

Ullswater

After Reading

Comprehension Check

Understanding the story

Decide whether the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.

Read from the beginning of the story to “...thick tongues of buffalo grass grew everywhere”.

1. The story takes place in England near a lake.
2. Ranjit is the narrator’s brother.
3. The narrator is Senaka’s uncle.
4. The narrator’s name is Victor.

Read from “I hadn’t seen Senaka for years...” to “His face flushed”.

5. The narrator had visited Senaka before he died.
6. It was the narrator’s custom to visit his family every summer.
7. Sonia is the narrator’s sister- in-law.
8. Senaka was an expert in Botany.

Read from “The wedding took place...” to “I really couldn’t understand it at the time”.

9. Sonia’s father was small and weak.
10. Senaka did not like his house at all.
11. Senaka was a true conservative.
12. The narrator and Senaka used to have long talks on marriage and politics.

Read from “Then you were born...” to “A couple of flies settled on the table”.

13. Senaka was happy that his son looked like him.
14. After his son’s birth Senaka liked his house so much that he never used to go out.
15. When the narrator visited Senaka he could smell alcohol in the air.
16. In 1967 Sonia and Senaka were still happily married.

Read from “It wasn’t the first time...” to “my whole body began to numb”.

17. The narrator and Senaka were used to sitting on the veranda staying in silence.
18. Senaka’s face was swollen.
19. Arrack is an alcoholic drink.
20. The Narrator hated his brother and told him so.
21. Senaka blamed his brother for their mother’s death.

Read from “I was so angry...” to the end of the story.

22. Senaka was drunk.
23. Senaka committed suicide
24. Ranjit never knew that his father had drinking problems.

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You are Senaka. Imagine he wrote a letter to his wife or son before dying. In the letter he explains the reasons for his drinking problems and his isolation from the world around him.

Before you start discuss with your class mates the following points:

How long has Senaka been drinking?

Why did he take up drinking?

The words in brackets will help you.

(self-esteem)

(unhappy marriage)

(loneliness)

(contrast with his brother/parents)

Why did he not ask for help?

Why was it hard for him to give up drinking?

Talk about the tone you can use in the letter and decide which tone to use:

loving

offended

angry

cold

detached

According to the tone you have chosen what expressions in your language would you use? Write a list. Use a dictionary or ask your teacher to help you find the corresponding English words.

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Very often parents interfere in their children's marriages. This is exactly the situation between Sonia and her father. Read the following extract from the story and then write a short dialogue between Sonia's father and Senaka. Sonia's father is putting pressure on Senaka to marry Sonia and to make her happy. He promises Senaka a beautiful house and money if Senaka agrees. Finally, act out the dialogue to the class.

Your grandfather, Sonia's father, said at the wedding, in front of us all: My daughter must have the best. I'll give you a house, a good start, but if you ever make her unhappy-he cocked a fat yellow finger at Senaka-I'll put a bullet in you myself, understand? And he might easily have done if he had lived long enough. He was an ox of a man.

Before writing the dialogue here are some points you can discuss in two groups. One group can take Sonia's father's side, the other Senaka's. Each group should take notes.

Here are some tips for the discussion.

What questions did Sonia's father ask Senaka?

The words in brackets will help you:

(family background)
(education)
(money)
(personal qualities)
(vices)
(promises)

What was Senaka's reaction?

What were Senaka's own questions?

What promises did he himself make?

Did Senaka accept the offers ?

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Sonia and Senaka split up. Imagine you were Sonia. Write a letter to a good friend of yours in which you complain about your husband's behaviour. Ask for advice.

Before writing the letter, make notes on Senaka's behaviour which could have annoyed Sonia.

Read the following extracts from the story:

He had his books,...and in any case did not care for company,...Sonia...said he was not well but it was impossible to do anything for him.

He became such a conservative...he preferred to sit in his garden and watch his flowers grow, or read his books of faraway places in the light of a yellow desk lamp and dream of another world.

