

CHAPTER - 1

THE LAMENT

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Understanding the Text

1. Comment on the indifference that meets Iona's attempts to share his grief with his fellow human beings.

Answer

Iona Potapov had lost his son, who died a week before. He wished to share his suffering and his emotions and grieve at his loss. However, the people he came across, whether passengers or others, were not interested in listening to his story. Either the people were in hurry or were tired or busy. Thus, none of them paid heed to his words as he began every time. Finally, he told it all to his horse.

2. What impression of the character of Iona do you get from this story?

Answer

Iona was an old cabdriver; he lost his young son. Being lonely, he was reduced to a phantom figure. He desperately wished to talk and share his sentiments with someone. He was so shattered that he tried to talk to any or everybody. He lamented his loss, despair and melancholy encompassed him. He was plunged in the thoughts of his son so much that he was totally unaware of his surroundings, even the snow. He drove his sledge rashly and brandished his horse more than necessary. He lost control over his emotions and went on blabbing his loss in front of even the ones who would be least interested to know. He tried talking to his passengers, the policemen and the three drunkards. He was afraid for his withered age and that his son was gone. He knew it would be difficult for him to earn his livelihood. He even made a remark to the horse that had his young son been alive, they would not have suffered and would have had plenty of food to live on. His state was of a typical old man who loses his young son and feels helpless and only grieves.

3. How does the horse serve as a true friend and companion to Iona?

Answer

When Iona realised that no body was listening to him and that he had no body to go to to grieve at his loss, he turned to his horse. He tried to talk to his passengers, the officers, the drunkards and the young cabdriver, about his son; how he fell ill, what did he say before he died. It was about to be a week since the mishap and the Cabby had had no body to talk to so far. Finally, he decided to go to look after his horse. It was unbearably painful to him to picture his son when he was alone. So he tried to keep himself occupied. He offered hay to the little horse as that was all he could as he had no corn as he did not earn much for he had lost his young son, he explained it to the horse. Iona's feelings were too much for him. The driver goes on explaining the whole story of his son to the horse, while the horse listened patiently and breathed over his master's hand like a true mate.

Talking about the Text

1. Empathy and understanding are going out of modern society. The individual experiences intense alienation from the society around him or her.

Answer

We have entered an era that feeds on globalisation. A world that is driven by fast technology. The age old emotions and sentiments are all bygone. There is little time for empathy and understanding. An ordinary human's lifestyle has evolved, changing the ethics of our society. People are busy and work is immense and the pressure that a human undergoes leaves no time for her/him to ponder or wonder. A state that makes a human mechanical and lacking in sensibility, which is overtaken by practicality. The concept of society has altered. The individual is alienated from the society. Human does contribute to the society but not with cultural values but only by technological advancement. The sharing and dependence have evaporated from our culture and we have restricted our zone by not giving way to feelings of joy, sorrow, fear or love any way. Humans have resigned from such emotions and are resolute not to give in to them.

2. Behind the public face of the people in various occupations is a whole saga of personal suffering and joy which they wish to share with others.

Answer

Like Iona, every human has a portion of his/her heart unexplored. They guard it stealing it from everyone and yet they long for it to be uncovered; sharing it all with a companion, a friend, a mate. A human, like a diamond has many facets. The face people wear in public is just one of those facets. There is a child inside everyone, a male in every female and a female in every male, unknown, hidden. They keep them locked inside and yet crave to share it with someone. This world of today, where we all are much wiser and practical and much more busy, get little time to spend and share the inner self of ours with someone. The true face behind us all is shielded carefully and it longs to be known, understood. We all hold our souls back yet we wish to share our dark secrets with someone. Our sufferings, our joys, our desires, our hidden self. And in this modern world, few find that true mate with whom they can share their personal joys and sufferings, which they keep locked away in their hearts.

Apperciation

1. The story begins with a description of the setting. How does this serve as a fitting prelude to the events described in the story?

Answer

The story of Iona Potapov is one of suffering. The setting described in the beginning sets the mood of the reader, the atmosphere is full of gloom and darkness as it is a day covered with snow. The author has tried to evoke melancholy in the reader's heart through the environment he describes so that the reader is set in tune with the mood of the protagonist. The author describes the positions and appearance of Iona. He appears like a phantom who is lost as if he is not interested in the world any more, unaware of his surroundings and the snow that covered his eyelashes and even on his horse's back. This all sets the mood perfectly for a story that is to uncover the protagonist's loss at which he laments.

