

CLASS XII

FLAMINGO: THE LAST LESSON

ALPHONSE DAUDET

WORKSHEET

Background

The story is set in the days of the Franco-Prussian war. The French district of Alsace and Lorraine were captured by Germans. The new master was to come the next day in a school in Alsace to teach German in place of French. The story tells the effect of this news on the life at a school in Alsace.

The Story at a Glance

The prose 'The Last Lesson' written by Alphonse Daudet narrates about the year 1870 when the Prussian forces under Bismarck attacked and captured France. The French districts of Alsace and Lorraine went into Prussian hands. The new Prussian rulers discontinued the teaching of French in the schools of these two districts. The French teachers were asked to leave. The story describes the last day of one such French teacher, M. Hamel. Mr. M. Hamel had been transferred and could no longer remain in his old school. Still he gave his last lesson to his students with utmost devotion and sincerity as ever. The story depicts the pathos of the whole situation about how people feel when they don't learn their own language and then losing an asset in M. Hamel. One of his students Franz who dreaded French class and M. Hamel's iron rod, came to the school that day thinking he would be punished as he had not learnt his lesson. But on reaching school he found Hamel dressed in Sunday's clothes and all the old people of the village sitting there. It was due to an order on the bulletin board. That was the first day when he realised for the first time that how important French was for him, but it was his LAST LESSON in French.

Dominant Theme Raised in the Text - Linguistic Chauvinism

'Chauvinism' is a devotion for or against something, just based on what you feel (not necessarily what you may know). So, linguistic chauvinism is the idea that one's language is superior to that of others. This happens generally when the language is that of the ruling class.

Linguistic chauvinism is the overt preference for one language over others. Language is considered to be the cultural identity of a particular group of people who use it. Hence, imposing some other language on the people hammers their emotions and is a step to annex their relationship with their culture. The language of any country is the pride of that country. It not only defines the culture but also tells us about the people, literature and history of the country. Language for some people is just the medium of communication but for others it is the question of life and death.

'The Last Lesson' very prominently raises the question of linguistic and cultural hegemony (supremacy, control) of the colonial and imperial powers and their lust for controlling the world and influencing their cultures and identities.

The Last Lesson raises the burning question very innocently through the words of little Franz that "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" This raises the question of immorality of imposing imperial languages and cultures on the colonies. The child questions that when even the

birds and animals can't be forced to abandon their language and speak others then what forces the man to think that it would be prudent to force other human beings to forcibly accept any language other than theirs.

The language of a country is not only a medium of communication for the people but also the link for identity, once the native language is snatched away from the people. It's not only the loss of convenient communicating medium but also the loss of identity for people for what they have been and what they might become. When a small child like Franz can think of the irrationality behind snatching away the right of language and identity from people then why can't the war lords and colonizers understand the fact?

Answer the following in about 30-40 words.

1. What was the narrator's greatest fear as he walked towards the school?
2. What thoughts ran across Franz's mind as he walked towards the school?
3. What did Franz notice that was unusual about the school that day?
4. What was the 'thunderclap' the narrator received as M. Hamel began the lesson?
5. How did Franz's feelings towards school work and school books suddenly change?
6. Why had the villagers occupied the back benches of the class that day?
7. 'We've all a great deal to reproach ourselves with'. What does M. Hamel mean by these words?
8. How did the people react when they realised that they will never be able to learn their language?
9. How was M. Hamel's last class different from his previous classes?
10. The people in the story suddenly realize how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?

Long Answer Questions

1. Justify the title of the story "The Last Lesson".

The title 'The Last Lesson' by Alphonse Daudet is apt and appropriate. The whole story focuses on the last lesson delivered by M. Hamel. The lesson reveals how much people should care for their language. It is for the first time that people came to realize the value of their language.

The story highlights a situation where the people of Alsace felt that there was plenty of time to learn their lessons and so did not give due importance to school. They sent their children to work on farms and mills instead of having them learn their lessons. Even Franz looked for opportunities to escape school and was never serious about learning his lessons. Quite unexpectedly they receive orders from Berlin that French will no longer be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. It is then that they realize what they had been evading all this while will now be deprived to them. They awaken to the course of safeguarding their language and reach to attend the last lesson taught by M. Hamel, the French teacher. The story evokes a consciousness in the reader that he must learn his lessons in time. One can never apprehend which day of life he may be learning his last lesson.

