

Chapter – 6

Once Upon a Time

Tony Morrison

About the Author

Tony Morrison was the eighth woman and the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize (1993) in literature. This speech underlines the magic of the proper use of language. It also makes the point that language should be living and vibrant.

The old woman

- The speech uses the anecdote (story) of a blind but a wise negro woman.
- She was widely respected for her wisdom.
- She lived a secluded life in a small hut house outside the town.
- Her words were law among her people.
- Even for deviating from the conventions of the society, they looked upon her.
- She was famous in the city where people usually laugh at the intelligence of village people.

The old woman receives the visitors from the city

- One day, some young people of the town visited her to test her knowledge.
- One of them asked if the bird he was holding in his hands was dead or alive.
- She at once knew their motive.
- So, after a long silence she answered that whether dead or alive, it was in their hands.

The interpretation of the old woman's answer

- This was a way of scolding them for making fun of her disability.
- The bird represents language and the blind woman stands for a writer with experience.
- In other words, the blind woman scolded the young people for killing the language, ie, not using it correctly.

Different interpretations of the story

- The children may not have a proper language in which to understand or explain things.
- They may make up a story about a bird to ask questions to an adult about the adult world.
- They felt that the old woman was lucky to be blind:
 - She could understand things without looking at them.
 - She had the power to explain things.
- The young people were scared of things which did not have a name.

- They thought that language could help them to be calm.
- May be, the children wanted to understand the life of woman so that they could understand the life of a man.
- May be, the children wanted to know about the life at the edge of the towns.
- May be, the children wanted to know what life would be there after this.

Conclusion

- The different speeches of the young men towards the end of the story suggest that they have learnt to use language properly, and effectively.
- Hence, they have truly 'caught' the bird (language) which is lovely (living and vibrant).

Questions

Now, on the basis of your understanding of this lesson, try to answer the following questions:

1. Enumerate the traits of the old woman.
2. Have you recently heard a story which is interesting? Write that story in 100 words.
3. The art of storytelling is dying down.
4. Stories have been a great source of information since time immemorial.
5. Do you think that language is crucial to a writer? Give any three reasons.
6. What do you think about the terms