2. Comment on the graphic detail with which the various passengers who took Iona's cab are described.

Answer

The author described the passengers that took Iona's cab defining their character sketch. The first one was the officer. It gives an image of the impatience that the police personnel have. These characters portray the society we live in. How a drunkard might react to someone's grief and how a police officer

would be unconcerned about someone's loss. Even the boy in the stable did not pay any heed to Iona's story. No body in the busy world had the time to stop and hear to what the poor old cab driver had to say.

3. This short story revolves around a single important event. Discuss how the narrative is woven around this central fact.

Answer

The story has a simple plot and revolves around it. Iona Potapov, an ageing man, a poor Russian cab driver lost his dear son earlier week. A load that he carries, weighing his heart, Iona wishes to speak and share his grief desperately with someone. Thus, on finding no companion or friend to mourn over his grief he tries to share it with every one he comes across. He tries to share it with the passengers that board his sledge only to find how disinterested everyone is in his story. His agony grows and he is thrown into despair. All the while there is one thing that remains constant in the story, the loss Iona suffers and his attempt to overcome it. So, overwhelmed is the old father that he finally decides to go on and talk his heart out to his horse. The horse proves to be a true companion and listens to Iona's story patiently while munching hay.

4. The story begins and ends with Iona and his horse. Comment on the significance of this to the plot of the story.

Answer

The story is a satire on how disengaged humans are that one has to find a true companion in an animal. Iona from the beginning of the story is portrayed with his horse. In the beginning, while Iona is struck with his loss and is melancholic, he and his horse stood unmoved. It appeared that they both shared similar grief. Both seemed unaware of their surroundings and of the heavy snow, the horse for being a slave animal and Iona due to his grief. The story narrates how Iona lashes his frustration by brandishing the horse unnecessarily, yet the horse is faithful to his master. Even by the end of the story, Iona is left unheard and his heavy heart knows no one to release his burden to. He finds solace in the company of his horse again. He goes up to him and gives him hay to munch. While he goes on speaking to the silent animal explaining how he lost his young son. He grieved, now that he is old and poor, to make things worse, he will be having trouble earning. The animal, not sure if understood what his master said, remained silent and heard it all peacefully proving its faithfulness to his master.

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Language Work

1. Look at the following set of words and mention what is common to them both in form and meaning.

| | | | |
|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| Snuffle | snort | sniffle | snore |
|---------|-------|---------|-------|

Answer

All the words given are different ways of breathing

Snuffle: To breathe noisily due to cold or because of crying

Snort: To breathe air out noisily through nose to show anger

Sniffle: To breathe air from nose in a way that makes a sound, especially while crying or on having cold

Snore: To breathe noisily through nose and mouth while sleeping

2. Look at the words given in the box below

| | | | |
|----------|---------|----------|---------|
| snigger | wriggle | sneak | squeak |
| squawk | titter | pant | chuckle |
| giggle | jeer | chortle | guffaw |
| sigh | sidle | boo | shriek |
| scramble | croak | straggle | plod |
| gasp | | | |

Now classify them according to their closeness in meaning to the words given below

| | | | | |
|---------|---------|--------|------|------|
| A | B | C | D | E |
| snigger | wriggle | squeak | jeer | sigh |

Answer

giggle boo plod

snigger wriggle squeak jeer sigh titter

chortle
chuckle
guffawsneak
straggle
scramble
sidleshriek
squawk
croak
gasp
pant

3. Explain the associations that the colour 'white' has in the story.

Answer

White is the colour of light. However, the irony in the story The Lament is that it reflects the gloom portrayed in the story. In the beginning to show the melancholy of Iona Potapov, the narrator says that he is so white that he looks like a phantom. His horse also appears quiet white. Actually white is the colour of snow. And snow reflects despondency and lethargy of the season of winter and how the whole environment and atmosphere appears to be thrown into utter despair. The evening is setting in and everything seems so white and withered. The street lamps' light is also white, replacing the brighter rays. The whole setting, while laying stress on the white surroundings, project the solitude of the poor cab driver.

4. What does the phrase 'as if he were on needles' mean? Can you think of another phrase with a similar meaning substituting the word 'needless'?

Answer

The phrase actually is 'on pins and needles' which means to be nervously waiting to see what is going to happen.

Another phrase that has similar meaning is 'on tenterhooks'.