

A.B.M. College

English Core

I.A. & I.Com.

By Manish Prabhakar Singh

THE LAST LESSON



Born to a silk manufacturer in Nîmes, France, Alphonse Daudet didn't have the smoothest of starts. When Daudet was seventeen, his father lost all of his money, leaving Daudet without any easy educational or employment prospects. Daudet moved to Paris, where he joined his elder brother, to pursue writing, and published his first book of poems, *Les Amoureuses*, in 1858. During his early years in Paris, he was recruited to act as undersecretary to the Duke de Morny, a powerful minister under Napoleon III. When the Franco-Prussian war began in 1870, Daudet enlisted in the army. He continued writing throughout this time, publishing books such as *Letters from My Mill* (1869) and *The Nabob* (1877), as well plays, including *The Last Idol* (1862). His novel *Fromont the Younger and Risler the Elder* (1874) won an award from the French Academy, and as a result Daudet became an established fixture in the Paris literary scene. He would not live long, however. The symptoms of a venereal disease that he had picked up as a young man escalated with age, leading to an affliction of the spinal cord. He died in 1897, at the age of 57.

SUMMARY

'The last lesson' written by Alphonse Daudet narrates about the year 1870 when the Prussian forces under Bismarck attacked and captured France. The French districts of Alsace and Lorraine went into Prussian hands. The new Prussian rulers discontinued the teaching of French in the schools of these two districts. The French teachers were asked to leave. Now M. Hamel could no longer stay in his school. Still he gave lesson to his students with utmost devotion and sincerity as ever. One such student of M. Hamel, Franz who dreaded French class and M. Hamel's iron rod, came to the school that day thinking he would be punished as he had not learnt his lesson on participles. But on reaching school he found Hamel dressed in his fine Sunday clothes and the old people of the village sitting quietly on the back benches. It was due to an order from Berlin. That was the first day when he realized for the first time that how important French was for him, but it was his last lesson in French. The story depicts the pathos of the whole situation about how people feel when they don't learn their own language. It tells us about the significance of one's language in one's life for the very existence of a race and how important it is to safeguard it.

Gist of the lesson

Franz is afraid of going to school as he has not learnt participles.

He wants to enjoy beauty of nature. The bright sunshine, the birds chirruping in the woods, Prussian soldiers drilling but resisted.

Bulletin board: all bad news, lost battles, the drafts and orders of the commanding officers: wondered what it could be now

The changes he noticed in the school.

Instead of noisy classrooms everything was as quiet as Sunday morning

The teacher does not scold him and told him very kindly to go to his seat

The teacher dressed in his Sunday best.

Villagers occupying the last benches

To pay tribute to M. Hamel for his 40 years of sincere service and also to express their solidarity with France.

Hamel making the announcement that that would be the last French lesson; realizes that, that was what was put up on the bulletin board.

Franz realizes that he does not know his own mother tongue

Regretted why he had not taken his lessons seriously.

Also realizes the reason why teacher was dressed in his Sunday best and villagers sitting at the back.

Hamel realizes that all three, the children, the parents and he himself are to be blamed for losing respect and regard for the mother tongue.

Always keep the mother tongue close to your heart as it is the key to the prison of slavery.

Atmosphere in class: teacher teaching sincerely and patiently, students and others studying with utmost sincerity.

Franz wonders sarcastically if Prussians could force pigeons to coo in German.

Hamel overcome with emotions could not speak and wrote on the black board "Long Live France".

Major Characters

Franz

Franz is the young French student at a school in Alsace-Lorraine, France who is the story's first-person narrator. The dramatic tension of the story seems as though it is going to be the result of friction with his teacher because the tale begins with Franz anxious preparing for school knowing he is unprepared for his teacher's grammar lesson on participles. After getting to school, the tension turns out to be far worse than a dangling participle.

Mr. Hamel

Mr. Hamel is Franz's teacher and schoolmaster, the man whose intent to lure Franz into the mysterious world of French participles has seized the young man with dread. But when he gets to school, Franz quickly learns that his not having studied or being prepared for the questions his teacher have overnight become the problems of another world. The war with the Prussians has just resulted in the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine into Prussian control. It turns out that today is not just Mr. Hamel's last day on the job, it is also his last day in the region, having been ordered to leave what is now Prussian territory. Even more distressing: it is the last day that Franz will be required to learn French.

