

The Portrait of a Lady – Important Questions

Q. What stories of the grandmother did the author treat as ‘Fables’ of the Prophets? Why?

Ans. The author treated the stories of grandmother’s youth and beauty as fables as he had always seen her old and he found it was hard to accept that she could once be pretty and young.

Q. Give a pen picture of narrator’s grandfather as he appeared in the portrait?

Ans. The narrator’s grandfather looked like a hundred years old man in the portrait. He had a long white flowing beard. It came up to his chest. It looked as if he had lots and lots of grandchildren.

Q. Did the narrator like his grandmother telling him of the games she played as a child? If not, why?

Ans. The grandmother often told her grandson about the games she played as a child. Her stories looked quite funny. She looked childish. The narrator didn’t take them very seriously.

Q. Why did the grandmother keep one hand on her waist?

Ans. The grandmother was very old. She was slightly bent. She had to keep one of her two hands on her waist. She did so to balance her stoop.

Q. Explain. “As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting?”

Ans. The narrator’s grandmother was terribly old. She could not appear young and beautiful. Her face was a criss-cross of wrinkles. She was short, fat and slightly bent. The very idea of her being young and pretty did not appeal to the mind.

Q. How long had the narrator known his grandmother ‘old and wrinkled’? What did people say? How did the narrator react?

Ans. The narrator had known his grandmother to be old and wrinkled for the last twenty years. She was terribly old. Perhaps she could not become older. People said that she had once been young and pretty. They said that she even had a husband. The narrator found it hard to believe.

Q. Explain. “Old, so terribly old that she could not have grown older ”

Ans. The grandmother looked extremely old. She couldn't have grown older anymore. She looked the same terribly old lady for the last twenty years.

Q. Why did the grandmother hate music?

Ans. The grandmother actually hated music. She thought that music was meant only for prostitutes and beggars. Music was not meant for school children from respectable families. It was not meant for gentle folk.

Q. The narrator's grandmother looked like 'the winter landscape in the mountains'. Comment.

Ans. The grandmother always wore spotless white clothes. Her locks of hair also looked silver white. Her spotless white dress and silver white hair made her look like the snowy mountains in winter. It is also because she exuberated peace and tranquility like the mountains.

Q. The grandmother had a divine beauty. How does the author bring it out?

Ans. The grandmother's silvery locks scattered untidily over her pale and wrinkled face. This made her look like an expanse of pure white serenity. She had a divine beauty. She looked like the winter landscape in the mountains.

Q. How were the grandmother and the narrator good and intimate friends?

Ans. Actually, both of them were like good and intimate friends, she woke him up early in the morning and got him ready for school. She gave him a breakfast of stale bread with a little butter and sugar spread on it. She accompanied him to his school.

Q. Why did the grandmother accompany the narrator to his school? What did she do there?

Ans. The grandmother accompanied her grandson to his school. Actually, the school was attached to a temple. She sat inside the temple reading scriptures while he studied at the school.. They came back home when the school was over.

Q. What did the priest teach at the village school?

Ans. The priest taught the alphabet and the morning prayer at the village school. He made the students stand in rows on either side. They would sing the alphabet and the morning prayer in a chorus.

Q. Describe the feeding of village dogs by the grandmother.

Ans. When the grandmother and the narrator would walk back home together, the village dogs met them at the temple door. They followed them. The grandmother would throw chapattis to them. The dogs would growl and fight with each other for the crumbs.

Q. What was the turning point in their friendship?

Ans. The narrator's parents brought them to the city. It was the turning point in their friendship. The city life and English school made all the difference. She didn't accompany him to his school. Nor could she help him in his studies. They saw less of each other now.

Q. What opinion did the grandmother form of the English school in the city?

Ans. The grandmother didn't like the English school in the city. She was sad as they didn't teach anything about God and scriptures at the school. Nor was she interested in Science. She hated music lessons given in the school.

Q. How was the common link of friendship between the grandmother and the grandson snapped?

Ans. When the narrator's family shifted to the city, the grandmother couldn't accompany him to the school as she used to do in the village. Now he would go by motor bus. She was not able to help the grandson in his studies also. Thus the common link between their friendship snapped.

