearly lost his life. So, once he had landed safely, he was relieved and glad to get out of the plane — he was "not sorry" (in fact he was happy) to walk away from the aircraft that had given him such a frightening experience.

Answer: Because the flight had been so terrifying and nearly fatal that he was relieved and glad to walk away from the plane after landing safely.

Q4 What made the woman in the control centre look at the narrator strangely?

SOLUTION

After landing, the narrator asked the woman in the control centre where he was and who the other pilot was, because he wanted to thank the pilot of the black aeroplane who had helped him.

The woman looked at him strangely and then laughed, because she said no other aeroplanes were flying that night — his was the only one she could see on the radar. Since there had been no second plane at all, the narrator's question about another pilot puzzled her, and that is why she looked at him so strangely.

Answer: The narrator asked about the other pilot who guided him, but the woman said no other plane was flying that night — his was the only one on the radar.

Exercise 3.3 — Thinking about Language

Q1 Guess the meanings of the word ‘black’ in the sentences given below: (1) Go and have a bath; your hands and face are absolutely black. (2) The taxi-driver gave Ratan a black look as he crossed the road when the traffic light was green. (3) The bombardment of Hiroshima is one of the blackest crimes against humanity. (4) Very few people enjoy Harold Pinter’s black comedy. (5) Sometimes shopkeepers store essential goods to create false scarcity and then sell these in black. (6) Villagers had beaten the criminal black and blue.

SOLUTION

(1) black = very dirty (covered with dirt).
(2) a black look = an angry, hostile or disapproving look.
(3) blackest = most evil, most wicked or shameful.
(4) black comedy = comedy that deals with grim, tragic or unpleasant subjects in a humorous way.
(5) sell in black = sell illegally / in the black market (at unfair, inflated prices).
(6) black and blue = badly bruised (bruised all over from a beating).

Answer: black = dirty; black look = angry look; blackest = most wicked; black comedy = grim humour; in black = black-market/illegal; black and blue = badly bruised.

Q2 Match the phrases given under Column A with their meanings given under Column B: 1. Fly a flag; 2. Fly into rage; 3. Fly along; 4. Fly high; 5. Fly the coop. (B: Move quickly/suddenly; Be successful; Display a flag on a long pole; Escape from a place; Become suddenly very angry.)

SOLUTION

1. Fly a flag — Display a flag on a long pole.
2. Fly into rage — Become suddenly very angry.
3. Fly along — Move quickly/suddenly.
4. Fly high — Be successful.
5. Fly the coop — Escape from a place.

Answer: 1–Display a flag on a long pole; 2–Become suddenly very angry; 3–Move quickly/suddenly; 4–Be successful; 5–Escape from a place.

Q3 We know that the word ‘fly’ (of birds/insects) means to move through air using wings. Tick the words which have the same or nearly the same meaning: swoop, flit, paddle, flutter, ascend, float, ride, skim, sink, dart, hover, glide, descend, soar, shoot, spring, stay, fall, sail, flap.

SOLUTION

The words that mean the same or nearly the same as moving through the air (as with wings) are:

swoop, flit, flutter, float, skim, dart, hover, glide, soar, sail, flap.

The words that do NOT fit are those about moving on the ground/in water or not moving through the air: paddle, ascend, ride, sink, descend, shoot, spring, stay, fall. (Note: 'ascend' and 'descend' merely mean go up/down and 'fall' means drop — they are not flying with wings.)

Answer: Tick: swoop, flit, flutter, float, skim, dart, hover, glide, soar, sail, flap.

Exercise 3.4 — Thinking about the Poem — How to Tell Wild Animals

Q1 Does ‘dyin’’ really rhyme with ‘lion’? Can you say it in such a way that it does?

SOLUTION

No, in correct pronunciation 'dyin'' (dying) does not really rhyme with 'lion'.

However, the poet drops the 'g' and spells it 'dyin'' so that, if we say it in a drawling or non-standard way — pronouncing 'lion' as 'lie-in' and 'dyin'' as 'die-in' — the two words can be made to rhyme. This deliberate mispronunciation adds to the humour of the poem.

Answer: Not in standard speech, but if 'lion' is drawled as 'lie-in' and 'dyin'' as 'die-in', they can be made to rhyme — which adds humour.

Q2 How does the poet suggest that you identify the lion and the tiger? When can you do so, according to him?

SOLUTION

The poet identifies the lion as a "large and tawny beast" that you meet in the jungles of the east; you know it is the Asian Lion if it roars at you as you are dying.

The tiger is a "noble wild beast" with "black stripes on a yellow ground"; the poet's humorous rule is to notice whether he eats you — if he does, it is the Bengal Tiger.

So, according to the poet, you can identify these animals only when it is too late — when the lion is killing you and the tiger is eating you. This absurd, dangerous 'rule' is the source of the humour.

Answer: The lion is tawny and roars at you as you die; the tiger is striped and eats you — so you identify them, absurdly, only when it is too late.

Q3 Do you think the words ‘lept‘ and ‘lep’ in the third stanza are spelt correctly? Why does the poet spell them like this?