2. When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison. Comment.

The last lesson by Alphonse Daudet beautifully brings to light the brutality of war which makes man insensitive to human feelings and emotions.

Mother tongue helps a person to express his feelings and thoughts intimately. Conquerors try to subdue and control the people of the enslaved territory by enforcing many measures such as imposing their own language. The enslaved natives also become victims of a restrained and confined life with no hope of breathing freely in their own motherland. At such times of enslavement, it is their language, the mother tongue which keeps their identity alive. It is the key to their prison as the mother binds them together. It constantly reminds them of their enslavement and brings them together urging them to fight for the liberation of their motherland. M. Hamel, the French teacher reminds his countrymen to safeguard their language to liberate themselves and maintain their identity.

3. Franz thinks, “Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?” What could this mean?

The Last Lesson by Alphonse Daudet highlights linguistic chauvinism. Acquisition of power over the Alsacians made the Prussians so domineering that they imposed even their language on them.

Franz means that their pride cannot make them dominate their minds and hearts. They had grown up using French as their language. Now taking it away from them would be unfair and unkind. This language was natural to them as cooing is to the pigeons. Robbing them of it would be not only difficult but next to impossible. It will be difficult to accept a language that will be imposed on them. It causes pain to undo a known language and learn to communicate in another. The purpose of language will be lost. Moreover French bound them as brethren.

Franz mocks at the Berlin order which has imposed German language on the French people. Powerful Germans can defeat France, but they cannot compel pigeons to coo in German. In fact, no language can be imposed on the unwilling learners, especially a foreign language.

4. Give a character-sketch of M. Hamel on the basis of your study of the story, ‘The Last Lesson’.

The Last Lesson by Alphonse Daudet centers on a French teacher, M. Hamel, who has been asked to leave. An order from Berlin banned the teaching of French in Alsace and Lorraine. The order said that German will replace French.

M. Hamel emerges as an epitome of an ideal teacher. He is introduced by the narrator as a strict stereotyped teacher. He is very particular that his students know their lessons. The author feels he is insensitive to the feelings of his students. Later he emerges through the course of the story to be a facilitator. His domineering tone becomes gentle and shows concern about the education of his students. He is a guide and friend and advises the innocent villagers to shift priorities and pay more attention to learning. M. Hamel is also a true patriot- loves both his country and the language. He is a man of courage and deep emotions who teaches to perfection till the very end. He proudly writes ‘vive La France’ on the blackboard in the end. M. Hamel is an ideal teacher, true guide, philosopher and patriot to the core.

VALUE BASED QUESTIONS

Q. Franz’s feelings about M. Hamel and school changed gradually by the end of the text, though he had a great disliking for both in the beginning of the story. It is said that first impression is the best impression. Is it true in context of ‘The Last Lesson’? Definitely not. Write a small paragraph of

about 100 words penning down your views on, 'A person can be best judged in his first appearance only'.

Ans: A well-known dictum states that 'appearances are deceptive'. In fact, it is true that one cannot be judged in just one meeting. Actually, one or more meetings are not enough to judge a person's personality. Every person reacts differently on different situations at different times. So it is not a matter of single appearances to form a judgement about a person. It might be a prejudice. Now-a-days every person appears to be social and gentle. They want to be presentable in the society. No matter what their background is. One's clothes, gestures, habits, etc. do not define one's personality in just one appearance. Due time should be taken to form opinion about a person. Different situations reveal different aspects of one's personality. Sometimes a life remains short to know a person. But sometimes even a few seconds are enough to know one's real face. Hence, it is not a matter of first or last impression but the issue of time, needed to know one in one's right colours.

Q. While speaking his mouth choked and wrote, 'Vive La France' and finally by gesture he said: "School is dismissed – you may go." These lines show that M Hamel was greatly attached to his motherland, profession and mother tongue. In other words, one should be attached to his own land, cultures and customs. But today's Indians are drowned in the western colours. It shows that there is need to spread awareness about the feeling of patriotism and other related factors. Write a paragraph in about 100 words highlighting the issue.