Hauser

Hauser is an older gentleman Franz recognizes from the village. He is surprised to see the old man sitting on the benches in the back of the schoolroom alongside the also unexpected sight of several other adults include the former mayor and former postmaster. By the end of the story, Hauser is in tears as he helps the younger students learn their letters using his old French language primer.

Theme

The Last Lesson revolves around the language and its importance to the citizens of a country. It is the duty of every citizen to safeguard the language as it connects with the person's identity. Another important aspect is "Chauvinism" i.e. a devotion for or against someone or something. If the language is of the ruling class, we notice "Linguistic Chauvinism". Language is like a cultural identity and it defines the people. If a country loses its own language, people lose their own identity. The story also focuses on the importance of mother tongue. Language is the one which gives us our respect, identity and freedom.

Question and Answers

Q1. The people in this story suddenly realize how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?

A. When the village men realize that their mother tongue, French will no longer be taught to them, they realize its importance. Suddenly, they develop an inclination towards learning.

They attend the last lesson of French, bring their old, torn primers to learn the language which shows their eagerness. They regret putting off learning French to the next day. Now, finally, the last lesson has arrived, and they cannot read their own language. They are ashamed of themselves and realize that the Germans have overpowered them due to their lack of knowing their own language.

Q2. Franz thinks, “Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?” What could this mean?

A. Franz is disheartened when he comes to know that he can no longer learn his language – French. Their district has been captured by Germany and now German will be taught to them. Franz feels that mother tongue comes to a person naturally, he is born with it and no one can snatch it away.

Just like the pigeons make the ‘coo’ sound, irrespective of the country from which they are, similarly, human beings also communicate in their mother tongue. As the Germans are trying to impose their language on the French, so similarly, Franz feels that they will teach the pigeons also to ‘coo’ in German language. He has given this example to highlight his point that language is a natural mode of communication and it cannot be imposed.

Question 2 : Why did Franz not want to go to school that day?

Answer : Franz did not want to go to school that day as he had not prepared his lesson on participles. His French teacher would certainly scold him for this. So, Franz wanted to avoid going to school.

Question 3 : What did Franz wonder about when he entered the class that day?

Answer : When Franz entered class that day, he was expecting a scolding from M Hamel he spoke very kindly and asked him to sit. Franz also wondered at the presence of senior villagers occupying back benches of the class.

Question 4 : Why did M Hamel write ‘Vive La France!’ on the backboard?

Answer : M Hamel wrote ‘Vive La France!’ on the backboard to show his love for his country as well as for the French language. In addition, he was displaying his resistance to the German occupation of France.

Question 5 : “We have all got a great deal to reproach ourselves with,” said M Hamel. Comment.

Answer : M Hamel said this as most of the people of Alsace could neither speak nor write French. The parents of students preferred to put them to work to earn money and M Hamel himself did not give much importance to learning as it demanded.

Question 6 : How did M Hamel display his love for the French language?

Answer : M Hamel showed his love for the French language by telling the students that the French language was the most beautiful language in the world – the clearest and the most logical.

Question 7 : What was the bulletin board news that caused a change in the school?

Answer : A news had been put on the bulletin board stating that only German should be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine from the next day.

Question 8 : Whom did M Hamel blame for Franz's inability to answer his question?

Answer : M Hamel blamed the habit of people of Alsace of putting off learning for tomorrow and not sending their children to school regularly. He also blamed himself for neglect of learning of boys like Franz.

Question 9 : What was unusual about M Hamel's dress on his last day in school?

Answer : M Hamel had put on his ceremonial clothes on his last day in the school. He was wearing a beautiful green coat, a frilled shirt, and a little black embroidered silk cap.

Question 10 : What tempted Franz to stay away from school?

Answer : Franz feared a scolding at school as he had not prepared his lesson on participles. Besides, the warm, bright weather, the chirping of birds and the sight of the marching Prussian soldiers also tempted him to stay away from school.

Question 11 : "What a thunderclap these words were to me!" (Franz). What were those words and what was their effect on Franz?

Answer : M Hamel told his students that it was their last French lesson as an order had come from Berlin that henceforth only German was to be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. This announcement seemed to be thunderclap to Franz as he was surprised and shocked on hearing them.