SOLUTION

No, they are not spelt correctly. The correct spellings are 'leapt' and 'leap'.

The poet spells them 'lept' and 'lep' deliberately, so that they rhyme with 'Leopard' (Leo-pard) and 'peppered' in the stanza. This playful misspelling keeps the rhyme

and rhythm and adds to the poem's humour.

Answer: No; the correct forms are 'leapt' and 'leap'. The poet misspells them on purpose to rhyme with 'Leopard' and 'peppered' and to create humour.

Q4 Do you know what a ‘bearhug’ is? It’s a friendly and strong hug — such as bears are thought to give, as they attack you! Again, hyenas are thought to laugh, and crocodiles to weep (‘crocodile tears’) as they swallow their victims. Are there similar expressions and popular ideas about wild animals in your own language(s)?

SOLUTION

The poem plays on well-known English expressions: a 'bearhug' (a very tight hug like a bear's), a hyena's 'laugh', and 'crocodile tears' (false, insincere tears — as a crocodile is said to weep while it eats its prey).

Yes, most languages have similar expressions and popular ideas about wild animals. For example, a fox is called cunning or sly, a lion is called the brave 'king of the jungle', and an owl is thought to be foolish (or, in some cultures, wise). Such phrases exist in Hindi and other Indian languages too, drawn from the qualities people traditionally associate with each animal.

Answer: Yes — like English, other languages have animal expressions (e.g. a sly fox, a brave lion, a foolish/wise owl) based on qualities linked to each animal.

Q5 Look at the line “A novice might nonplus”. How would you write this ‘correctly’? Why is the poet’s ‘incorrect’ line better in the poem?

SOLUTION

'Nonplus' means to puzzle or confuse, and it is usually used in the passive. So the grammatically 'correct' line would be: "A novice might be nonplussed" (that is, a beginner might be puzzled).

The poet's 'incorrect' version is better in the poem because 'nonplus' rhymes with 'thus' in the next-but-one line and keeps the metre. Writing it correctly as 'be nonplussed' would break both the rhyme and the rhythm, and would spoil the light, humorous tone of the poem.

Answer: Correctly it would be "A novice might be nonplussed"; the poet's version is better because 'nonplus' rhymes with 'thus' and keeps the rhythm and humour.

Exercise 3.5 — Thinking about the Poem — The Ball Poem

Q1 Why does the poet say, “I would not intrude on him”? Why doesn’t he offer him money to buy another ball?

SOLUTION

The poet says "I would not intrude on him" because the boy is going through a moment of deep, personal grief at losing his ball, and the poet does not want to disturb him or enter a situation where he is not welcome. He wants the boy to experience and understand his loss on his own.

He does not offer money to buy another ball because he knows that money and a new ball cannot replace what the boy has really lost. As the poem says, "A dime, another ball, is worthless" and "Money is external". The boy must learn an important lesson about loss and responsibility that no new ball can teach him.

Answer: Because the boy must learn to face his loss alone; a new ball or money is worthless since it cannot replace what he has truly lost or teach him the lesson of loss.

Q2 “… staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went …” Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?

SOLUTION

Yes, it seems the boy has had the ball for a long time. The phrase "staring down / All his young days into the harbour where / His ball went" suggests that, as he watches the ball sink, he seems to be watching his childhood days go down with it.

So the ball is clearly linked to the memories of the many days he played with it. That is why its loss affects him so deeply — it is not just a cheap object but a part of his happy early days.

Answer: Yes — the ball seems to be an old possession tied to his happy childhood days, which is why his grief at losing it is so deep.

Q3 What does “in the world of possessions” mean?

SOLUTION

"In a world of possessions" means in this world where people own and value material things — things they buy, keep and become attached to.

The poet is telling the boy that in such a world, possessions will always be lost from time to time ("balls will be lost always"), and "no one buys a ball back". Through losing his ball, the boy is beginning to learn his "first responsibility" — the truth that in a world of belongings, loss is a natural and unavoidable part of life.

Answer: It means this world where people own material things; in it, possessions are inevitably lost and cannot be brought back.

Q4 Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.

SOLUTION

No, it seems the boy has not lost anything precious before this. This appears to be his very first experience of a real loss.

The words that suggest this are "He senses first responsibility" and "He is learning" the "epistemology of loss". The word "first" shows that he is only now, for the first time, understanding what it means to lose something he cares about.

Answer: No; the words "He senses first responsibility" and "He is learning... The epistemology of loss" show this is his first real experience of loss.

Q5 What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words.

SOLUTION

The poet says the boy is learning "the epistemology of loss" — that is, the true nature and meaning of loss.

In simple words, the boy is learning that in life we are bound to lose the things we love, that money cannot buy back what is truly lost, and that such losses are a part of everyone's life. Above all, he is learning "how to stand up" — how to accept his loss bravely, control his grief and carry on. This is a lesson "every man must one day know" and most people must learn many times over.

Answer: He is learning the real meaning of loss — that we all lose loved things, that money cannot buy them back, and that one must accept loss bravely and learn "how to stand up".