

Chapter 5.

The Snake and the Mirror

Before You Read

Q1. Do you like to look at yourself in the mirror? What do you think about at such times? Have you ever seen a dog, a cat or a bird look into a mirror? What do you think it sees?

Answer. Do Attempt it.

Q2. Now read this humorous story about a doctor, a snake, and a mirror.

Answer. Do Attempt it.

Thinking About The Text

Q1. Discuss in pairs and answer each question below in a short paragraph (30–40 words).

1. “The sound was a familiar one.” What sound did the doctor hear? What did he think it was? How many times did he hear it? (Find the places in the text.) When and why did the sounds stop?

2. What two “important” and “earth-shaking” decisions did the doctor take while he was looking into the mirror?

3. “I looked into the mirror and smiled,” says the doctor. A little later he says, “I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself.” What is the doctor’s opinion about himself when: (i) he first smiles, and (ii) he smiles again? In what way do his thoughts change in between, and why?

Answer. 1. The doctor heard a familiar sound caused by the movement of something on the beam. He thought that the sound was being made by the movement of rats. He heard the sound thrice. After the third time, the sounds stopped. Suddenly, he heard a dull thud as if a rubber tube had fallen to the ground. When he turned, he saw a snake that wriggled over the back of the chair and landed on his shoulder.

2. The first important decision that he took while looking into the mirror was that he would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome. The second earth-shaking decision he took was that he would always keep his attractive smile on his face to look more handsome.

3. When the doctor first smiled in front of the mirror, he was appreciating his attractive

smile. He decided to keep that smile on his face to look more handsome. His opinion about himself at that point of time was that he was a bachelor and a doctor too. Later, when he smiled feebly at himself, he had forgotten his danger. He knew that the snake would strike him and that he had no medicines in his room. At that moment, his opinion about himself was that he was but a poor, foolish, and stupid doctor. His thoughts had changed because of the lurking danger. Earlier, he had thought that the noise was created by rats. However, later he had a snake sitting on his shoulder and that is when he realized the gravity of the situation.

QII. This story about a frightening incident is narrated in a humorous way. What makes it humorous? (Think of the contrasts it presents between dreams and reality. Some of them are listed below.)

- 1. (i) The kind of person the doctor is (money, possessions)
(ii) The kind of person he wants to be (appearance, ambition)**
- 2. (i) The person he wants to marry
(ii) The person he actually marries**
- 3. (i) His thoughts when he looks into the mirror
(ii) His thoughts when the snake is coiled around his arm**

Write short paragraphs on each of these to get your answer

Answer. 1. The story presents a contrast between dreams and reality. This contrast has been depicted in a humorous manner. The doctor had just started his practice. His earnings were therefore meagre. He lived in a small rented room, which was not electrified. He had only sixty rupees in his suitcase. Apart from a few shirts and dhotis, he had one solitary black coat. His house was full of rats. However, his dreams and ambitions were in contrast to this. He was a great admirer of beauty and he believed in making himself handsome. He laid great emphasis on the fact that he was unmarried and a doctor. He was too pleased with his appearance. He decided to shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome. The manner in which he decided that this decision is an 'important' one is quite funny. Later, he also made an 'earth-shaking decision' to always keep smiling in order to look more handsome. This contrast between the kind of person he was and the kind of person he wanted to be makes the story humorous.

2. He had thought about the kind of person he would want to marry. He wanted to marry a woman doctor who had plenty of money and a good medical practice because he did not have any of those. He wanted a fat wife so that whenever he would make a mistake his wife would not be able to catch him. However, the woman he married was a thin and slender person who could run like a sprinter. This contrast between the kind of wife he wanted and the kind of wife he ends up marrying adds to the humour of the story.

3. When he looked into the mirror, he was full of appreciation for his good looks. He was a great admirer of beauty and believed in making himself look handsome. He took a close look at his face and decided that he would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look even more handsome. Then, he looked into the mirror and smiled. He decided to keep smiling as he considered his smile very attractive. However, later when the snake was coiled around his arm, he turned into a stone. At this moment, he felt the presence of God near him. In his imagination, he tried to write 'O God' in bright letters. He felt pain in his left arm where the snake was coiled. He realized that if the snake struck him, then he did not even have any medicines in his room for the same. That was when he thought that he was a poor, foolish, and stupid doctor. In this way, his thoughts changed from calling himself an unmarried doctor who looked very handsome to calling himself a poor, foolish, and stupid doctor. This sequence of events also provided humour to the story.

Thinking About Language

Q1. Here are some sentences from the text. Say which of them tell you, that the author: (a) was afraid of the snake, (b) was proud of his appearance, (c) had a sense of humour, (d) was no longer afraid of the snake.

1. I was turned to stone.
2. I was no mere image cut in granite.
3. The arm was beginning to be drained of strength.
4. I tried in my imagination to write in bright letters outside my little heart the words, 'O God'.
5. I didn't tremble. I didn't cry out.
6. I looked into the mirror and smiled. It was an attractive smile.
7. I was suddenly a man of flesh and blood.
8. I was after all a bachelor, and a doctor too on top of it!
9. The fellow had such a sense of cleanliness...! The rascal could have taken it and used it after washing it with soap and water.
10. Was it trying to make an important decision about growing a moustache or using eye shadow and mascara or wearing a vermilion spot on its forehead.

Answer. 1. Was afraid of the snake

2. Had a sense of humour
3. Was afraid of the snake
4. Was afraid of the snake
5. Was afraid of the snake
6. Was proud of his appearance
7. Was no longer afraid of the snake
8. Was proud of his appearance
9. Had a sense of humour 10. Had a sense of humour

QII. Expressions used to show fear Can you find the expressions in the story that tell you that the author was frightened? Read the story and complete the following sentences.

