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Honeydew
Class: VIII

CHAPTER-1

The Best Christmas Present in the World

By- Michael Morpurgo

About the author

Michael Morpurgo is a British author. He is best known for writing children's novels such as 'War Horse'. The common themes in Morpurgo's work include nature and environmental issues, community and interdependence, and relationships between the old and the young. He often depicts people coming together and helping each other in times of crisis, such as war and natural disasters.

Theme

War only brings sadness and humiliation all around the world. It only leads to destruction and devastation and loss of both human life and property. There are much better ways of resolving differences.

Summary

The Best Christmas Present in the World is a story written by Michael Morpurgo. The author bought a roll-top desk from a junk shop which was in a bad condition. The author started its repair on Christmas Eve and found a letter in its drawer. Out of curiosity, the author read the letter and found it was written by Jim Macpherson to his wife Connie. He found that Jim Macpherson was the leader of the English Army and he described how desperately English and German army wanted peace as they were engaged in war. On Christmas morning a wonderful thing happened, both side's soldiers exchanged Christmas wishes. The leaders shared their ideas and feelings with each other and celebrated Christmas by eating, laughing, talking and drinking. Then they played a football match in which the Germans won. At night both troops sang carols and had a peaceful Christmas.

The author decided to give this letter to

Jim's wife back. He went to the address mentioned on the envelope. There he found that the house caught fire while 101 years old Connie was inside. However, she was rescued later and was admitted to a nursing home. The author went there but seeing the author She mistook him as her husband Jim. It was her belief that her husband kept his promise and he was back. She declared him as the Best Christmas Present in the World.

Students kindly read thoroughly the given notes

Kindly note down the following word meanings and question answers in your English notebook.

spotted it:
saw it; found it
(informal)

scorch marks:
burn marks

was going for:
was selling for
(informal)

restore:
(*here*) repair

veneer:
a thin layer of
plastic or decorative
wood on
furniture of
cheap wood

taken their
toll on:
damaged

stuck fast:
shut tight

scruples:
feelings that
make you
hesitate to do
something
wrong

standing to:
taking up
positions

trenches:
long deep
ditches in the
ground where
soldiers hide
from the
enemy

Fritz:
(*here*), a name
for a German
soldier (Fritz is
a common
German name)

Tommy:
a common
English name,
used here to
refer to British
soldiers

that would be
that:
that was all;
that was the
end of the
matter

schnapps
(pronounced,
sh-naps):
a German
drink made
from grain

cello:
a musical
instrument
like a large
violin

marzipan:
a sweet
covering on a
cake made
from sugar,
eggs and
almonds

dugout:
a shelter for
soldiers made
by digging a
hole in the
ground and
covering it



burned out:
destroyed by
fire

boarded-up:
covered with
wooden
boards

**muddle-
headed:**
confused

lit up:
became bright
with happiness,
excitement

suffused with:
(glow of
happiness)
spread all over
her face

Page No 10:

Question 1:

What did the author find in a junk shop?

ANSWER:

The author found a nineteenth century roll-top desk in the junk shop. It was made of oak. It was in a very bad condition. The roll-top was broken into several pieces. One of the legs was clumsily mended and there were scorch marks down one side. The author bought it in order to restore it.

Question 2:

What did he find in a secret drawer? Who do you think had put it in there?

ANSWER:

The author found a small black tin box in the secret drawer. There was a paper sello-taped to its top. It said, 'Jim's last letter, received on January 25, 1915. To be buried with me when the time comes.' Most likely, it was put there by Mrs. Jim Macpherson, who was Jim's wife. Her name and address were on the envelope.

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Question 1:

Who had written the letter, to whom, and when?

ANSWER:

Jim Macpherson had written the letter to his wife Connie Macpherson on December 26, 1914 when he was away on the war front, fighting the war against the Germans.

Question 2:

Why was the letter written--what was the wonderful thing that had happened?

ANSWER:

Jim wrote the letter to tell his wife about a wonderful thing that had happened on Christmas day. The British and the Germans were engaged in a war, yet on this day, both the troops met in no man's land. It was a thing of wonder because right in the middle of a war, the warring soldiers were making peace.

Question 3:

What jobs did Hans Wolf and Jim Macpherson have when they were not soldiers?

ANSWER:

Hans Wolf was from Dusseldorf. He played the cello in an orchestra. Jim Macpherson was a school teacher in Dorset.

Question 4:

Had Hans Wolf even been to Dorset? Why did he say he knew it?

ANSWER:

No, Hans Wolf had never been to Dorset. He had learned all about England from school and from reading books in English.

