Short Stories - 8.

The Luncheon

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Q. 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?

Answer:

William Somerset Maugham's "The Luncheon" narrates the incident of the narrator and the lady who had met each other in restaurant twenty years ago. The story, ornamented with classic humor and irony, narrates the story of the author of how he was told to meet at an expensive restaurant, Foyot, by the lady in a very cunning manner. Despite his fragile financial condition, he couldn't turn down a lady's request and decided to turn up at the place at the prescribed time to ultimately face the lady in a humiliating condition at the restaurant. Without paying any heed to the narrator, the lady started ordering exotic delicacies like salmon, caviar, champagne, asparagus, without consulting with the narrator or even bothering about the bill. The narrator, in an embarrassing situation of not being able to reveal the true nature of his financial stature, had to comply with the lady and couldn't prevent her from ordering the delicacies. Although he kept on making excuses for not ordering anything for himself, ultimately it was him who had to spend his entire money in clearing the payment. He was then left with no a single penny for the whole month to fall back on. Since he was a complacent and tolerable man, he didn't blurt a word against her. The reason the narrator says that he had finally had his revenge against her is that after all these years, the lady has turned into a twenty-one stone. Thus, though not physically avenging on the lady the injustice meted out against him had eventually led her to become a twenty-one stone.

Q. 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?

Answer:

In “The Luncheon”, the expression “my heart sank” has been used by the narrator when the lady ordered caviar in the restaurant and the narrator was trying to estimate the cost of the dish. He has employed this phrase to express his inability to afford the dish. The narrator has also used the expression “panic seized” to state his anticipation by wondering about the price of the dish and whether it would exceed his budget line. Both the expressions lend humor, pathos, an embarrassment to the situation.

Q. 3 Locate instances of irony in the story.

Answer:

The technique is intended to expose something verbally or through physical actions to reveal certain things which are contradictory to what had been known previously. The foremost ironical incident in “The Luncheon” occurs when the narrator contemplated that he would be able to manage the expenditure at Foyot with his available cash. However, he was taken aback by the strangely high process of the dishes. He is flabbergasted by the whole incident. Again, irony comes in the lady declaring previously that he hardly had anything for luncheon but then didn’t bother to order salmon, caviere and other such dishes at a go. Finally, we have verbal irony in the story at a point when the narrator remarks that he had been abstained from drinking by his doctors which is actually not the truth.

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Q. 1 Discuss in pairs or in small groups. People with foibles are often not conscious of them.

Answer:

Every person is constituted of foibles, follies along with goodness to balance them out. To be human is to err. To be human is to be a liar. To be human is to be selfish. It is the human nature to contain foibles without realizing them. Humans carry imperfections within themselves. And it is these imperfections that make us so human. Flawlessness is a utopic concept that doesn't adhere to the premises of human world. The capitalist and commercial ideals to import flawlessness make people conceal their shortcomings by turning them into hypocrites. Thus, people are often not ready to accept their flaws or often they are not conscious of their nature in the hope of attaining perfection.

Q. 2 Discuss in pairs or in small groups.The author's attempts at keeping up his presence of friendliness while he was mentally preoccupied with the expense of the luncheon.

Answer:

The author or the narrator tried his best to remain calm and composed while the lady kept on ordering food with his indirect approval. The narrator was trying to keep himself calm by not letting out the truth about his apprehension regarding the bill. He was constantly pushing himself to maintain his goodliness by complying with the lady's views regarding food habits. He even negated his hunger just to ensure that the lady doesn't come to know about his embarrassing financial crisis.

APPRECIATION

Q. 1 A

The author is a humorist. How does the story reflect his sense of Humour?