Ans. Patriotism-An Unmatched Spirit: Patriotism is defined as one's love for one's customs, culture, mother tongue, motherland and everything that is associated with one's motherland. One should be proud of what one's country has given to him. In Indian context, people have started adopting western culture. They are in the race of being 'Modern'. This is really surprising as well as pathetic. As an Indian, we own a rich and diversified culture which has attracted foreigners too. Many patriots have sacrificed their lives in the name of their country which has attracted foreigners too. Many patriots have a feeling that cannot be filled in the hearts of Indians but it should be arisen and inculcated among the future generation of the country. The students or the youth of the country need to be indianised. Adaption of different cultures is not bad. But forgetting our own culture for sake of other ones is not done. The need of the hour is to inculcate the moral values, virtues, love for humanity and motherland among the Indian youth. Patriotism is an undying and unmatched spirit that cannot be sacrificed for anything.

Note: Follow the format of an article/speech.....

Write in three paragraphs. Introduction – body (relate to the lesson in 2 – 3 sentences – write the name of the lesson and the author) - conclusion

1. The importance of schooling cannot be denied in any individual's life. The people of Alsace and Lorraine did not understand how education could mould one's life and personality and they avoided sending their children to school. Keeping this in mind, write an article in 100 words on "The importance of schooling in an individual's life".

Ideal platform to inculcate qualities of mind and body – learns virtues of self-discipline, cooperation, team work and caring for others –time management and daily routine makes him responsible and grooms him for future life – receives not only education but also hone their skills and sharpen their latent faculties - school child's second home – learns to interact beyond his family – civilised member of the society or country – Alphonse Daudet in The Last Lesson – People of Alsace and Lorraine – avoided sending their children to school – field – garden –

2. 'Bah! I've plenty of time. I'll learn it tomorrow.' Franz was shocked when he heard that it was the last lesson and he hardly knew French, his mother tongue. Many of us find ourselves in similar

situations and regret when all is over. What qualities should we inculcate in life so that we are able to achieve our goals?

Time management and setting up priorities – key to success –focused approach – chart out plan – managing resources – set targets and deadlines – competitive world – cut throat competition – will lag behind - greatest obstacle postponing work – hard work, regularity, punctuality and consistency of effort – cultivate qualities like determination and perseverance – Alphonse Daudet – The Last Lesson – Berlin order – German replace French - Franz regretted - hardly knew the language.

3. The old people of Alsace do not realize the importance of education but when they come to know that it was the last day of learning French, they promptly report to school, with their elementary books. So it is an undeniable truth that it is never too late to be educated. Keeping this in mind, write an article on ‘The need for Adult Literacy in the changing Scenario of today’s world’.

There is no specific age to become literate - adults who missed the prime time- due to lack of resources, social restrictions, ignorance-can make use of this benefit to get educated - literacy will save them from exploitation, impart confidence and empower them - the government and NGO’s striving to increase the literacy level- several schemes - training in basic education is the right of every citizen - ‘Each One Teach One’- should spread to every corner and each segment of the society – relate to the lesson.

4. ‘Then he turned to the blackboard, took a piece of chalk and, bearing on with all his might, wrote as large as he could-Vive La France!’ Abraham Lincoln, a former President of America said, “I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man so that his place will be proud of him.” After reading the lesson and the above quote you begin to reflect on the lost spirit of patriotism amongst the youth in India due to which there is no respect for one’s countrymen and no determination amongst the youth to lead the country to a better future.

Write an article in about 100 words for a national magazine on the need for revival of patriotic spirit amongst the youth in India.

Country’s youth value starved- facing a total crisis - violence, separations and inter group conflicts, political apathy- order of the day - secured freedom but not utilized in its true perspective - time for young people to wake up and create their own identity - need for good leadership and good governance - need to inculcate the spirit of nationalism along with humanism in children from the beginning – relate to the lesson.

5. The people of Alsace did not understand the importance of learning their language-French. Emphasize upon the importance and need of learning one’s native language. Discuss what values are revealed when one sets upon learning one’s native language. (100 words)

Impact of Western culture- importance of one’s native language- taken a back seat - one’s native language- repository of culture, identity and way of living - cause of pride - knowing one’s native gives a sense of belonging - native language also reminiscent on one’s childhood, friends and relatives - speaking the native language –only way to connect to one’s people and soul – relate to the lesson.
