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ONCE UPON A TIME

Have you ever heard your grandmother or grandfather talking about how the world was very different when they were children? Have you heard them say that people had more time to talk to each other or meet each other in the olden days?

As children we are innocent, loving and honest about our feelings. But as time passes, many social and cultural factors and experiences change our personality and behaviour. These experiences often take away some of our honesty and innocence. In the same way, the old way of life was innocent like a child because in those days people were more honest and caring about each other than they are in the busy, modern-day world. When we meet people today we often do not mean what we say. We only say nice things to them because we don't want to seem rude.

The poet wishes that the modern world would once again become innocent and childlike. He also wishes that he could once again be as natural, honest, and innocent as when he was a child.



OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson you will be able to:

- recognise the value of being genuine in a relationship;
- compare changing behaviour patterns with time;
- record actions that influence one to change one's behaviour;
- explain implied comparison, and
- identify the elements of satire.



Notes



25.1 LET US READ THE TEXT

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, son,
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laugh with their eyes:
but now they only laugh with their teeth,
while their ice-block-cold eyes
search behind my shadow.

There was a time indeed
they used to shake hands with their hearts:
but that's gone, son.
Now they shake hands without hearts:
while their left hands search
my empty pockets.

'Feel at home'! 'Come again':
they say, and when I come
again and feel
at home, once, twice,
there will be no thrice –
for then I find doors shut on me.

So I have learned many things, son.
I have learned to wear many faces
like dresses - homeface,
officeface, streetface, hostface,
cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles
like a fixed portrait smile.

And I have learned too
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',
when I mean 'Good-riddance';
to say 'Glad to meet you',
without being glad; and to say 'It's been
nice talking to you', after being bored.



cold eyes - emotionless eyes

search – look for something

indeed - something which does exist

shut - closed

conforming - normally acceptable

portrait - picture

good – riddance - a feeling of relief when an unwanted person leaves



But believe me, son.
 I want to be what I used to be
 when I was like you. I want
 to unlearn all these muting things.
 Most of all, I want to relearn
 how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
 shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs !

So show me, son,
 how to laugh; show me how
 I used to laugh and smile
 once upon a time when I was like you.

– Gabriel Okara

25.2 LET US UNDERSTAND THE TEXT

25.2.1 PART 1 (Stanzas 1, 2 and 3)

Once upon a time shut on me.



The poet tells his son about the behaviour of people in the past and in the present, in the olden days and in the modern world. He remembers a time when people had true feelings for one another. They would laugh from the heart and meet one another with genuine feeling. But today in the modern, busy world people often greet each other without any warmth in their handshake. They greet each other with a smile or a laugh that does not reach their eyes or warm their hearts. When they say ‘come again’ to a guest they don’t really mean it, they only say it to be polite. According to the poet, people these days are often interested

in meeting people only if they are rich, powerful, successful or famous, and do not value or respect those who have no wealth or position.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 25.1

I. Answer the following questions with reference to the lines in the following stanzas:

1. Stanza 1.

“Once upon a time _____ my shadow”

a. Who does the word ‘they’ refer to?

muting - expressionless / not expressed in speech

fangs - poisonous teeth of snake



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- b. What effect does the poet create by using the phrase ‘once upon a time’?
 - c. How can a person laugh with his eyes and heart?
 - d. What human behavior is being discussed in this stanza?
2. Stanza 2.
- “There was a time _____ my empty pockets.”
- a. What do the words “there was a time” refer to?
 - b. What happened at that time?
 - c. ‘...while their left hands search.....’. What do they search? What is the significance of this ‘search’?
 - d. Based on the poem’s context what do you think will be the reaction of people who search the poet’s pockets and find them empty.
3. Stanza 3.
- “Feel at home _____ doors shut on me.”
- a. What does the expression ‘feel at home’ mean? Does the poet ‘feel at home’ in the situation he describes in this stanza?
 - b. Which words or expressions are used by the poet to indicate that repeated visits are not welcome.
 - c. Have you ever experienced a situation in which you believed completely in someone who offered to help you or promised something to you. Later you realized that he/she did not mean it? How did you feel when this happened to you? If this has not been your personal experience, imagine how would you feel if you were let down.



DO YOU KNOW

ATITHI DEVO BHAV

Since times immemorial Indians have been well known for their hospitality (the way in which guests are served and taken care of).

Atithi Devo Bhava is a very old slogan. What does it mean?

In the olden days when the means of communication were limited and slower than they are today, it was not possible to be prepared for the arrival of a guest. The word *Atithi* means a





guest whose date of arrival is not known, or a person who arrives unexpectedly. Atithi is made up of A + *tithi*, in which ‘A’ stands for *not known* and ‘*tithi*’ means date. *Devo* means **God** and ‘*Bhav*’ stands for ‘is’.

Atithi Devo Bhava hence means that the arrival of a guest at any time is like the arrival of God and the guest shall be treated thus. This sentiment is deep-rooted in our culture even today.

In recent times the Government of India through the Ministry of Tourism has used this slogan to promote tourism in India.