He complained to your mother that not only was the house not really his own but everything in it seemed to belong, in its origin, to somebody else. The tables, the cupboards, the china, the crockery, even the bed they slept in had somebody's else's imprint on it...and everything came from your mother's side; ... even you- his baby son- had your mother's features, her family bounce.

After our parents passed away he just withdrew. Your mother told me he had become closed completely, hunched up. She said that when their eyes met it was no different from meeting the gaze of a stray cat. ...he retreated to his study and stayed with the door shut.

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Senaka is desperate so he has written the following letter to his brother, Victor. Write an answer giving your advice.

My dearest brother,
 I know it is a long time since we last saw each other. Besides we never really talked, but now I am telling you how desperate I am. Sonia has left me. I am very depressed. Drinking seems to be the only solution, since I am terribly lonely. I spend all my time alone in my study, reading my books and I never go out. I have no friends or any sort of social life. I just sit on my veranda drinking my life away. Please help me and tell me what to do.

Before you start, read the following excerpts from the story to get some ideas on how Victor would have answered: by offering his love and advice or reproaching his brother. Then write an answer to Senaka's letter revealing your feelings.

What's happened, Senaka? I asked. I wanted to capture some of the time we'd lost. Life was passing by too fast I wanted to say. Too fast for us to sit there saying nothing.

I said, Fine. I wanted to make some gesture of good will. I was willing-God knows I was willing then - even though I felt sick inside.

I wanted to reach him again so much. I came to help- what are we if we can't help each other-but anger was climbing up inside my throat. He had no right to shout at me like that, to talk like that. I felt all wired up inside.

What about your son? I asked. About you. I thought he must recognize some responsibility.

I wanted to smash the glass in my fist, hammer some sense into him, but I controlled myself and very carefully put the glass down on the table...I was so angry with him for making it so. For his drunkenness. For his hopelessness. I could not bear to stay a minute longer.

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Read the following information about drinking in Sri Lanka.
Discuss with a partner how drinking alcohol is considered in your country and in Sri Lanka. Make two different lists.

Alcohol in Sri Lanka

The main religions of Sri Lanka (Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism) actively discourage the consumption of alcohol. However, in Sri Lanka, particularly in urban areas, drinking is socially acceptable, largely because of the influence of the Portuguese, Dutch and British presence since the 16th century.

Common local drinks are arrack and toddy. Arrack is the most popular alcoholic beverage and is a strong liquor made from the sap of coconut palms. Toddy is a weaker drink, which is extracted by tapping flowers of coconut palmyrah and "kitul" and dates back to the days of the Sinhalese kings. Beer, wine, and other strong spirits such as whisky, gin and brandy are available. Some of the poorer people drink a cheaper illegal liquor called kassippu with very high alcohol content (around 50 per cent).

Since Independence in 1972 alcohol consumption has almost doubled, possibly due to the government requesting the production of legal types of liquor such as arrack, beer and whisky.

In 1994, there was an attempt to popularise beer drinking among Sri Lankans by reducing the price of beer to reduce hard liquor drinking by getting them to drink beer instead. However, what actually happened is that people who were used to hard liquor such as arrack, whisky and kassippu could not be persuaded to drink beer, while others who had not drunk alcohol previously started drinking beer.

In general, not many women drink. In the cities, some women will occasionally drink beer or wine. For a man, drinking at a bar, at home with friends or at a wedding reception is acceptable. The majority of Sri Lankans especially the Buddhists and Christians serve alcohol, especially whisky, brandy and arrack at wedding and homecoming parties. In the rural areas mainly kassippu and arrack are served to guests.

Write a paragraph on the similarities and differences.

Consider the following points:

Is drinking a social practice?

What are the positive and negative aspects of alcohol?

Where is drinking practiced in your country: at home, in public places, in restaurants with food?

Is it possible to buy alcohol in shops, department stores?

What about in Sri Lanka?

Is drinking alcohol against your religion? Which religions consider drinking to be immoral?

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Read the following excerpts from the story. How do you think Ranjit really feels about his father? What reasons do you think he might have for those feelings. Make notes and then discuss your ideas with a partner.