Question 5:

Do you think Jim Macpherson came back from the war? How do you know this?

ANSWER:

No, it is most likely that Jim Macpherson did not come back from the war. The notepaper sello-taped to the tin box mentioned the letter contained in the box to be the "last letter" from Jim. Perhaps therefore his wife Connie had preserved his letter.

When the story ends Mrs. Macpherson was a hundred and one years old lady, still waiting for her husband's return which indicates that many decades have passed and contrary to his promise, Jim did not come back home. He was probably dead.

Page No 15:

Question 1:

Why did the author go to Bridport?

ANSWER:

The author went to Bridport because that was the address where Mrs. Macpherson lived. He wanted to give the letter back to her.

Question 2:

How old was Mrs Macpherson now? Where was she?

ANSWER:

Mrs. Macpherson was a hundred and one years old. She was admitted to Burlington House Nursing Home after her house had caught fire.

Page No. 16:

Question 1:

Who did Connie Macpherson think her visitor was?

ANSWER:

Connie Macpherson thought that her visitor was her husband, Jim.

Question 2:

Which sentence in the text shows that the visitor did not try to hide his identity?

ANSWER:

The sentence which shows that the visitor did not try to hide his identity is, "I explained about the desk, about how I had found it, but I don't think she was listening."

Working with the Text

Page:16

Question 1:

For how long do you think Connie had kept Jim's letter? Give reasons for your answer.

ANSWER:

Connie must have kept Jim's letter for a long time till the house, in which she lived, caught fire. As she told the narrator how she read it quite often every day so that she could feel that Jim was near her.

Question 2:

Why do you think the desk had been sold, and when?

ANSWER:

The desk must have been sold when the house in which Connie Macpherson lived had caught fire. The remains of the household articles must have been sold after Mrs Macpherson was taken to the nursing home.

Question 3:

Why do Jim and Hans think that games or sports are good ways of resolving conflicts? Do you agree?

ANSWER:

Both Jim and Hans were soldiers. Both of them were warm - hearted. They had seen the suffering of war, so it was natural for them to hate war. They favoured a peaceful solution to settle disputes. They thought that games or sports are good ways of resolving conflicts because nobody dies in matches. I also agree with them as wars only lead to death and devastation.

Question 4:

Do you think the soldiers of the two armies are like each other, or different from each other? Find evidence from the story to support your answer.

ANSWER:

The soldiers of the two armies were like each other. Some instances are given below from the story

- Both the armies celebrated Christmas.
- Both the armies shared their food and spent their time together in laughing, talking, drinking and eating.
- They played football match and agreed that conflicts and disputes may be resolved by games or sports.
- They agreed about the negative aspects of war and longed for peace.
- They exchanged carols and hoped to unite with their families again.

Question 5:

Mention the various ways in which the British and the German soldiers become friends and find things in common at Christmas.

ANSWER:

The British and the German soldiers belonged to different camps. They were enemies in war time. But after all they were human beings and therefore they had similar feelings. They shared the joy and spirit of Christmas. They got over hatred and played games, feasted and drank like good friends. Both hated war. Both were anxious to go back to their families at the end of the war.

Question 6:

What is Connie's Christmas present? Why is it "the best Christmas present in the world"?

ANSWER:

Connie thought that Jim had come back from the war. She mistook the narrator for Jim. She had been waiting for her husband for a long time as he had written in the letter that he would come home for Christmas, so the coming of Jim (narrator) was the best Christmas present in the world for her.

Question 7:

Do you think the title of this story is suitable for it? Can you think of any other title(s)?

ANSWER:

Yes, the title of the story is a suitable one. The spirit of Christmas is the theme that prevails throughout the story. The message of Christmas peace and goodwill to all is brought out so clearly through the story. It was on a Christmas day, in the middle of a raging war, that two warring troops made peace. The moment of peace that the soldiers shared with each other was the best Christmas present for them. Again, it was on a Christmas day that the narrator went to see Mrs Macpherson. He went to return her husband's letter to her. The letter was precious to her, but even more precious was her presumption (belief) that the narrator was her husband Jim, who she believed had returned as promised on a Christmas day. This was the best Christmas present for her. Since the story revolves around Christmas the alternate title of the story could be 'The Christmas Gift' Or 'The Christmas Message'.

The Ant and the Cricket

A fable is a story, often with animals as characters, that conveys a moral. This poem about an ant and a cricket contains an idea of far-reaching significance, which is as true of a four-legged cricket as of a 'two-legged one'. Surely, you have seen a cricket that has two legs!

