

Activity – I (Read and Respond)

Question 1.

What lesson does Ivan seek to learn from his brother's life?

Answer:

The lesson Ivan seeks to learn from his brother's life is to know how the hard and sour gooseberries become delicious to him.

Question 2.

Compare Aliokhin's first appearance in the story with that of Nicholai.

Answer:

When he sees him first Aliokhin was standing at the threshold. He was about 40, tall and stout. He had long hair. He looked more like a professor or a painter than a farmer. He was wearing a grimy white short and rope belt, and pants instead of trousers. His boots were covered with mud and straw. His nose and eyes were black with dust. Nicholai was 2 years younger to his brother Ivan. Nicholai was at the Exchequer Court when he was 19. He was not happy at the Exchequer. For years he was sitting in the same place, writing the same documents. He was thinking of only one thing – how to get back to the country and buy a small farm near the bank of a river or lake.

Question 3.

The story begins and ends in rain. What does the imagery convey to you?

Answer:

The imagery conveys to me a gloomy atmosphere. There is no joy and mirth.

Question 4.

Why do you think the story is titled Gooseberries?

Answer:

The story is titled 'Gooseberries' because life is very much like gooseberries. Gooseberries are sour and sweet. Similarly life too is sour (bitter) and sweet. Nicholai lives all his life like a miser and even marries an ugly widow to get money to buy the estate with a gooseberry bush. The state he bought does not have a gooseberry bush and so he plants some. Later he eats the gooseberries from the plants he had planted and looks pleased when he eats them. Gooseberries may be sweet for one, but sour for another. Life is like that. One man's food is another man's poison and one man's religion is another man's madness.

Question 5.

Identify the climax of the story.

Answer:

The climax of the story is when in the night Ivan watches his brother Nicholai going again and again to the plate of gooseberries and eating gooseberries. That night Ivan was able to understand he too had been content and happy. We don't have to wait for happiness.

Question 6.

Rain has an additional symbolic relevance in this story. Can you identify other symbols?

Answer:

The other symbols are, Gooseberries, six feet of land, the name Himalayskoe, the red-haired dog, soda & castor oil curing all diseases and the family sitting round a table having coffee.

Question 7.

Analyze Ivan's argument against happiness ('There is nothing sadder than the sight of a happy man').

Answer:

Ivan argument against happiness stems from the fact that he has no family. He says that nothing is more dreadful to see than the sight of a happy family, sitting round table, having tea. Everybody has his idea of happiness. But Ivan's idea of happiness seems to be peculiarly his own. I don't agree with him.

Question 8.

How does Chekhov develop his theme in the story? What are the techniques used? (story within the story, realism, irony, symbolism)

Answer:

Chekhov's theme in the story is finding happiness. Nicholai finds happiness in eating strawberries. He thinks he can make the peasants happy by giving them half a bucket of vodka. People pursue happiness in different ways. Some find happiness in eating, drinking and merrymaking. Some find happiness in strict ascetic life. Some find happiness in serving others and making sacrifices for them.

Chekhov develops his theme by using different techniques. There is a story within a story. Ivan and Bourkin are walking. It is raining and they take shelter in the farmhouse of Aliokhin. Then Ivan tells the story of his brother Nicholai, how he sought happiness. Chekhov uses realism in unfolding the story. The account of the life of Ivan and his brother Nicholai in the village after the death of their father is highly realistic. There is also realism in the description of Aliokhin and his farmhouse.

Irony is an important ingredient Chekhov has used. Nikolai eats gooseberry after gooseberry to feel happy and contented. We know how gooseberry is. Nikolai lived all his life like a miser, not eating and drinking properly, not dressing properly, to eat gooseberries, He even married an ugly widow to eat gooseberries!

Chekhov is a master in the use of symbolism. He has used the symbol of rain to great effect. It gives the entire story a sad and melancholic mood. The red-haired dog which looks like a pig is an excellent symbol. So is the symbol of the family sitting round the table enjoying their coffee. Both Nikolai and Ivan have their peculiar, even perverted, sense of happiness. It is a relevant question to ask whether our own sense of happiness is normal or something queer.

Activity – II (Review)

Question 1.

Based on the above points, attempt a review of Chekhov's 'Gooseberries' bearing in mind the following hints:

Read and recall what you have read and formulate your own observations.

- Theme/content
- Writing style/presentation
- Characters
- Depiction of landscape
- Symbolic relevance

Answer:

Chekhov's story 'Gooseberries' is essentially a satire on man's search for happiness. Here we see two brothers – Ivan and Nicholai – seeking to be happy. Ivan is a veterinary doctor and Nicholai is an official at the Exchequer. Nicholai is fed up with his job – sitting in the same place and writing out the same documents. His dreams were centred round a farmhouse with a garden, an orchard, a fishpond and above all a gooseberry bush. He lives like a miser to get his ideal place. He even marries an old ugly widow to fulfil his dream. In the end he buys an estate with a farmhouse but it had no orchard, no duck-pond and no gooseberry bush. He plants some gooseberry bushes in his new estate. His joy in life is going on eating the gooseberries his gooseberry bushes produce.

Checkhov has presented the story in a fine way, as a story inside another story. We are curious to know what happens to Nicholai after all his sacrifices. The characterization by Chekhov has been excellent. There are only 4 main characters in the story Ivan, Nicholai, Bourkin and Aliokhin. We are also told about Tchimsha Himalaysky, the father of Ivan and Nicholai. The characterization of Nicholai and Aliokhin stand out as superb.

Chekhov has presented the landscape in exquisite beauty. We see the endless farms and the windmills. We can see the dreamland of Nikolai – an estate with a farmhouse, a river nearby, garden, mill, mill-pond, garden-walls, flowers, fruits, nests, carp and ducklings in the pond. It is country side at its best.

Chekhov is a master in the use of symbol. The rain, gooseberries, six feet of land, the name Himalayskoe, the red-haired dog, soda & castor oil curing all diseases and the family sitting round a table having coffee, are all symbols. They make a powerful impact on the readers.

Activity – III (Write-up)

Question 1.

According to Chekhov, 'money, like vodka, plays queer tricks with man '. How far is this statement relevant in the present-day world? Prepare a write-up on the topic.

Answer:

in the present day world, the statement by Chekhov that money, like vodka, plays queer tricks with man' is highly relevant. When a person drinks vodka he feels that he can do anything, Alcohol gives even a weak man courage to speak out his mind. We often suppress our feelings because of fear. But once some vodka gets into us, our tongues become loose and we can say anything without any fear. The same is the case with money. Once people have money they think they can do anything and speak anything. In the present day world, there is a lot of corruption and so people with money can get away from punishment by bribing the authorities. Money, like vodka, intoxicates a person and gives him courage to do things he would not normally do. It is called Dutch courage.