25.2.2 PART 2 (Stanzas 4 and 5)

So I have learned after being bored.



Have you ever said something nice to someone without meaning it? Why do you think you said it? Was it because you were too busy and did not think about what you were saying? Was it because it was the correct thing to say in that situation? To be a part of the society we need to learn behaviour that is accepted in society. We begin to learn this as we grow up and behave according to the situation we are in. We learn this behaviour so well that our natural behaviour slowly disappears, and in each different situation we behave in the way that is considered appropriate for that situation. The poet says that he behaves very differently in the office, compared to the way he behaves at a party, or on the street. And none of these different faces that he puts on is his natural self or his real face. He says that he has also learnt to say things that he doesn't really mean, because they are the correct things to say in that situation. For example, when we are introduced to someone we are taught to say, “Glad to meet you.” So the poet says that he too sometimes politely greets a person in this way even though he may not be interested in meeting him or her. The poet feels sad that like other adults in today's world he has forgotten how to be a natural person.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 25.2

I. Answer the following with reference to the lines mentioned in the following stanzas:

1. Stanza 4.

“So, I have learntlike a fixed portrait smile.”

- a. What has the father learnt?
- b. Explain “Like a fixed portrait smile.”



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c. What do the different faces stand for?

2. Stanza 5.

“And I have learned too after being bored.”

a. Mention the other things that the father has learnt.

b. Which learnings by the father refer to emotionless relationships?

c. Select any two phrases that show the contrast between intention and action.

II. Imagine the following situation:

Nisha’s friend, Sia has been sick and has missed a week of school. Nisha promises to share her notes with Sia and also to teach her whatever she cannot understand. But when Sia actually comes to ask her to explain something to her before the exam, Nisha makes an excuse and does not help her. Explain how this could affect Sia.



LET US DO 25.1

All of us need help at some point of time. Reflect on the fact how you would feel if someone committed to help you and then refused.

25.2.3 PART 3 (Stanzas 6 and 7)

But believe me when I was like you.



The poet has a deep desire to go back to the innocence of childhood. He is dissatisfied with his own changed self. He thinks that his son’s genuine laughter can teach him how to express his feelings honestly. He wants to relearn how to behave in a natural way. He wants to get rid of the falseness in his behaviour that makes his laugh unpleasant, because he laughs with his lips and teeth and not with his eyes and heart.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 25.3

1. What does the father wish for in stanza 6?
2. In stanza 6 the teeth have been compared to _____ .
3. What does the simile “like a snake’s bare fangs” bring to your mind? Explain what the poet means when he uses this simile in stanza 6.

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4. What does the father ask his son to do in stanza 7 and why?
5. The word 'relearn' has 're' as a prefix. Combine the prefixes in column A with the words in column B below to form new words. Make sure each prefix is used only once.

A	B
re	timely
de	literate
un	activate
il	form



25.3 LET US WRITE

Imagine you are the father in the poem. Think of one or two actions of your child that made you realise how your conduct differs from that of your child, and that made you admire him. These actions of your child inspire you to be like him. Record these actions in the form of a diary entry.

A page from the diary is given below with a few lines to help you begin your diary entry.

Monday, ___ 20XX

9:30 pm.

Dear Diary,

For the past few days Rahul's behaviour has been making me realise how I have changed with time. Just a week back _____

I pray to God to help me change my ways and be my true self again.

Kamal

Note: For tips on writing a diary entry refer to LET US WRITE in lesson no. 11 "My Elder Brother" and lesson no. 18 "The Little Girl".



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

As we grow into adulthood, we lose some of the simplicity and truthfulness of our childhood. Similarly in our advanced, globalized world of e-mail, social networking sites and so on we have forgotten some simple and honest human feelings and relations. We have distanced ourselves from each other because we are too busy, or because we do not need to meet people in order



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to talk to them or see them. Instead we have learned formal, polite, and correct but meaningless behaviour to interact with other human beings. But this does not mean that we have no hope of relearning how to be natural, simple and truthful again. This is possible only when we observe children and let their innocence and honesty be an example for us to follow.



TERMINAL QUESTIONS

I. Based on your understanding of the poem, match the following expressions/phrases with their meanings. Please note there are extra options in the meaning column.

Expression/Phrase	Meaning
1. laugh with their hearts	a. to feel comfortable.
2. laugh with their teeth	b. one is no longer welcome if he/she visits someone very often.
3. shake hands without their hearts	c. people can change their expressions to suit different occasions.
4. shake hands with heart	d. relationship are measured in terms of how much money/ power one has.
5. hands search my empty pockets	e. a handshake that conveys feelings.
6. feel at home	f. laughter that is natural.
7. there will be no thrice	g. laughter that is artificial.
8. learned to wear many faces like dresses	h. a handshake that does not show warmth but a routine formality.
9. like a fixed portrait smile	i. I am happy and content.
10. I want to unlearn all these muting things	j. I wish to forget modern trends and return to a more natural style of living.
	k. laughter resembles roar of a tiger.
	l. a smile which remains fixed, and does not change with personal feelings and moods.