Answer:

The device of humour is employed to evoke laughter. Laughter is of two types, dry or blank laughter and wise or meaningful laughter. Humour evokes laughter which often calls for sympathy from the readers. In the

opening of the story, the narrator introduces us to humour by describing how he was tactfully and cunningly called by the lady to visit the Foyot. She almost insisted him to offer her a luncheon in that highly expensive place. Visiting Foyot was not a reachable thing to afford in those days and given the economic condition of the narrator, it was beyond his reach to visit the place. However, driven by flattery he agreed to do so. After several calculations, he finally decided to visit there only to realize that to afford the dishes of Foyot was beyond his budget line. Thus, we find the comic humour in the story as he constantly tries to calculate his available cash and simultaneously tries to entertain the lady. Further, we find humour in the lady's remark that she lives on the very meager amount of food for a luncheon but ultimately orders a variety of rich delicacies. Finally, there is humour in the lady's remark as she instructed the narrator to follow her example of having a so-called little luncheon and the narrator sarcastically replied that he would set a better example by not having anything for dinner that night. Thus, we find that Maugham's "The Luncheon" is replete with ample humorous moments carved with soft sarcasm.

Q. 1 B

The author is a humorist. What makes his lady friend remark— 'you are quite a humorist'?

Answer:

Somerset Maugham's "The Luncheon" unpacks itself with finely layered humour packed with polite sarcasm. The story begins with the narrator's lady friend who happened to coax him out for a little luncheon at a highly expensive restaurant. The narrator was quite sure about ordering little food keeping in mind his budget for the month. However, irony unveils itself as soon as we learn that under the title of "little luncheon", the lady kept on ordering exotic foods like salmon, asparagus, caviar and so on without paying any heed to the narrator's financial capacity. At the end, when the lady instructs the narrator that

he should follow her footsteps of serving himself with a “little luncheon”, the author sarcastically and quite humorously remarks that he would rather do better by not having anything for dinner that day. It is in retaliation to this statement that the lady said, “you are quite a humorist”.

Q. 1 C

The author is a humorist. Give instances of the author’s ability to laugh at himself.

Answer:

Somerset Maugham’s “the Luncheon” begins with a lady friend of the narrator who almost forced him in a cunning and alluring fashion to offer her a treat for a luncheon at Foyot. Given the economic condition of the narrator, it wasn’t possible for him to visit such an exotic place had it not been for the extreme flattery that he was exposed to by the lady friend. At a tender age and having to face such flattery was too much for him to turn down the lady’s request. Besides, the author or the narrator laughs at himself at several moments in the story and especially when the lady takes up the initiative to order expensive delicacies one after the other without consulting with the narrator. The narrator then laughs at his own fault of giving in to the lady’s flattery to visit Foyot.

Q. 2 How does the first person narrative help in heightening the literary effects of the story?

Answer:

Maugham’s “The Luncheon” is composed in the first-person narrative where we get to peep inside the narrator’s mind and his evident apprehension, anticipation, embarrassment of visiting Foyot under the supposed flattery meted out to him by one of his lady friends. The first-person narrative allows us to delve into the confusion and apprehended fear that the narrator develops within himself. The apparent soft, polite

gesture that we find him exhibiting before his lady friend, conceals within him the monetary dilemma and the sheer embarrassment that he might be exposed to. The first-person narration allows us to see through his mind that fosters sarcasm and anger against the lady friend. The difference between his inner mental trauma and the external rib of gentility helps us understand his plight and gives rise to irony.

LANGUAGE WORK

Q. 1 Pick out the words and phrases in the text that indicate that the author was not financially well off.

Answer:

Certain words and phrases that capture the author's unstable financial status are- possessing a "tiny apartment", "I was earning barely enough to keep body and soul together". Regarding his visit to Foyot, he said, "it was so far beyond my means" and his "heart sank a little" as the lady ordered salmon for the luncheon and he said to himself, "I could not afford caviar". Again, as the lady friend ordered asparagus, the narrator's "heart sank". Finally, while coming out of the restaurant, the narrator was thinking of how he would plan his expenditures with the meager sum that was left with him to last for the month and said, "not a penny in my pocket".