Chapter 1: The Portrait of a Lady

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Exercise 1.1 — Understanding the Text

Q1 Mention the three phases of the author's relationship with his grandmother before he left the country to study abroad.

SOLUTION

The relationship between the author and his grandmother passed through three distinct phases before he went abroad.

Phase 1 — Village years: In the village, they shared a very close bond. The grandmother woke the author up every morning, got him ready, and accompanied him to the school attached to the temple. She carried chapattis for the village dogs on the way. They spent the day together and walked home together.

Phase 2 — City school years: When the family moved to the city, the grandmother could no longer accompany the author to his English school. She continued to wake him up and ask about his lessons, but she was troubled by the absence of religious teaching. She disapproved of music lessons and gradually grew more distant. She spent her time feeding sparrows in the courtyard.

Phase 3 — University years: When the author moved into his own room at university, their common link was completely severed. The grandmother accepted her seclusion without complaint and spent her days spinning and reciting prayers, relaxing only in the afternoon to feed the sparrows.

Answer: Three phases: close village companionship → growing distance during city schooling → near-complete separation during university years.

Q2 Mention three reasons why the author's grandmother was disturbed when he started going to the city school.

SOLUTION

When the author moved to the city school, his grandmother was disturbed for three reasons.

First, the curriculum at the English school had no teaching of God or the scriptures. She could not help the author with his lessons and felt cut off from his education, which had earlier been her daily responsibility.

Second, the subjects taught — English words, the law of gravity, Archimedes' Principle, the idea of a round earth — were things she neither believed in nor understood. The western, scientific content conflicted with her deeply religious worldview.

Third, she was very disturbed when the author told her that music lessons were being given at school. To her, music had 'lewd associations' and was 'the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk.' This was the deepest shock, and after that she rarely talked to him.

Answer: She was disturbed by: absence of religious teaching, content she found irreligious (western science), and the introduction of music lessons, which she considered indecent.

Q3 Mention three ways in which the author's grandmother spent her days after he grew up.

SOLUTION

After the author grew up and moved into his own university room, the grandmother settled into a quiet daily routine.

First, she sat at her spinning-wheel almost the entire day, from sunrise to sunset, spinning and simultaneously reciting prayers. The wheel and the prayer became her constant companions.

Second, every afternoon she took a break from spinning to feed the sparrows. She would sit in the verandah, break bread into little bits, and hundreds of sparrows would gather around her — some perching on her legs, shoulders, and even her head. This was described as the happiest half-hour of her day.

Third, she spent her time telling the beads of her rosary and moving her lips in inaudible prayer throughout the day, maintaining her deeply devotional way of life.

Answer: She spent her days spinning at the wheel while reciting prayers, feeding sparrows in the afternoon, and continuously telling the beads of her rosary.

Q4 Mention the odd way in which the author's grandmother behaved just before she died.

SOLUTION

On the evening of the author's first day home after five years abroad, the grandmother behaved in a very unusual way. She gave up her prayers — something she had never done in all the years the author had known her.

Instead, she gathered the women of the neighbourhood, got hold of an old drum, and began to sing. For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang songs of the homecoming of warriors. The family had to persuade her to stop in order to prevent her from overstraining herself.

The author remarks that this was 'the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.' For a woman whose entire daily life was built around prayer and the rosary, this departure was striking and — as it turned out — seemed to be her farewell celebration before death.

Answer: She abandoned her evening prayers, gathered neighbourhood women, and sang joyful songs of a warrior's homecoming while beating an old drum — the only time she ever skipped her prayers.

Q5 Mention the way in which the sparrows expressed their sorrow when the author's grandmother died.

SOLUTION

When the family came to take the grandmother's body for cremation in the evening, they found thousands of sparrows sitting silently all over the verandah and her room, right up to where she lay wrapped in her red shroud.

What was most striking was the complete absence of chirruping — the birds sat in total silence. The usual noisy gathering had become a silent vigil. The author's mother tried to offer them bread, broken into crumbs the way the grandmother used to do, but the sparrows paid no attention to the food.

When the family carried the grandmother's corpse away, the sparrows flew off quietly. The next morning, the sweeper swept the untouched bread crumbs into the dustbin. Their silent gathering, their refusal to eat, and their quiet departure were read as a collective expression of mourning.

Answer: Thousands of sparrows gathered in silence around her body, refused the bread offered to them, and flew away quietly when her corpse was carried out — their stillness and untouched food conveying grief.