II. Answer the following questions:

1. What has the poet forgotten and what is his desire?
2. In today's world it is often difficult to know what to believe and what not to believe. What you see is often not the reality. Explain.

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3. The father and son in the poem represent two different periods of time. Elaborate.
4. Which time according to you is better? Why?
5. By addressing his son who is the poet also addressing?

III. When we use humour, irony, sarcasm or exaggeration to criticize someone or something, it is called satire. The poem is a satire on modern society. With the help of examples from the poem support this statement.



ANSWERS

25.2.1 PART 1

INTEXT QUESTIONS 25.1

- I. 1. a. The word 'they' refers to people in modern times.
 - b. By using the phrase 'Once upon a time' the poet indicates that he is talking about something that happened a long time ago. The phrase 'Once upon a time' also makes the beginning of the poem sound like the poet is telling his son a story.
 - c. When we laugh heartily and with true feelings, it gets reflected in our eyes.
 - d. Human behaviour which is false, formal, and artificial is being discussed in this stanza.
2. a. The words denote a time long past.
 - b. At that time people greeted each other with real pleasure and happiness because they had true feelings for one another.
 - c. The search signifies that when a person is introduced to the poet he/she shakes the poet's hand in greeting, and at the same time he/she tries to find out if the poet is rich or poor.
 - d. Individual responses.
3. a. The expression 'feel at home' means to feel comfortable. No, the poet does not feel comfortable in the situation he describes in this stanza. He finds that he is not welcomed if he/she becomes a frequent visitor, even though he is told to 'feel at home' and to 'come again'.
 - b. 'I find doors shut on me.'
 - c. Individual responses.



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25.2.2 PART 2**INTEXT QUESTIONS 25.2**

- I. 1. a. The father has learnt to wear many faces. This means that he has learned to act or behave according to the need of each situation, and not according to his own natural feeling.
- b. According to the poet, when adults smile it is often as a formality. The smile is without any feelings or expression like the smile in a picture or a painting.
- c. The different faces stand for the different ways in which a person conducts himself/herself, dresses, behaves or speaks to suit the different situations he/she has to face.
2. a. The father has also learnt to say things which are the exact opposite of his real feelings and of what is in his heart. He has learnt to use pleasant words without meaning them at all, or with unpleasant and unkind thoughts going on in his mind.
- b. To laugh only with his teeth, to shake hands without his heart.
- c. i. to say 'goodbye' for 'good riddance'.
- ii. to say 'glad to meet you' without being glad.
- iii. to say 'it's been nice talking to you' after being bored.

II. Individual responses

25.2.3 PART 3**INTEXT QUESTIONS 25.3**

- The father wishes he could once again be what he used to be. He wishes to be his true self again.
- In Stanza 6 the teeth have been compared to a snake's bare fangs.
- A laugh that shows the teeth like a snake's bare fangs brings to mind a laugh that is without real feeling. It brings to mind a person whose laugh is falsely pleasant and therefore dangerous and deceptive like a snake. The poet uses this simile to show that he has forgotten to laugh with real feeling and pleasure. When he laughs he does not laugh with his eyes and heart but only by showing his teeth.
- The father asks his son to show him the way to be simple, honest, natural and innocent. He wants his son to help him to find his old self, because his son is a child and children are completely natural.
- re-form, deactivate, untimely, illiterate.



25.3 LET US WRITE

Summarising

Individual responses

TERMINAL QUESTIONS

I.	Expressions	Meanings
	1.	f.
	2.	g.
	3.	h.
	4.	e.
	5.	d.
	6.	a.
	7.	b.
	8.	c.
	9.	l.
	10.	j.

II. 1. The poet has forgotten his true, natural self. He wants to get back to his state of innocence when he was open and honest about expressing his feelings and thoughts.

2. People in modern society say and do whatever is necessary to achieve their goals and ambitions even if there is no genuine feeling in their actions and words. As a result the actions and words are often completely the opposite of the thoughts and feelings of the person doing the actions and saying the words. Hence it is difficult to know the reality and to know what to believe and what not to believe.

3. Individual responses.

Suggested response: The father as an adult stands for the modern period in which people are false and insincere and artificial. The son is a child and represents the old days when people were natural and honest and childlike.

4. Individual responses.

5. By addressing his son the poet is actually addressing all the adults of the modern world who have lost their innocence and are artificial and sometimes heartless in their behaviour. He is trying to tell them to relearn from their children how to be natural and honest and sincere.

**Notes****III. Individual responses.**

Suggested response: The poem is a satire on the falseness in modern society. The poet expresses this by using contradictions and interesting expressions such as people ‘laugh only with their teeth’, ‘shake hands without hearts’, ‘their left hands search my empty pockets’. By using expressions such as ‘wear many faces’ to show that people behave differently and have different attitudes in different situations and with different people instead of being one’s true self the poet brings out that people in modern society are like actors changing masks on a stage and acting in a play. There is no connection between their actions and their feelings. This is a serious problem in modern society but the poet criticizes it in the true style of a satire.