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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
CLASS XII

FLAMINGO – THE RATTRAP - By: SELMA LAGERLOF

Characters: 1. A tramp with rattraps, 2. A crofter, 3. Master Smith in the Ramsjo Iron Mill in Sweden, 4. Helpers in the Mill – blacksmiths, 5. Iron mill owner, 6. Edla Willmansson – daughter of the Iron Mill owner.

The Title: "The Rattrap" is an appropriate title as it is the story of a rattrap peddler. The author has used the metaphor of a Rattrap to highlight the human predicament. Just as a rat is fooled by bait and gets trapped, most human beings also fall into the trap of material benefits. The story revolves around the incident of a man getting trapped due to his greed. Hence, the title is an apt one.

Theme: The human beings are prone to fall into the trap of material benefits. It is the human tendency to redeem oneself from dishonest ways. Hence, the whole world is called a big rattrap which tempts the people towards its materialistic benefits, and brings about their doom and never ending predicament. It also highlights the themes like human loneliness, status and treatment meted out to have-nots and callous attitude of society and government towards such people. One of the themes is that man is inherently good by nature. The society and environment make them bad. Human goodness and kindness can bring about the change in their attitude.

Understanding the Lesson: The Rat Trap" written by Selma Lagerlof is a short story about an old disheartened beggar and thief who is taken in and shown generosity by a young woman, her kindness changes his bitter attitude about life. The peddler is a man who has fallen upon misfortune and now resorts to selling rattraps, begging, and thievery. He is very pessimistic about the world around him and sees the world as merely a "rat trap". He believes that society tempts us with riches and fine things, and when we accept, we are caught in the trap and are left with nothing.

The warmth of compassion extends its rays around the world, engraving mankind with its characteristic. Selma Legerlof supports the theory of compassion in her modern day short story "The Rat Trap" which depicts the powerful and positive impacts of such care. In the story, cynicism grips the protagonist rat trap peddler until the old man and the blacksmith's daughter infect the protagonist with their altruism. Thus, the peddler's inner soul experiences a rapid transformation form an ugly duckling to a dazzling swan. Legerlof's first scene of compassion is from the old man's hospitality. Despite the fact that he did not know

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the peddler, the old man still opened his arms and acted charitable by providing food and shelter. This action is not typical in the today's world; a majority of us would turn a blind eye. However, although the old man showed a sign of compassion, it was not appreciated—the protagonist stole from the old man. As the peddler ponders on the road of guilt, he soon receives a second action of care from a little girl. Compassion is illustrated when the blacksmith's daughter takes pity on the protagonist. Although she knew the fact that he was not Captain von Stahle, whom he claimed to be, the girl said," I think he ought to stay with us today. I don't want him to go." The girl's compassionate words cracked the foundation of the protagonist's cynical world. Throughout the story, the protagonist only believed in the dismal side of human nature, survival of the fittest, and viewed the world as a battlefield. His whole belief system was shattered when he received the girl's pity and an opportunity to enjoy his first "true" Christmas. Lagerlof's "The Rat Trap" strongly validates the concept that compassion revolves around humankind. She provides evidence when the old man and the blacksmith's daughter show compassion towards the protagonist. As a result, the girl acted as the North Star, guiding the protagonist out of the trap of cynicism.

Another lesson the mendicant learns throughout the course of the story is to be considerate of others. At the end of the novel, he makes amends with the old man by returning his money and writing Edla a thank you note. He understands what he did to the man was wrong and that was not returning the kindness and trust given to him. He apologized for lying to the girl and her father and leaves her a present, a rat trap and the stolen money (thirty croner bills) of the old man to be returned.

Main Points: 1) 'The Rattrap' is a story that underlines the belief that essential goodness in human beings can be aroused through sympathy, understanding and love. 2) Once a man went around selling small rattraps but he took to begging and thievery to keep his body and soul together. 3) One day he was struck with the idea – the whole world is a big rattrap and it offers riches as bait. 4) People let themselves be tempted to touch the bait then it closes in on them bringing an end to everything. 5) One dark evening the rattrap peddler sought shelter in an old crofter's roadside cottage. 6) The old man gave him food, tobacco they enjoyed the card game too. 7) Next morning the peddler stole away his thirty kroners. 8) The rattrap peddler escaped into a big confusing forest and got lost. 9) While resting on the ground he recollected his idea that the world is a rattrap and thought his end was near. 10) Hearing a thumping sound he reached Ramsjo ironworks for a night shelter. 11) The owner came on his nightly rounds and noticed the ragged wretch near the furnace. 13) He took him as an old acquaintance 'Nils Olof.' 14) He invited him to stay with their friends