A silly young cricket, accustomed to sing
Through the warm, sunny months of gay summer and spring,
Began to complain when he found that, at home,
His cupboard was empty, and winter was come.

Not a crumb to be found
On the snow-covered ground;
Not a flower could he see,
Not a leaf on a tree.

"Oh! what will become," says the cricket, "of me?"

At last by starvation and famine made bold,
All dripping with wet, and all trembling with cold,
Away he set off to a miserly ant,

To see if, to keep him alive, he would grant

Him shelter from rain,
And a mouthful of grain.

He wished only to borrow;
He'd repay it tomorrow;

If not, he must die of starvation and sorrow.



Says the ant to the cricket, "I'm your servant and friend,

But we ants never borrow; we ants never lend.

But tell me, dear cricket, did you lay nothing by
When the weather was warm?" Quoth the cricket,
"Not!"

My heart was so light
That I sang day and night,
For all nature looked gay."

"You sang, Sir, you say?"

Go then," says the ant, "and dance the winter away."

Thus ending, he hastily lifted the wicket,
And out of the door turned the poor little cricket.
Folks call this a fable. I'll warrant it true:
Some crickets have four legs, and some have two.

adapted from *Aesop's Fables*

Glossary

accustomed to sing: used to singing; in the habit of singing

famine: scarcity of food; having nothing to eat

lay nothing by: save nothing

quoth: (old English) said

Write the above given word meanings in your notebook.

The Ant and the Cricket (poem)

By Aesop

Aesop was a Greek fabulist and a storyteller. He is credited with a number of fables which is collectively known as 'Aesop's Fables'. Many of the fables and tales are characterised by animals and inanimate objects that have the ability to speak, solve problems and have general characteristics of a human being.

Summary of the poem:-

It is a fable in poetic form. A fable is a story, often with animals as characters, that conveys a moral.

As the title suggests the poem revolves around an ant and a cricket. There was a young and silly cricket who spent all his time enjoying the pleasant month of summer and spring.

When the winter arrived, the cricket could not find anything to eat. He became worried and decided to go and meet the miser ant. The cricket requested the ant to give him food and shelter by explaining his situation and circumstances. He informed the ant that whatever help he would take, he would repay it soon. He also told the ant that if the ant refused to help him, he would die. The ant felt sorry for the cricket, but told him that ants neither borrow nor lend to anybody. The ant asked the cricket what he was doing during the warm weather. The cricket replied that he was so happy during the happy months of summer that he sang day and night. He was so happy and the nature looked so pleasant that he forgot all about the winter or the difficult times. On hearing this, the ant told him to sing and dance through the winter too. The poet ends the poem with the moral that "Some human beings are like the cricket who save nothing for the future."

Moral: We should enjoy the happy moments of our life but should not be ignorant regarding our future. A very careful planning is essential for everyone as it ensures a secure future.

Working with the poem

Question 1:

The cricket says, "Oh! What will become of me? " When does he say it and why?

ANSWER:

The cricket said the given lines when it found that its cupboard was empty and winter had arrived. It could not find a single crumb to eat on the snow covered ground and there were no flowers or leaves on the tree. It wondered what would become of it because it was getting cold and since there was nothing to eat, it would starve and die.

Question 2:

(I) Find in the poem The lines that mean the same as "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" (Shakespeare).

(II) What is your opinion of the ant's principles?

ANSWER:

(I) The lines in the poem that mean the same as "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" are 'But we ants never borrow; we ants never lend'.

(II) I agree with what the ant says first that one should save something for the future so that he does not need to borrow or lend. But I don't agree with the ant's principle what he told later. If he says he is a friend of cricket then he should also help the cricket at the time of distress. On the other hand I believe that a friend in need is a friend indeed.

Question 3:

The ant tells the cricket to "dance the winter away". Do you think the word 'dance' is appropriate here? If so, why?

ANSWER:

Yes, the word 'dance' seems quite appropriate and used in a sarcastic manner in these lines. The cricket had fun during the happy and pleasant months of summer. The ant tells him that he might as well have fun in the winter, without any food or shelter.

Question 4

(i) Which lines in the poem express the poet's comment?

(II) Write the comment in your own words.

ANSWER:

(I) The poet's comment is expressed in the last two lines-

"Folks call this a fable. I'll warrant it true"

"Some crickets have four legs and some have two"

(II) This comment by the poet means that this poem is indeed a fable as it had a moral behind it. The cricket did not have anything to eat during the winters because it did not bother to store food during summers.

But I think the story is true and educative. Some people live in the present only. They spend what they earn and make merry. But they regret their habits later on.