Q. Draw a comparison between village school education and city school education.

Ans. Elementary education was given in the village school. The pupils were taught alphabets and multiplication tables. It was quite simple confined to reading, writing and arithmetic. In the city school, English, Science and Music were taught. Unlike the village school there was no teaching about God and the scriptures.

Q. What were the happiest moments of the day for the grandmother?

Ans. The grandmother would sit in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits for the sparrows. Hundreds of sparrows would gather around her. They would perch on her legs, shoulders and even on the head. It was the happiest half-an-hour of the day for her.

Q. When did the common link of friendship between the narrator and his grandmother finally snap?

Ans. The narrator went to the university. Now he was given a room of his own. This separated the narrator from his grandmother. The common link of their friendship was thus finally broken.

Q. How did the grandmother react when the narrator decided to go abroad? Was she upset?

Ans. The grandmother appeared to be quite normal. She knew that her grandson would be away for five years. She looked composed and didn't show any emotion. She came to see him off at the station. She kissed him lightly on his forehead before departing.

Q. Why did the narrator think that the grandmother's kiss was the last sign of physical contact between them?

Ans. The grandmother kissed the forehead of the narrator before he left for abroad. The narrator considered it the last sign of physical contact between them. He never expected his old grandmother to live for five more years, the time when he would be back.

Q. How did the grandmother celebrate the home coming of his grandson?

Ans. The grandmother was really very much excited and happy when the narrator returned from abroad. She celebrated his arrival by collecting the women of the neighbourhood in the evening. She continued beating an old drum and sang for hours. She even forgot to pray.

Q. Why did the grandmother stop talking to anybody before her death?

Ans. The old lady fell ill. She had a mild fever. The doctor told them that she would be all right soon. But the grandmother declared that her end was near. She had forgotten to pray the last evening. She was not going to waste any more time talking to them.

Q. Why didn't the sparrows take any notice of the bread crumbs thrown to them. How would you explain their strange behaviour at the death of the grandmother?

Ans. The sparrows expressed their grief at the death of the grandmother. They sat around her dead body mourning her death. They didn't chirp. Nor did they touch the bread crumbs thrown to them by the narrator's mother. They flew away quietly when the dead body was carried off.

Q. How did the sparrows mourn the death of the grandmother?

Ans. The sparrows joined the mourning along with other family members. They sat in hundreds around her dead body. They didn't chirp. Nor did they touch the crumbs of bread thrown to them. They flew away quietly when the dead body was carried off for cremation.

Q. What is the significance of sparrows in grandmothers life?

Ans. When grandmother shifted to the city, she spent half an hour everyday feeding the sparrows. The birds became very friendly with her and came everyday in the verandah of her house. It was the happiest hour of the day. When she died after her short illness, hundreds of sparrows flew in the verandah and sat near her body. They were quiet and not chirping. They even ignored the bread crumbs given by the author's mother. In this way they expressed their grief and their bonding with the grandmother.

Q. What does Khushwant Singh describe in 'The Portrait of a Lady'?

Ans. In 'The Portrait of a Lady' Khushwant Singh draws a pen picture of his grandmother. He describes how he spent his childhood with her in the village. He also describes the changes that came in their relationship in the city.

Q. Grandmother never complained about anything. Her patience was beyond any measure. Mention any two instances.

Ans. Two instances that show the grandmother's patience are:

1. When she fed the sparrows the birds used to sit on her head but she never shooed them away.
2. She did not become upset when the author went abroad for higher education. She accepted the decision in a calm and composed manner

Q. Draw a character sketch of Khushwant Singh's grandmother as portrayed by him in the lesson 'The Portrait of a Lady'.

Ans. The narrator's grandmother was a true picture of love, affection and care. She had all those virtues which grandmothers generally have for their grandsons. She was highly religious but a conservative lady. The grandmother presented a picture of peace and contentment. Her spotless white dress and her silver white hair gave her spiritual beauty. The grandmother was not physically very attractive. She had deep love and affection for her grandson. She got him ready for school. She accompanied him to his school and came back home with him. She was a very religious lady. She was always telling the beads of her rosary. She had compassion even for animals and birds. She fed the village dogs. She took to feeding the sparrows in the city. But the grandmother was a conservative lady. She didn't like the English language and Science. She hated music. She associated music with prostitutes and beggars.