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for Christmas but the stranger declined the offer. 15) His daughter Edla Willmansson persuaded to go home with him. 16) She requested him to stay for Christmas Eve only. 17) On his way to the Manor House the peddler thought that he had thrown himself into the lion's den. 18) The next day in broad day light the iron master realized the stranger was not captain and threatened to call the sheriff. 19) Edla pleaded for him and asked him to stay back. 20) Christmas Eve at Ramsjo was as usual and the stranger slept and slept. 21) She made him understand that if he wanted rest and peace he would be welcome next Christmas also. This had a miraculous effect on him. 22) Next morning they went for early church service leaving behind the guest who was asleep. 23) They learnt at church that a rattrap peddler had robbed an old crofter. 24) Edla becomes very upset. 25) They reach home immediately and learn that the peddler had already left but had not taken anything at all with him. Instead, he had left a small packet for the young girl as a Christmas present. 26) She opens the packet and finds a rattrap, three wrinkled ten-Krona notes and also a letter with a request to return the Kroners to the crofter.

Points for the Textual Long Answer Questions:

1. How does the peddler interpret the acts of kindness and hospitality shown by the crofter, the ironmaster and his daughter?

The peddler initially – no principles in life – driven by want, hunger and starvation – stoops to begging and stealing - well-received by the crofter- received hospitality and company- but betrayed the crofter' s confidence vested in him- stole the thirty kronors- when he loses his way in the forest- realizes that he is trapped- ironmaster's kindness- baits to draw him further into the trap- but Edla's warmth and hospitality – raises him and stirs the latent goodness in him- leaves a letter with the stolen money and a rattrap as a gift- her warmth redeems him from his dishonesty and makes him turn over a new leaf.

2. What are the instances in the story that show that the character of the ironmaster is different from that of his daughter?

The father and daughter- stand in contrast- father lacks maturity and acts impulsively- jumps to conclusion without much thought- mistakes the peddler for an old regimental comrade without much thought- again on realising his mistake- wishes to defer the matter to the sheriff- Edla on the other hand- keen sense of observation- identifies him to be a tramp at first sight- has a cool and sympathetic attitude- persuades her father to let the peddler stay on for Christmas- welcomes him the next year too.

3. The story has many instances of unexpected reactions from the characters to others' behaviour. Pick out instances of these surprises.

Old crofter's reaction to the tramp's request to stay with him- unexpected-hospitality which hit him by surprise- peddler' act of stealing- breach of trust- ironmaster's sudden invitation to the tramp- peddler's refusal to go with him- later on accepting Edla's request- unexpected- ironmaster's reaction on knowing his identity- unexpected- Edla's intercession and the peddler's gift to her at the end – full of unexpected reactions.

4. What made the peddler finally change his ways?

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The peddler had been living a despicable life of poverty- no one to bestow love and kindness upon him- Edla instrumental in changing him-her treatment of him as a captain- helps redeem him from dishonesty- finally is a changed man- leaves the thirty kronors and the rattrap as a gift to Edla- a present from a rat who had been caught in this worldly rattrap – transformed because of his innate goodness being kindled.

5. How does the metaphor of the rattrap serve to highlight human predicament?

Metaphor of a rattrap reveals man's helplessness, restlessness and powerlessness in the face of difficult situations that pursuit of joys and luxuries land him in –bait – yields to the temptations -The peddler thinks of the world to be a rattrap-setting baits for people- when he stole the crofter's money- loses his way in the forest- world as a rattrap had trapped him in- when ironmaster realizes his mistaken identity- the peddler tells him that the world is a rattrap- one day he would also be caught in it- none escapes- one person falls onto it one day the other another day- finally leaves a rattrap as a present- metaphor highlights the theory of crime and punishment- theft is compared to enticement by a bait- and subsequent imprisonment comparable to guilt and atonement.

6. The peddler comes out with a subtle sense of humour. How does this serve in lightening the seriousness of the theme of the story and also endears him to us?

The peddler has a subtle sense of humour- although a vagabond, without any idea about his next meal- thinks of the world to be rattrap- when he loses his way in the forest thinks of the rattrap again and realises that he had been trapped- his acknowledgement that he had been enticed reduces the gravity of his crime- when invited to the ironmaster's house felt he was voluntarily throwing himself into the lion's den-reminds the ironmaster of the worldly rattrap- what endears him to the readers is his transformation and his signature as Captain Von Stahle.

VALUE BASED QUESTIONS

Q1. The peddler in 'The Rattrap' is a thief, dishonest, but there was something gnawing his conscience. He always resented taking to evil ways, felt guilty of stealing and blamed and cursed himself. He could reform because he had the desire. Where there's a will, there's a way. Keeping this in mind, write an article in 100 words on this topic.

Value Points: Everyone wishes to be successful in life- but in the path that leads to success one should not forget the battle - When we feel the dire need of something, we make all efforts to achieve it - Dr Kiran Bedi in her book, "I Dare' says, 'If you want to achieve something, you must struggle. Throw yourself in the valley of your aim' - If one has strong willpower, no obstacles, no opposition can shake it - Will power coupled with optimism is like a river that can flow on and on unhindered - For success one has to continuously struggle and not give up.

