Chapter 5: The Tale of Melon City

Exercise 5.1 — Reading with Insight

Q1 Narrate 'The Tale of Melon City' in your own words.

SOLUTION

A just and placid king orders an arch to be built across the main thoroughfare of his city. When the arch is completed and the king rides beneath it, it is too low and knocks off his crown, embarrassing him publicly.

Furious, the king orders the chief of builders to be hanged. The chief of builders blames the workmen, so the king shifts the blame to them. The workmen blame the bricklayers for supplying the wrong-sized bricks. The masons in turn blame the architect. The architect reminds the king that he himself had approved certain amendments to the original plans. This places the king in a difficult position.

Unable to make up his mind, the king summons the wisest man in the country — a frail, blind old man who is carried to court. The old man declares that the arch itself is the true culprit and must be hanged. As the arch is being led to the gallows, a councillor points out that it would be disrespectful to hang something that had touched the king's head. The king agrees but, by now, a restless crowd is demanding a hanging. The king, anxious about public order, insists that someone must be hanged immediately.

To find the right person, a noose is set up and every man in the crowd is measured against it. Only one person is tall enough to fit the noose — the king himself. Following royal decree, the king is hanged. The ministers, relieved that the crowd's demand has been satisfied, call out 'Long live the King! The King is dead.'

The ministers then follow their custom: the next person to pass the city gate will choose the new ruler. An idiot passes by. When asked who should be king, he answers 'A melon' — his standard reply to every question, since he loves melons. The ministers duly crown a melon and place it on the throne. Years later, the people of the city are quite content with this state of affairs, reasoning that as long as their ruler leaves them in peace and liberty, it does not matter what or who the king is.

Answer: A king's misplaced 'justice' sets off a chain of blame-shifting that ends with the king himself being hanged; a melon is then crowned king, and the contented people call this an expression of peace and liberty.

Q2 What impression would you form of a state where the King was 'just and placid'?

SOLUTION

The poem presents a deeply ironic picture of what 'justice' and 'placidity' mean in this kingdom. The king is described as 'just and placid', yet his idea of justice is purely mechanical — someone must always be punished, though the real culprit keeps shifting with each new plea.

He moves the death sentence from the chief of builders to the workmen, then to the masons, then to the architect, and finally — unable to settle on anyone — ends up being hanged himself. His 'placidity' means he is easily swayed by every new argument and by the mood of the crowd.

A state governed by such a ruler would inspire little confidence. Justice would be arbitrary and capricious, driven by who last spoke rather than by evidence or reason. Citizens could be condemned or reprieved at random. At the same time, the king's eagerness to satisfy the mob rather than uphold principled justice shows that mob pressure, not law, is the real authority in the state.

The ultimate absurdity — a melon being crowned and the people happily accepting it — suggests that an indifferent or ineffectual ruler may actually suit the people better, since he (or it) leaves them in peace and liberty. The poem implies that 'just and placid' leadership, when taken to extremes, collapses into meaninglessness.

Answer: A state with such a king would be one where justice is arbitrary, governance is whimsical, and authority is driven by crowd pressure rather than reason — ultimately no better (and perhaps no worse) than having a melon on the throne.

Q3 How, according to you, can peace and liberty be maintained in a state?

SOLUTION

The poem ends with the people of Melon City saying that as long as the ruler leaves them 'in Peace and Liberty', it does not matter what form that ruler takes. This is a satirical statement, but it points to something genuine: people value a life free from fear and interference above almost anything else.

In my view, peace and liberty in a state depend on several interconnected conditions. First, there must be a system of just and impartial laws — not the whimsical 'justice' of the poem's king, but laws that apply equally to all. Second, rulers and institutions must be accountable; they should not be able to shift blame or act arbitrarily. Third, citizens themselves must be informed and engaged, willing to question authority rather than simply demanding 'a hanging' without considering right and wrong.

Additionally, freedom of expression and a free press help check the abuse of power. When people can speak without fear and hold their leaders to account, both peace and liberty are more likely to endure. The poem, through its absurdist satire, reminds us that blind deference to authority and mob mentality are equally dangerous — true peace and liberty require active, rational participation by citizens.

Answer: Peace and liberty are best maintained through impartial laws, accountable governance, and an informed citizenry — not through blind deference to authority or mob pressure, as the poem's satire illustrates.

Q4 Suggest a few instances in the poem which highlight humour and irony.

SOLUTION

The poem is rich in both humour and irony, and they are often inseparable.

The most sustained irony is the king's description as 'just and placid'. His notion of justice is so mechanical that he simply shifts the death sentence from person to person as each one offers a fresh excuse. He is not interested in truth — only in ensuring that someone is punished. The humour lies in watching the blame ping-pong its way up from workmen to masons to architect to the king himself.

A second instance of irony is the summoning of the 'wisest man in the country'. The man is so old he can neither walk nor see, and his solution — hanging the arch — is as absurd as anything that has come before it. The humour is heightened when a councillor immediately overturns even this 'wisdom' by pointing out that the arch had touched the king's head and therefore cannot be disgraced.

A third ironic and darkly comic moment is when the king himself fits the noose. The very king who ordered hangings at every turn ends up being the one person tall enough to be hanged. The ministers then call out 'Long live the King! The King is dead' — a line that captures the hollow, ceremonial nature of royal proclamations.

Finally, the crowning of a melon as king is the poem's central comic absurdity. The idiot's answer ('A melon') becomes policy because custom demands it, and the people accept the melon as king because it leaves them in peace — an ironic comment on what good governance really means to ordinary people.

Answer: Key instances include: the justice that always punishes the wrong person, the 'wisest man' advising that the arch be hanged, the king fitting the noose himself, and a melon being crowned king — each combining dark comedy with pointed irony about power and governance.

Q5 'The Tale of Melon City' has been narrated in a verse form. This is a unique style which lends extra charm to an ancient tale. Find similar examples in your language. Share them in the class.

SOLUTION

This question invites personal exploration and sharing, so the following is a model response.

Verse narrative — telling a story entirely in rhyming or metered verse — is a tradition found across many languages. In Hindi, the works of poet Kabir use dohas (couplets) to narrate moral tales and truths in a compact, memorable form. The Ramacharitmanas by Tulsidas retells the entire Ramayana in verse, combining devotion with narrative charm. In English, Lewis Carroll's 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' narrates an absurd, satirical tale in ballad form — much like Vikram Seth's poem here.

In regional Indian languages, similar traditions exist: in Tamil, the Kambaramayanam; in Bengali, verse narratives in the works of Rabindranath Tagore such as 'Puratan Bhritya'; in Urdu, masnavi poetry tells extended stories in rhyming couplets.

What verse narrative adds to a tale is rhythm and memorability. The rhymes in 'The Tale of Melon City' — such as 'just and placid King' and 'such a tricky thing' — create a light, lilting tone that makes the absurdist satire feel playful rather than harsh. Students can look for ballads or verse tales in their regional language textbooks or folk traditions and read them aloud in class to appreciate how metre and rhyme shape the telling of a story.

Answer: Verse narrative is a cross-cultural tradition; examples range from Hindi dohas and Tulsidas's Ramacharitmanas to Carroll's ballads in English. The rhyme and metre of 'The Tale of Melon City' give its satire a light, playful tone that straight prose would not achieve.