



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F75

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Tell Me a Story

By Rabindranath Tagore

As soon as the child learns to speak, he says: "Tell me a story."

Grandmother begins: "Once upon a time, a prince and his friend, the minister's son ..."

She is stopped by the schoolmaster, who says: "Three times four makes twelve."

Well-wishers go on dinning in the child's ears: "Three times four make twelve; this is a fact, while the prince is fiction; therefore ..."

It fails to impress the child, for his mind has flown away to an unmapped land where the prince has killed a demon; and no arithmetic has the wings to fly there.

The well-wishers shake their heads and say: "Spoilt, absolutely spoilt; the rod is the only remedy."

Grandmother has been put to silence by the school-master. But one storyteller takes the place of another. There is no end to them. The well-wishers repeat in vain: "Those stories are not recorded in history. They are false."

From primary to higher school, from school to college, the attempt goes on to reform the boy; but nothing can stop his demand: "Tell me a story."

All over the world, in every home, stories pile up from year to year, in writing or by word of mouth, and outweigh every other heritage of man.

The well-wishers have never cared to think clearly over one point: that, to compose stories has been a hobby of the Creator Himself. Unless you shake this habit out of the Creator, you cannot shake it out of mankind.

Once upon a time, in His busy workshop, the Creator began to build out of the elements. The universe was then a vaporous mass. Rocks and metals were laid layer upon layer. If you had seen the Creator on that day, you would not have thought that there was any trace of a childmind in Him; whatever He then did is what is called “substantial.”

Then came the beginnings of life. Grass grew, trees sprang up, and there came birds and beasts and fishes. Some built nests. Others raced over the earth and propagated their species. Others hid under the surface of water.

Ages passed. At last, one day the Creator made man. Up to that time He had been partly a scientist and partly an architect; now He became a literary artist.

He began to unfold the human soul through fiction. Animals ate, slept, brought up their young. But man’s life moved through story materials — through whirlpools formed by the clash between passion and passion, between individual and society, mind and flesh, desire and denial. As a river is a running stream of water, so is man a running stream of fiction. When two people meet the inevitable question is, “What news? What happened then?” The answers have woven a network covering the Earth. They are the story of Life, the real history of man.

History and story combine to make our world. To man the history of Asoka and Akbar is not the only reality; equally real is to him the story of the prince who crossed the seven oceans in search of the priceless jewel. To man a figure of the myths is as real as a figure of history. The point is, not which is the more reliable fact, but which is the more enjoyable fiction.

Man is a work of art. In his making the stress has been laid neither on the mechanical nor on the moral, but on the imaginative. Man’s well-wishers try to

screen this truth, but the truth blazes up and burns the screen. At last, in dismay, schoolmasters and man's well-wishers try to bring about terms of peace between morality and fiction. But the two meet only to hack at each other, and the pile of waste mounts up in heaps.

Questions:

Question 1: What is the first thing the child says as soon as he learns to speak?

Question 2: Who does the grandmother begin telling a story about?

Question 3: What fact does the schoolmaster interrupt with?

Question 4: According to the well-wishers, why should the child prefer "three times four makes twelve" over the prince story?

Question 5: Where does the child's mind fly to when he hears about the prince?

Question 6: What do the well-wishers conclude about the child who keeps asking for stories?

Question 7: What continues unabated from primary school to college despite all efforts to reform the boy?

Question 8: What does Tagore say the Creator Himself has as a hobby?

Question 9: In what role does the Creator change when He makes man, according to the essay?

Question 10: What does Tagore say man fundamentally is, in terms of how he was made?

Answers:

Answer 1: "Tell me a story."

Answer 2: A prince and his friend, the minister's son.

Answer 3: Three times four makes twelve.

Answer 4: Because it is a fact, while the prince (and stories) are fiction.

Answer 5: To an unmapped land where the prince has killed a demon.

Answer 6: That he is spoilt (absolutely spoilt), and the rod is the only remedy.

Answer 7: The demand: "Tell me a story."

Answer 8: To compose stories (storytelling / creating fiction).

Answer 9: A literary artist (who unfolds the human soul through fiction).

Answer 10: A work of art, with the stress laid on the imaginative (rather than the mechanical or moral).

Vocabulary Questions:

Question 1: What does the word "dinning" mean in the sentence: "Well-wishers go on dinning in the child's ears: 'Three times four make twelve; this is a fact...'"?

Question 2: In the phrase "his mind has flown away to an unmapped land," what does "unmapped" mean here?

Question 3: What does "fiction" mean as Tagore uses it repeatedly, for example in "the prince is fiction" and "unfold the human soul through fiction"?

Question 4: What does the word "propagated" mean in the sentence: "Others raced over the earth and propagated their species"?

Question 5: In the final paragraph, what does "hack at each other" mean when it says morality and fiction "meet only to hack at each other"?

Vocabulary Answers:

Answer 1: "Dinning" means persistently and noisily repeating something (like hammering or forcing an idea into someone's ears through constant, insistent repetition).

Answer 2: "Unmapped" means not marked or charted on any map; it refers to an imaginary, unknown, or fantastical place that exists only in the child's imagination and cannot be found in the real, measured world.

Answer 3: "Fiction" here means invented stories, imaginative narratives, or creative tales (as opposed to factual history or science). Tagore uses it positively to describe enjoyable, soul-enriching storytelling and myths, not negatively as mere lies.

Answer 4: "Propagated" means reproduced, multiplied, or spread their kind — in this context, it refers to animals having offspring and continuing their species.

Answer 5: "Hack at each other" means to attack or strike violently and repeatedly at one another (like chopping with an axe). It describes how morality and fiction clash destructively instead of finding harmony, resulting in conflict and waste.