Q2. Edla Wilmanson, in 'The Rattrap' had immense faith in the goodness of man and believed that each one has a core of humanity that can be awakened. Her faith proved true and the peddler showed an inclination to reform. It was her faith that transformed the peddler. Keeping this in mind, write an article of about 100 words on 'The Virtue of Faith'.

Value Points: Faith is the sum and substance of life - It is the driving force which leads to the fulfilment of each human endeavour - it is the only power that inspires a human being in despair - But if a person loses faith during the period of struggle, he succumbs to unfavourable situations - Mother Teresa, Baba Amte- were inspired by faith in God to help the underprivileged - A man having faith in God has faith in himself-it is truly said "If you think you'll lose you've lost - For out in the world we find success begins with a person's faith."

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Q3. Greed is the greatest evil force that has tempted man into doing a lot of misdeeds. It is greed that has led to so much corruption, violence and mayhem in the world. Whether it is greed of money or power, it is a great corrupting force that makes a man go to any extreme. The peddler in 'The Rattrap' is not conscientious nor does he think twice before robbing a crofter. Bearing these thoughts in mind, write an article discussing the qualities that are required for overcoming the Evil of Greed in 100 words.

Value Points: Greed is the greatest evil that paralyses the goodness of man and spreads like cancer - It spreads like wildfire and makes a man immune to goodness and kindness - Money, fame, power and property acquired by unfair means is like a vicious cycle- never lets anyone rest in peace - The consequences of greed are deep and never-ending - Meditation, consultations, keeping the company of good and honest people can keep the bridle on such men - But the desire to overcome greed should come from within.

Q4. In spite of utmost generosity and kindness shown by the Crofter, no change was seen in the peddler. His money was stolen by the peddler. But Edla was able to transform him. What according to you, was missing in his behaviour although he appeared to be compassionate?

Value Points: Crofter –first person to extend his hospitality to the peddler-no rudeness or coarse behaviour - But he was a fool to show his money to the peddler and offer him temptation - Moreover the crofter's kindness was borne out of his dire need for company and lack of a family- no genuine concern in the peddler's transformation - In the case of Edla, she showed total trust and gave him a chance to reform- unconditional kindness and concern - She even extends an invitation to the peddler for the next Christmas and aroused in him to live up to the status she created for him.

Q5. The peddler's instance speaks on a general level to the entire society, urging for a different outlook towards those maligned individuals who can be redeemed by compassion and understanding. The rehabilitation programmes at the prisons follow the same value. In the light of the instance mentioned above, how do you think society can help juvenile delinquents from falling prey to petty crimes or bad ways?

Value Points: Social reforms and reforming criminals –dealt with in different ways - They should be treated as normal people - It is exemplary that Dr Kiran Bedi ushered in so many reforms in Tihar jail and for the first time made the criminals capable of leading a life of dignity - She introduced Yoga classes and got them trained in bakery, pottery, textile-weaving and handicrafts - Our behaviour and approach has to transcend the pretentious barriers of charity and aim at real transformation - The society has to adopt an understanding and genuine love and concern can go a long way in changing them.

Short Answer Questions:

1. From where did the peddler get the idea of this world being a rattrap?

2. Why was he amused by this idea?

3. Did the peddler expect the kind of hospitality that he received from the crofter?

4. Why was the crofter so talkative and friendly with the peddler?

5. Why did he show the thirty kronor notes to the peddler?

6. Did the peddler respect the confidence reposed in him by the crofter?

7. What made the peddler think that he had indeed fallen into a rattrap?

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8. Why did the ironmaster speak kindly to the peddler and invite him home?

9. Why did the peddler decline the invitation?

10. What made the peddler accept Edla's invitation?

11. What doubts did Edla have about the peddler?

12. When did the ironmaster realize his mistake?

13. What did the peddler say in his defence when it was clear that he was not the person the ironmaster had thought that he was?

14. Why did Edla still entertain the peddler even after she knew the truth about him?

15. Why did the peddler sign himself as Captain Von Stahle?

Long Answer Questions:

1. What are the instances in the story that show that the character of the ironmaster is different from that of his daughter in many ways?

2. The story has many instances of unexpected reactions from the characters to others' behaviour. Pick out instances of these surprises.

3. The story "The Rattrap" focuses on human loneliness and the need to bond with others. Comment.

4. The story is both entertaining and philosophical. Discuss

5. The reader's sympathy is with the peddler right from the beginning of the story. Why this is so? Is the sympathy justified?

6. What made the peddler finally change his ways?

7. How does the metaphor of the rattrap serve to highlight the human predicament?

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