

ONCE UPON A TIME

Toni Morrison

*Toni Morrison was the eighth woman and the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize (1993) in Literature. She also won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Her seventh and most recent novel, **Paradise** was published early in 1998. Her speech 'Once Upon a Time' wonderfully exhibits how the proper usage of language could bring about changes and big revolution in the world and more so the immediate surrounding. This speech makes the point that language should be living and vibrant. Narratives have not only been entertaining but also one of the principal ways of absorption of knowledge. There are anecdotes which bring out the theme through the most simple form of expression and language. The given speech is a fine example of this.*

A. Work in small groups and pairs and discuss the following:

- 1. How often did you listen to stories when you were a child?**
- 2. Who told you stories?**
- 3. How did those stories usually begin?**

ONCE UPON A TIME

“Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise.” Or an old man? A guru, perhaps, soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

“Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.”

In the version I know, the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people, she is both the law and its transgression. The honour she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighbourhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement.

One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says.

“Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.”

She does not answer, and the question is repeated. “Is the bird I am holding living or dead?” Still she does not answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their colour, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman’s silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally she speaks, and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

For parading their power and her helplessness, the young visitors are reprimanded, told they are responsible not only for the act of mockery but also for the small bundle of life sacrificed to achieve its aims. The blind woman shifts attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised.

Speculation on what (other than its own frail body) that bird in the hand might signify has always been attractive to me, but especially so now, thinking as I have been about work I do that has brought me to this company. So, I choose to read the bird as "language" and the woman as a "practiced writer".

B.1. Answer the following questions briefly:

1. How was the old woman ?
2. Is this folklore present in one culture or many?
3. Who is the father of that old woman?
4. Where does the old woman live?
5. How is her reputation for wisdom?
6. What is her position in the neighbourhood?
7. Why did some young people visit her?
8. What does the old woman know about those people?
9. For what are the young visitors reprimanded ?
10. What does 'bird' and 'woman' signify to the speaker?



“Once upon a time. . .” Visitors ask an old woman a question. Who are they, these children? What did they make of that encounter? What did they hear in those final words: “The bird is in your hands?” A sentence that gestures towards possibility, or one that drops a latch? Perhaps what the children heard was, “It is not my problem. I am old, female, black, blind. What wisdom I have now is in knowing I cannot help you. The future of language is yours.”

They stand there. Suppose nothing was in their hands. Suppose the visit was only a ruse, a trick to get to be spoken to, taken seriously as they have not been before. A chance to interrupt, to violate the adult world, its miasma of discourse about them.

“You, old woman, blessed with blindness, can speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation.

“Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company.

“Tell us about ships turned away from shorelines at Easter, placenta in a field. Tell us about a wagonload of slaves, how they sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable from the falling snow. How they knew from the hunch of the nearest shoulder that the next stop would be their last.

“The inn door opens: a girl and a boy step away from its light. They climb into, the wagon bed. The boy will have a gun in three years, but now he carries a lamp and a jug of warm cider. They pass it from mouth to mouth.

“The girl offers bread, pieces of meat and something more: a glance into the eyes of the one she serves. One helping for each man, two for each woman. And a look. They look back. The next stop will be their last. But not this one. This one is warmed.”

It's quiet again when the children finish speaking, until the woman breaks into the silence.

“Finally,” she says. “I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done - together.” (*adapted and edited*)

B. 2. Complete the sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied.

1. A that gestures towards possibility.
2. The future of is yours.
3. Language alone scariness of things with no names.
4. The boy will have in three years, but now he carries a lamp and They pass it from
5. I trust you with the that is not in your hands because you have

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

lore (n) : wisdom, scholarship, learning knowledge

soothing (adj) : pacifying, quick, calm

culture (n) : civilization

transgression (vt) : to violate, to pass beyond limit, the violation of a law

clairvoyant (n) : the faculty of seeing mentally what is happening, person having power of seeing in the mind either future event or thing

stern (n) : the rear part of a ship a boat, to find oneself faced by some danger

reprimanded (v.t.) : to rebuke for a fault

encounter (n) : a meeting in conflict

miasma (n) : unhealthy environment or influence

latch (n) : fastening for a door

C.1. LONG ANSWER 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. Do you think that language is crucial to a writer? Give any three reasons.
4. Quote a few lines from the text which highlight the plight of the woman and the depressed class?
5. Write a paragraph on a character, in this story, that has impressed you most.

C.2. DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in groups or pairs:

1. The art of story telling is dying down.
2. Stories have been a great source of information since time immemorial.

C.3. COMPOSITION

1. You received a prize for writing story. Prepare a speech to be delivered while accepting the prize.

2. You are Snigdha/ Amandeep. You are a student of the Govt. Secondary School, Ramgarhwa. You are the Secretary of the Cultural Society of your School. A competition on story is to be organised. Write a notice, informing the students about the date and venue of and eligibility for the competition.

D.1. WORD STUDY

Correct the spelling of the following words:

asserion	istrument	speculasion	moteev
riputasion	iach	shilence	vertion

D.2. Word Meaning

Match the words or phrases in column (A) with their meanings in column (B):

Column A

Column B

amusement	statement of account
version	pastime
violate	mental view
speculation	to break

D.3. Phrase

'Once upon a time' is a phrase used in the text. Find out more phrases from the text and use in sentence of your own.

E. GRAMMAR

Ex.1. Punctuation marks are essential in language composition. In class IX, you have already studied about a few punctuation marks.

Here some more punctuation marks are given for you. Note these marks carefully:

(1) ! = Note of Exclamation

(2) “ ” = Inverted commas

(3)) (= Bracket parenthesis

Now locate (identify) the punctuation marks from the passage given below:

Raman: Hello! How do you do?

Ali : Hello! I am fine, Raman. Well done! You have brought a laurel for the school.

Raman: Ali, I always remember your advice, perfection is essential for success in every walk of life. My grand father told me, “True devotion bears a delicious fruit, it means (true) result.”

Ex.2. Identify the punctuation marks in the sentence given below:

“Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.”

Now in the given passage use the punctuation marks to make meaningful sentences.

She does not answer and the question is repeated: is the bird I am holding living or dead still she does not answer she is blind and cannot see her visitors let alone what is in their hands.

F. ACTIVITY

1. Collect at least three stories in your local dialect, translate these stories into English and tell them in your class.

G. TRANSLATION

Translate into Hindi / your mother language:

One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability : her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says. "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead."
