

## THE ARTIST

Shiga Naoya

*SHIGA NAOYA (1883-1971) is a celebrated Japanese short story writer of the twentieth century. He wrote very sensitively about his people and their culture. 'The Artist' unfurls before us the world of a talented Japanese boy, Seibei. It shows how the adult world often causes damage to such talents.*



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

1. Everyone has a hobby of one's own. What is your hobby?
2. Several people are passionately attached to a particular thing or idea. Does it help to be passionate?
3. Do you think that spending your time on things other than studies is a wastage of time?

## THE ARTIST

- 1 Seibei's parents knew that he often went out to buy himself **gourds**. He got them for a few **sen** and soon had a sizeable collection. When he came home, he would first bore a neat hole in the top of the gourd and extract the seeds. Next he applied tea-leaves to get rid of the unpleasant gourd smell. He then fetched the **sake** which he had saved up from the **dregs** in his father's cup and carefully polished the surface.
- 2 Seibei was **passionately** interested in gourds. One day as he was strolling along the beach, absorbed in his favourite subject, he was startled by an unusual sight: he caught a glimpse of the bald, elongated head of an old man hurrying out of one of the huts by the beach. 'What a splendid gourd!' thought Seibei. The old man disappeared

from sight, wagging his bald pine **pate**. Only then did Seibei realize his mistake and he stood there laughing loudly to himself. He laughed all the way home.

3 Whenever he passed a grocery, a curio-shop, a **confectioner's** or in fact any place that sold gourds, he stood for minutes on end, his eyes glued to the window **appraising** the precious fruit.

4 Seibei was twelve years old and still at primary school. After class, instead of playing with the other children, he usually wandered about the town looking for gourds. Then in the evening he would sit cross-legged in the corner of the living-room working on his newly acquired fruit. When he had finished treating it, he poured in a little sake, inserted a cork stopper which he had fashioned himself, wrapped it in a towel, put this in a tin especially kept for the purpose and finally placed the whole thing in the charcoal footwarmer. Then he went to bed.

5 As soon as he woke the next morning, he would open the tin and examine the gourd. The skin would be thoroughly damp from the overnight treatment. Seibei would gaze adoringly at his treasure before tying a string round the middle and hanging it in the sun to dry. Then he set out for school.

6 Seibei lived in a harbour town. Although it was officially a city, one could walk from one end to the other in a matter of twenty minutes. Seibei was always wandering about the streets and had soon come to know every place that sold gourds and to recognise almost every gourd on the market.

7 He did not care much about the old, **gnarled**, peculiarly-formed gourds usually favoured by collectors. The type that appealed to Seibei was even and **symmetrical**.

8 'That youngster of yours only seems to like the ordinary-looking ones,' said a friend of his father, who had come to call. He pointed at the boy, who was sitting in the corner busily polishing a plain, round gourd.

9 'Fancy a lad spending his time playing around like that with gourds!' said his father giving Seibei a **disgusted** look.

10 'See here, Seibei my lad,' said the friend, 'there's no use just collecting lots of those things. It's not the quantity that counts, you know. What you want to do is to find one or two really unusual ones.'

11 'I prefer this kind,' said Seibei and let the matter drop.

12 Seibei's father and his friend started talking about gourds.

13 'Remember that Bakin gourd they had at the agricultural show last spring?' said his father. 'It was a real beauty, wasn't it?'

14 'Yes, I remember. That big, long one ...'

- 15 As Seibei listened to their conversation, he was laughing inwardly. The Bakin gourd had made quite a stir at the time, but when he had gone to see it (having no idea, of course, who Bakin might be) he had found it rather a stupid-looking object and had walked out of the show.
- 16 'I didn't think so much of it,' interrupted Seibei, 'It's just a clumsy great thing.'
- 17 His father opened his eyes wide in surprise and anger.
- 18 'What's that?' he shouted. 'When you don't know what you're talking about, you'd better shut up!'
- Seibei did not say another word.

**B.1.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the story:**

- i. Seibei was passionately interested in .....
- ii. Seibei laughed all the way home because .....
- iii. Seibei was ..... old and at ..... school.
- iv. Seibei did not appreciate Baken gourd because.....
- v. Seibei was now .....in his picture .

**B.1. 2. Answer the following questions briefly:**

- 1) Where did Seibei live?
- 2) Which type of gourd did Seibei like?
- 3) Why did the conversation of his father and his friend make Seibei laugh inwardly?
- 4) Why did Seibei's father shout at him?
- 5) Why did Seibei wander about the town?

- 19 One day when he was walking along an unfamiliar back-street, he came upon an old woman with a fruit-stall. She was selling dried persimmons and oranges; on the shutters of the house behind the stall, she had hung a large cluster of gourds.
- 20 'Can I have a look?' said Seibei and immediately ran behind the stall and began examining the gourds. Suddenly he caught sight of one which was about five inches long and at first sight looked quite commonplace. Something about it made Seibei's heart beat faster.
- 21 'How much is this one?' he asked, panting out the words.
- 22 'Well,' said the old woman, 'since you're just a lad, I'll let you have it for ten sen.'
- 23 'In that case,' said Seibei urgently, 'please hold it for me, won't you?' I'll be right back with the money.'