Exercise 1.2 — Talking about the Text

Q1 The author's grandmother was a religious person. What are the different ways in which we come to know this?

SOLUTION

The grandmother's religiosity is woven into almost every detail of her daily life as the author describes her.

She said her morning prayer in a 'monotonous sing-song' while bathing and dressing the young author, hoping he would learn it by heart. She carried her rosary at all times, her fingers perpetually 'busy telling the beads.' Her lips were constantly moving in inaudible prayer as she went about the house.

She accompanied the author to the village school specifically because it was attached to the temple, and she sat inside reading the scriptures while the children studied. She was deeply troubled by the city school's lack of religious instruction and was disturbed that western science was taught instead of God and the scriptures.

From sunrise to sunset, after the author went to university, she sat at her spinning-wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Even at the railway station when the author left for abroad, her lips moved in prayer and her fingers told the rosary — she showed no emotion otherwise.

On her deathbed, she declared that since she had omitted to pray for a few hours the previous evening, she would 'not waste any more time talking' and resumed her beads. She died with her lips moving in prayer, the rosary falling from her fingers only when she was gone. Religion was not something she practised — it was who she was.

Answer: Her religiosity is evident in her constant prayer and rosary-telling, daily scripture reading at the temple, distress at the English school's secular curriculum, and her final hours spent in prayer rather than conversation.

Q2 Describe the changing relationship between the author and his grandmother. Did their feelings for each other change?

SOLUTION

In the village years the relationship was at its closest. The grandmother was the author's daily caretaker, companion, and moral guide. They walked to school together, she prepared his slate and breakfast, and they shared every part of the day. The author says plainly, 'My grandmother and I were good friends.'

The move to the city marked 'a turning-point in our friendship.' Physical proximity remained — they shared a room — but intellectual and emotional distance grew. The grandmother could neither help with English lessons nor approve of the school's content. After music lessons were announced, 'she rarely talked to me.' She channelled her affection into feeding sparrows rather than conversation.

University life severed the 'common link of friendship' entirely. The grandmother accepted her

seclusion 'with resignation' and stopped trying to bridge the gap.

Yet the underlying feelings did not change on either side. When the author returned from five years abroad, she met him at the station, clasped him in her arms, and celebrated his homecoming with song — the warmest expression of joy the author ever saw from her. The author, for his part, cherished the moist imprint of her kiss as 'perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us,' and the grief of the sparrows at her death mirrors the grief he implies but does not state directly.

The relationship grew quieter and more distant with every stage of the author's education, but the deep mutual affection never disappeared — it simply found fewer words.

Answer: Outward closeness gave way to increasing distance as the author's education pulled him away, but the deep affection remained on both sides — expressed less in words and more in small gestures and silent presence.

Q3 Would you agree that the author's grandmother was a person strong in character? If yes, give instances that show this.

SOLUTION

Yes, the grandmother emerges as a person of considerable inner strength and quiet dignity throughout the essay.

When the family moved to the city and she could no longer be part of the author's education, she did not complain or demand attention. She simply adapted — feeding sparrows in the courtyard — and carried on with her routine without bitterness.

When the author left for five years of study abroad, she showed no sentimental breakdown. She came to the station, moved her lips in prayer, kissed his forehead, and let him go. The author notes she 'was not even sentimental' — her composure in that moment of parting reveals great self-possession.

When the author went to university and their friendship was effectively broken, she 'accepted her seclusion with resignation' — not resentment. She did not press herself on anyone but found her own meaning in prayer and her sparrows.

Even in death, she remained in command of herself. When she fell ill, she told the family her end was near. She refused to waste time on talk, returned to her rosary, and died peacefully and on her own terms. She died as she had lived — self-contained, faithful, and undemanding.

Answer: Yes — her composure at the author's departure, her dignified acceptance of growing isolation, and her peaceful, self-directed death all reveal a woman of quiet but unshakeable inner strength.

Q4 Have you known someone like the author's grandmother? Do you feel the same sense of loss with regard to someone whom you have loved and lost?

SOLUTION

This question invites a personal reflection. A model response follows.

Many people have known an elderly relative — a grandparent, a great-aunt, a neighbour — whose world was built on quiet routine, deep faith, and unspoken affection. Such people rarely demand attention, but their presence is felt as a kind of constant warmth. Like the grandmother in the essay, they often express love through small, repeated acts: a particular food prepared just so, a blessing murmured at parting, a way of watching over you without a word.

