

Chapter 8: The Luncheon

NCERT · Class 11 · English · Woven Words · Short Stories

Understanding The Text

Question 1

Although the author was not a vindictive man he was very happy to see the twenty-one stone lady who had impoverished him twenty years ago, and says he had finally had his revenge. What makes him say this?

Solution

This story relates to incidents which are replete with irony and humour, involving a lady and the author in a restaurant about twenty years ago. The author explains how a lady friend cleverly suggested visiting a posh restaurant, Foyot. Considering the economic crisis that the author was in, visiting an expensive restaurant like Foyot with a lady for luncheon was inappropriate. The author explains in a flashback how in that situation, it became embarrassing for him as he was not able to turn down her request to meet at the restaurant. For the luncheon, the woman started to place orders expensive dishes from the menu, such as caviare, salmon, asparagus, champagne, etc., without thinking about the bill. Without being able to reveal the situation, the author gave excuses for not ordering food for himself. He had to give all the money which he had with him to pay the bill. Even a single penny did not remain in his hand, and the whole month stood before him. The author was not vindictive and did not say a word to her but endured her. In this situation, the author says on seeing the woman after twenty years that the embarrassment that was done in the restaurant to him was avenged in the course of time as the lady now weighs twenty-one stone.

Question 2

There are quite a few places where the author uses the expressions 'my heart sank', 'panic seized' etc. What was the reason for this?

Solution

The expression 'My heart sank' was used by the author when the lady ordered caviare. This expression used by the author explains his inability to afford caviare. The usage of this expression adds humour to

the entire situation.

In another situation, the expression 'panic seized' used by the author conveys that apart from the embarrassment, it was a concern when the lady ordered asparagus as he knew that its cost might exceed his budget. The expression aptly shows the mental state of apprehension and embarrassment of the author at that point.

Question 3

Locate instances of irony in the story.

Solution

This story is filled with events of irony. An ironic situation is something that happens contrary to one's anticipation or expectation. Irony is also the expression of an idea using language that means the opposite. In this story, numerous instances are present, which are ironic. When the author at the beginning goes to Foyot with the thought that he can manage it within the limited budget, an unexpected thing happens. He finds that the cost of dishes on the menu is very high, and he did not expect this. The lady first conveys to the author that she never eats anything for lunch. But she soon remarks that she would love to eat salmon, which is a costly dish on the entire menu. She also goes on to order caviare, champagne and asparagus at the end. This story contains situations of verbal irony too. The lady's statement that she never eats anything for luncheon is ironic as she starts to order so many highly-priced dishes. Another such instance is when the author conveys to the lady that his doctors have asked him not to drink champagne. Hence, this story is completely built on an ironic structure.

Discuss in pairs or in small groups

Question 1

People with foibles are often not conscious of them.

Solution

Every human being is subject to follies and foibles with probably an equal amount of goodness to balance them. Sometimes, it is the nature of people to have foibles in them without realisation. Imperfections are present within people, which makes us more human. The concept of flawlessness is utopic and does not match the laws that govern the human world. The commercial and capitalist ideals

introduce flawlessness, which makes people hide their faults and turn them into hypocrites. Hence, humans do not accept their flaws and are not conscious of them in their pursuit of perfection.

Question 2

The author's attempts at keeping up his pretence of friendliness while he was mentally preoccupied with the expense of the luncheon.

Solution

The author tried his best to stay composed and calm while his lady friend kept ordering dishes without his approval. He tried to keep quiet so that she did not get to know about his concern regarding the bill. He kept pushing himself to maintain goodness by adjusting to her views regarding food habits. He never exposed his hunger to make sure that the lady did not get to know about his financial crisis.

Appreciation

Question 1

The author is a humorist

- a. How does the story reflect his sense of humour?**
- b. What makes his lady friend remark – 'you are quite a humorist'?**
- c. Give instances of the author's ability to laugh at himself.**

Solution

a. The author of this story is a humorist. It mainly works to make others laugh. The author skillfully employs humour in his story from the start to the end. In the beginning, the author explains a humorous instance when the lady asked him to provide her lunch at a costly restaurant Foyot. According to the financial crisis of the author, visiting the costly restaurant Foyot was not within his budget. The author does calculations and finally decides to visit Foyot with the lady to experience a few embarrassing moments, which makes it humorous for the readers. In the beginning, on entering the restaurant, the author was taken aback when the lady ordered caviare, salmon, asparagus and champagne. These situations testify to the author's sense of humour. The way the author did not place orders for himself so that his budget was not revealed is also humorous. The way the author explains the lady as a woman of forty who is imposing rather than attractive is humorous. In the end, when the lady asks him to follow her path of having lunch, the author replies humorously that he would do better without eating anything.

Hence, the story shows the sense of humour of the author from the start to the end. Each and every instance shown in the entire story expresses the author's sense of humour.

b. The story describes how the lady friend of the author suggested having lunch in a costly restaurant Foyot with the author. With all the monetary constraints, he decided to go to the restaurant where especially senators visit. He chalked up an idea to order a few items in the expensive restaurant so that his budget for the month would not be affected. The real irony was exposed when his lady friend starts placing orders one by one without even having an idea about the author's budget. In the end, she asked him to follow her example to have a little luncheon, to which the author answered that he would do much better by not having dinner that night. This makes his lady friend remark – 'you are quite a humorist'.

c. The story contains many events to depict the ability of the author to laugh at himself. At the beginning, the author says that the lady suggested visiting a costly restaurant like Foyot. The author says that as he was younger than the lady, he was not able to say no to her invitation. At the restaurant, when she started to order expensive dishes one after the other, he was able to observe the irony. He then laughed at himself for accepting her invitation to a luncheon in Foyot. From the start of the story to the end, he demonstrates his ability to laugh at himself.

Question 2

How does the first person narrative help in heightening the literary effects of the story?

Solution

This story is composed in a first-person narrative which makes the readers familiar with the mindset of the narrator and his evident anticipation, apprehension and embarrassment of visiting the costly restaurant Foyot at the suggestion of his lady friend. It allows us to go deeper into the confusion and the fear developed by the narrator inside himself. The polite and soft gesture exhibited by the narrator in front of his lady friend explains the sheer embarrassment and monetary dilemma that he was experiencing. It allows the reader to visualise his mind about the anger and sarcasm which he possessed against his lady friend. The variations in the external gentility and inner mental stress help us to understand his plight, which gives rise to irony.

Language Work

Question 1

Pick out the words and phrases in the text that indicate that the author was not financially well off.

Solution

A few phrases and words which capture the unstable financial situation of the author are – “I was barely earning enough”, and possessing a “tiny apartment.” About his visit to Foyot, he said, “it was so far beyond my means”, and his “heart sank a little” when the lady friend of the author ordered salmon for lunch and said to himself, “I could not afford caviare”. When the lady ordered asparagus, the author’s “heart sank”. In the end, while coming out of the restaurant, the narrator was thinking of how he would manage his expenses with the little amount which was left with him to last for that month and said, “not a penny in my pocket”.