He said that lately he'd been feeling uncomfortable. He couldn't sleep at night. It was because of his father; he felt he knew so little about his father...and he couldn't stop thinking about him. What the hell happened Uncle? He shook his head trying to clear it. What happened to him in the end?

But what did my father really want? He asked. What the hell did he think he was doing?... Ranjit's voice was so harsh.

Surely he understood his father had turned into a drunk, that he had become ill, and that he had deliberately cut himself off? But Ranjit seemed to want me to exonerate him. Us.

Now write a dialogue between Ranjit and Senaka who have not seen each other for many years. They finally make up.

Start like this:

Ranjit: I could never forgive you for not caring for me. That's why I left and never came back.

Senaka: what do you mean, I never cared.

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Read the following excerpt from the story. It is about the love between Sonia and Senaka when they were young.

But instead in his mid-twenties he married your mother, Sonia. It was a love match. One of the first in town. While he was meant to be preparing for his examinations Senaka, unnoticed, had gone courting. It surprised everyone. We knew her as the daughter of a very wealthy fellow who lived on the other side of town and the marriage was seen as a coup. Everybody talked about it.

Write the conversation between Sonia and Senaka when Senaka courted her.

Before you start take notes about:

What affectionate names did Senaka call Sonia and Sonia Senaka?

What words would you use in your own language? Use your dictionary or ask your teacher to help you to find out the corresponding English word.

Where and how did Senaka invite Sonia for their first date?

What questions did they ask each other?

Did they make any promises of eternal love?

Did they talk about marriage on their first date?

What romantic things did Senaka say to Sonia?

What did he say he liked about her? And Sonia?

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Read the following excerpt from the text. Sonia and Senaka married because they loved each other.

It was a love match. One of the first in town.

Discuss the following points and take notes.

What does the narrator mean by “one of the first in town”?

Do you think he is referring to “arranged marriages” or marriages out of interest?

Are these kinds of marriages common in your country?

In which countries and cultures are they common?

Why are they common in certain cultures and not common in others?

Do you know anyone who married because they were forced to?

Do you know anyone who married for any reason other than love like Senaka and Sonia?

How do you think you would feel if your parents chose your husband/wife?

Finally, write your opinion on marriage. Contrast and compare how marriage is considered in your country with how it is considered in Asian cultures. Finally, say what the most important reason for getting married is, in your opinion.

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Further Reading

The author of the short story 'Ullswater', Romesh Gunsekera, has written many other short stories and has published a number of novels. He is also a poet.

Here is a poem by Romesh Gunsekera that has some links with the story 'Ullswater'. What parallels can you find?

CIRCLED BY CIRCE

After twenty years muzzled in North London
you tell me over a cup
of treasured Tangana tea, you have decided
you must now go back.

Back home to that repository of such
complicated images to find
a less constricting mask
and unthrottle
an old lion in your throat.

You kneel before a temporarily placed
music-centre; as the record spins
I listen and try to understand
how you imagine your future
will unravel from such a private past.

You have been heading for this announcement
over many years. Each time we met
your conversation grew more spiced
with images of gold sand, tamarind trees,
the cacophony of traffic - lorries, cars,
bullock carts, bicycles -
rising out of the deep roar of the sea
soothing life in a Wellawatte boarding house.

Have you found in old Galle Road
a histogram for the politics of development,
a place for the dry knowledge you extracted
from that heap of economics textbooks?
How quickly they invaded those bookshelves
that once encased
arm-loads of dog-eared poetry
and far-flung magic histories.

For twenty years you dug your heels
and watched the catkins' obstinate return.
You inscribed Keats, Marx, Paranavitana
on every inch of your eclectic skin
to come finally to such disillusion:
now you say you must measure your roots
and distance yourself
from an increasingly hostile climate.
It seems you must exchange
one mirror image for its reverse,
confound exile and pin your hopes
on a fragile memory
of things as they might have been.

Romesh Gunesequera