The sense of loss Khushwant Singh describes is quiet rather than dramatic, which is perhaps what makes it so moving. The grief is not only for the person but for a whole way of being — the certainty of a particular presence, the sound of prayers in the early morning, the feeling of being cared for by someone who asked nothing in return.

When someone like that is gone, the loss is often felt in ordinary moments: when there is no one to receive a certain kind of news, or when a familiar sound is absent. That specific, unhurried love is hard to replace, and the feeling the essay evokes — a mixture of gratitude, tenderness, and irreversible loss — is one many readers will recognise.

Answer: A personal and reflective answer is expected; the model response explores how the quiet, unconditional love of an elderly relative leaves a particular kind of void that is felt most in small, ordinary moments.

Exercise 1.3 — Thinking about Language

Q1 Which language do you think the author and his grandmother used while talking to each other?

SOLUTION

The author, Khushwant Singh, is a Punjabi writer, and the story is set in a Punjabi household in pre-partition India. The grandmother is depicted as a deeply traditional woman who reads scriptures, sings religious songs, and has no connection with English education. She is also shown to be troubled by the English-medium city school and cannot help the author with his lessons.

It is reasonable to infer that the author and his grandmother communicated in Punjabi, their shared mother tongue. This would have been the natural language of their home, their prayers, and the conversations about school and daily life. The grandmother's recitation of prayers, her singing of songs about warriors' homecomings, and her reading of scriptures would all have been in Punjabi or a related devotional language.

Answer: They most likely spoke in Punjabi, their shared mother tongue, as the story is set in a traditional Punjabi household and the grandmother had no connection with English.

Q2 Which language do you use to talk to elderly relatives in your family?

SOLUTION

This question calls for a personal answer based on the student's own family and linguistic background.

A model response: In many Indian families, children speak their regional mother tongue or a local dialect with grandparents and older relatives, even if they use English or Hindi in school and with peers. The home language carries the warmth of familiarity and is often the only language in which certain things — blessings, folk songs, proverbs, expressions of affection — can be said naturally. Speaking to an elderly relative in their language is also a mark of respect and closeness.

Answer: Personal answer; typically students use their regional mother tongue or home language with elderly relatives, as it is the language of warmth, familiarity, and respect within the family.

Q3 How would you say 'a dilapidated drum' in your language?

SOLUTION

This question asks for a translation into the student's own regional language. 'Dilapidated' means broken down, old, and in a state of disrepair. A drum that is dilapidated would be old, worn, with sagging or torn skins.

In Hindi, for example, one might say 'टूटा-फूटा ढोल' (a broken-down drum) or 'जर्जर ढोल' (a decayed/worn-out drum). Students should find the equivalent phrase in their own language that

conveys both the age and the poor condition of the instrument.

Answer: Personal/language-specific answer; in Hindi: 'जर्जर ढोल' or 'टूटा-फूटा ढोल'; students should find the equivalent phrase in their own language that conveys both age and disrepair.

Q4 Can you think of a song or a poem in your language that talks of homecoming?

SOLUTION

This question invites students to draw on their own cultural and linguistic tradition. Homecoming — the return of a loved one after a long absence — is a universal theme celebrated in songs and poetry across all Indian languages.

In Punjabi folk tradition, there are many songs about the return of warriors, travellers, and bridegrooms. Hindi literature has poems and film songs celebrating the return of a family member. In Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, and other languages, similar songs exist as part of wedding and festival traditions.

Students should recall a specific song or poem from their own language — a folk song sung at a wedding or festival, a film song, or a poem from their syllabus — that captures the joy of a loved one coming home, and briefly describe it.

Answer: Personal/language-specific answer; homecoming songs exist in every Indian language tradition — students should recall a specific folk song, film song, or poem from their own regional language and describe it briefly.

Exercise 1.4 — Working with Words

Q1 Notice the following uses of the word 'tell' in the text and match each use to one of the four senses given: (a) Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary. (b) I would tell her English words and little things of Western science and learning. (c) At her age one could never tell. (d) She told us that her end was near. — Senses: 1. make something known to someone in spoken or written words. 2. count while reciting. 3. be sure. 4. give information to somebody.

SOLUTION

(a) 'Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary.' — Sense 2: count while reciting. Here 'telling' means counting each bead as a prayer is recited.