1. I was turned_____ .
2. I sat there holding_____ .
3. In the light of the lamp I sat there like_____.

Answer. 1. I was turned to stone.

2. I sat there holding my breath.

3. In the light of the lamp I sat there like a stone image in the flesh.

QIII. In the sentences given below some words and expressions are italicised. They are variously mean that one

- is very frightened.
- is too scared to move.
- is frightened by something that happens suddenly.
- makes another feel frightened. Match the meanings with the words/expressions in italics, and write the appropriate meaning next to the sentence. The first one has been done for you.

1. I knew a man was following me, I was scared out of my wits. (very frightened)
2. I got a fright when I realised how close I was to the cliff edge.
3. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the bull coming towards him.
4. You really gave me a fright when you crept up behind me like that.
5. Wait until I tell his story — it will make your hair stand on end.
6. Paralysed with fear, the boy faced his abductors.
7. The boy hid behind the door, not moving a muscle.

Answer. 1. I knew a man was following me, I was scared out of my wits. (Very frightened)

2. I got a fright when I realised how close I was to the cliff edge. (Frightened by something that happens suddenly)

3. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the bull coming towards him. (Very frightened)

4. You really gave me a fright when you crept up behind me like that. (Frightened by something that happens suddenly)

5. Wait until I tell his story — it will make your hair stand on end. (Makes another feel

frightened)

6. Paralysed with fear, the boy faced his abductors. (Too scared to move)
7. The boy hid behind the door, not moving a muscle. (Too scared to move)

QIV. Report these questions using if/whether or why/when/where/how/which/what. Remember the italicised verbs change into the past tense.

1. Meena asked her friend, "Do you think your teacher will come today?"
2. David asked his colleague, "Where will you go this summer?"
3. He asked the little boy, "Why are you studying English?"
4. She asked me, "When are we going to leave?"
5. Pran asked me, "Have you finished reading the newspaper?"
6. Seema asked her, "How long have you lived here?"
7. Sheila asked the children, "Are you ready to do the work?"

Answer. 1. Meena asked her friend if she thought her teacher would come that day.

2. David asked his colleague where he would go that summer.

3. He asked the little boy why he was studying English.

4. She asked me when we were going to leave.

5. Pran asked me if I had finished reading the newspaper.

6. Seema asked her how long she had lived there.

7. Sheila asked the children if they were ready to do the work.

Speaking

Q1. Using some of the expressions given above in exercise III, talk about an incident when you were very scared. You may have a competition to decide whose story was the most frightening.

Answer. Once we went on a school excursion to Jim Corbett. Me and my friend Chhavi were asleep in our room at the resort when we heard some noises-rustling of leaves, scratching sound on our door and rattling of pebbles. Both of us got up in a jerk. I sat on my bed paralysed with fear. There was silence for the next few minutes before we heard that scratching sound again. This time I nearly jumped out of my skin. Chhavi got up from the bed to look out of the glass window but I sat there without moving a muscle.

When she removed the blinders I could see darkness all around. Suddenly we noticed a hooded figure move in the darkness. Seeing this, my hair stood on end. Both of us started crying and shouting for help when we heard some voices calling our names. Somebody turned on the lights outside our room and we saw our friends standing outdoors. They apparently were playing a prank. Till this day I remember the way I was horrified and scared out of my wits.

Writing

Q1. Try to rewrite the story without its humour, merely as a frightening incident. What details or parts of the story would you leave out?

Answer. 1. One hot summer night, a doctor returned home late at night. He heard a familiar scuttling sound of rats from above while opening the door. He heard the sound thrice. The doctor was sitting at a table on which stood a lamp and a mirror when he heard a dull thud as if a rubber tube had fallen to the ground. At the same time that the doctor turned his back to find out the source of the thud, he found a snake wriggling at the back of his chair. As the snake slowly slid along the arm of the doctor, he found himself paralysed with fear. The doctor sat there without a muscle moving, silently praying to God. The doctor felt helpless and foolish at that time as he did not have any medicine for snakebite. By chance, the snake turned his head to the mirror and it slowly slithered away towards it. Taking the opportunity, the doctor ran till he reached his friend's house, where he took bath and changed into fresh clothes. Next morning, he returned to his house to shift his belongings only to find that his belongings had been stolen by a thief.

Q2. Read the description given alongside this sketch from a photograph in a newspaper (Times of India, 4 September 1999). Make up a story about what the monkey is thinking, or why it is looking into a mirror. Write a paragraph about it.



THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL A monkey preens itself using a piece of mirror, in the Delhi ridge. ('To preen oneself' means to spend a lot of time making oneself

look attractive, and then admiring one's appearance. The word is used in disapproval.)

Answer. The monkey preens itself using a piece of mirror, in the Delhi ridge. It is the first time that the monkey is seeing a reflection of itself, so clear and life-like. The monkey admires the beautiful brown hair on its head, neatly parted along the centre. Its eyes are a twinkling brown. It has a flat nose and a small mouth. The monkey then opens its mouth to inspect its tiny set of teeth, with two large fangs. It sticks its black tongue out at the reflection. As the piece of mirror is moved slightly, it sees its shoulder and body in the mirror. It then flicks its long brown tail and brings it into the reflection. But the features on its face are more interesting. It manages to get its face back on the mirror and once again goes back to inspecting its mouth. Suddenly the bright sunlight is obscured by a dark cloud, or so the monkey thinks. With a heavy swoosh, a thick net, lands over the monkey and tightens around it. The mirror falls from its tiny hand, and all it sees around, are the human faces, out to get him.