(b) 'I would tell her English words and little things of Western science and learning.' — Sense 4: give information to somebody. The author was passing on facts and knowledge to his grandmother.

(c) 'At her age one could never tell.' — Sense 3: be sure. The phrase means one could never be certain or know for certain what would happen.

(d) 'She told us that her end was near.' — Sense 1: make something known to someone in spoken or written words. She formally communicated this belief to the family.

Answer: (a) → 2 (count while reciting); (b) → 4 (give information); (c) → 3 (be sure); (d) → 1 (make something known in words).

Q2 Notice the different senses of the word 'take': (1) to take to something: to begin to do something as a habit. (2) to take ill: to suddenly become ill. Locate these phrases in the text and notice the way they are used.

SOLUTION

'She took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.' — Here 'took to' means she began feeding the sparrows as a regular habit after the family moved to the city. It was a new daily activity she adopted and continued.

'The next morning she was taken ill.' — Here 'taken ill' means she suddenly became ill. The phrasing suggests the illness came upon her unexpectedly, which fits the narrative: the family and the doctor did not think it was serious, but the grandmother sensed it was the end.

Answer: 'Took to feeding sparrows' = began as a regular habit; 'taken ill' = suddenly became ill.

Q3 The word 'hobble' means to walk with difficulty because the legs and feet are in bad condition. Tick the words in the box below that also refer to a manner of walking: haggle, shuffle, stride, ride, waddle, wriggle, paddle, swagger, trudge, slog.

SOLUTION

The following words from the box refer to a manner of walking:

Shuffle — to walk by dragging one's feet along the ground without fully lifting them.
Stride — to walk with long, decisive steps.
Waddle — to walk with short steps, swaying from side to side (like a duck).
Swagger — to walk in a bold, confident, and slightly arrogant manner.
Trudge — to walk slowly and heavily, typically because of exhaustion or difficult terrain.
Slog — to walk with great effort, usually through difficult conditions.

Words that do NOT refer to a manner of walking: haggle (to argue about price), ride (to travel on a vehicle or animal), wriggle (to twist or squirm, not a walking gait), paddle (in the context of walking it means to wade in shallow water — it can loosely refer to movement in water but is not a land gait).

Note: 'paddle' in the poem 'A Photograph' is used for wading in the sea, so it describes a manner of moving through water rather than a standard walking gait on land.

Answer: Words that refer to a manner of walking: shuffle, stride, waddle, swagger, trudge, slog. (haggle, ride, wriggle, paddle do not describe a land walking gait.)

Exercise 1.5 — Noticing Form

Q1 Notice the form of the verbs italicised in the given sentences from the text. These are examples of the past perfect form of verbs. Explain how the past perfect is used in each sentence to recount the distant past: (1) She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her. (2) When we both had finished we would walk back together. (3) When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me. (4) It was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray. (5) The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a golden light.

SOLUTION

The past perfect tense is formed with 'had' + past participle. It is used to describe an action or state that was completed before another point or action in the past — it looks back from an already-past moment to something even further in the past.

Sentence 1: 'She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her.' — Both past perfect forms indicate a condition (being old/wrinkled) and a relationship (knowing her) that had already existed for twenty years before the narrator's present moment of recollection. The wrinkles and age preceded everything else he describes.

Sentence 2: 'When we both had finished we would walk back together.' — 'Had finished' shows that the completion of lessons (his) and scripture reading (hers) happened before the act of walking back together. The past perfect signals the prior completion that triggered the next event.

Sentence 3: 'When I came back she would ask me what the teacher had taught me.' — 'Had taught' indicates that the teaching happened earlier (during school hours), before the grandmother's question. The lesson was a completed event in the past at the time of asking.

Sentence 4: 'It was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.' — 'Had known' marks the entire duration of the narrator's acquaintance with his grandmother as a stretch of time completed (or ongoing up to) before the specific evening when she did not pray.

Sentence 5: 'The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a golden light.' — 'Had lit' shows that the lighting of the room was already accomplished (the light was there) as the sun continued to set. The illumination preceded or was simultaneous with but treated as already complete within the ongoing sunset.

Answer: The past perfect ('had' + past participle) is used in each sentence to indicate an action or state completed before another past point — teaching before asking, finishing before walking, knowing her before the exceptional evening, and illumination before the scene of her death.