24 He dashed home and in no time at all was back at the stall. He bought the gourd and took it home.

25 From that time on, he was never separated from his new gourd. He even took it along to school and used to polish it under his desk in class-time. It was not long before he was caught at this by one of the teachers, who was particularly **incensed** because it happened to take place in an **ethics** class.

26 The teacher came from another part of Japan and found it most offensive that children should indulge in such **effeminate** pastimes as collecting gourds. He never minded having his students sing Naniwabushi ballads, however **raucously**. Now, when he found Seibei silently polishing his gourd, his voice trembled with fury.

27 'You're an idiot!' he shouted. 'There's absolutely no future for a boy like you.' Then and there he **confiscated** the gourd on which Seibei had spent so many long hours of work. Seibei stared straight ahead and did not cry.

28 When he got home, Seibei's face was pale. Without a word, he put his feet on the warmer and sat looking blankly at the wall.

29 After a while, the teacher arrived. As Seibei's father was not yet home from the carpenter's shop where he worked, the teacher directed his attack on Seibei's mother.

30 'This sort of thing is the responsibility of the family,' he said in a stern voice. 'It is the duty of you parents to see that such things don't happen.' In an agony of embarrassment, Seibei's mother muttered some apology.

31 Meanwhile, Seibei was trying to make himself as **inconspicuous** as possible in the corner. Terrified, he glanced up at his **vindictive** teacher and at the wall directly behind, where a whole row of fully prepared gourds was hanging. What would happen if the teacher caught sight of them?

32 Trembling inside, he waited for the worst, but at length the man exhausted his **rhetoric** and stamped angrily out of the house. Seibei heaved a sigh of relief.

33 Seibei's mother was sobbing softly. In a querulous **whine**, she began to scold him, and in the midst of this, Seibei's father returned from his shop. As soon as he heard what had happened, he **grabbed** his son by the collar and gave him a sound beating. 'You're no good!' he **bawled** at him. 'You'll never get anywhere in the world, the way you're carrying on. I've a good mind to throw you out into the street where you belong!' The gourds on the wall caught his attention. Without a word, he fetched his hammer and systematically smashed them to pieces, one after the other. Seibei turned pale but said nothing.

34 The next day the teacher gave Seibei's confiscated gourd to an old **porter** who worked in the school. 'Here, take this,' he said, as if handing over some unclean



object. The porter took the gourd home with him and hung it on the wall of his small, sooty room.

35 About two months later, the porter, finding himself even more hard-pressed for money than usual, decided to take the gourd to a local curio-shop to see if he could get a few coppers for it. The curio-dealer examined the gourd carefully, then assuming an uninterested tone handed it back to the porter, saying, 'I might give you five yen for it.'

36 The porter was **astounded**, but being quite an **astute** old man, replied coolly, 'I certainly wouldn't part with it for that.' The dealer immediately raised his offer to ten yen, but the porter was still **adamant**.

37 In the end the curio-dealer had to pay fifty yen for the gourd. The porter left the shop, delighted at his luck. It wasn't often that the teachers gave one a free gift equivalent to a year's wages! He was so clever as not to mention the matter to anyone, and neither Seibei nor the teacher ever heard what had happened to the gourd. Yes, the porter was clever, but he was not clever enough: little did he imagine that this same gourd would be passed on by the curio-dealer to a wealthy collector in the district for 600 yen.

38 Seibei is now **engrossed** in his pictures. He no longer feels any bitterness either towards the teacher, or towards his father who smashed all his precious gourds to pieces.

39 Yet gradually his father has begun to scold him for painting pictures.

**B.2.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the story:**

- i. The old woman asked ..... for the gourd.
- ii. The teacher was particularly angry because .....
- iii. Seibei's father worked at .....
- iv. Seibei's father fetched his hammer and .....
- v. The curio-dealer sold the confiscated gourd to .....

**B.2.2. Answer the following questions briefly :**

- 1) What made Seibei's heart beat faster?
- 2) Which is called effeminate pastime in the story?
- 3) How did Seibei's father react to the teacher's complaint?
- 4) How much did the curio-dealer pay for the confiscated gourd?
- 5) What did Seibei do after he was forced to give up collecting gourds?

## GLOSSARY AND NOTES

- gourds** (n): large fleshy fruits of a trailing plant  
**sen** (n): Japanese currency  
**sake** (n): a Japanese drink made from rice  
**dregs** (n): the last few drops left in a glass  
**passionately** (adv): keenly, fervently  
**pate** (n): head  
**confectioner's** (n): sweet seller's  
**appraising** (v): assessing, reviewing  
**gnarled** (adj): twisted or wrinkled  
**symmetrical** (adj): well-shaped  
**disgusted** (adj): shocked, stunned  
**clumsy** (adj): awkward  
**persimmons** (n): yellow fruits, date plum  
**incensed** (adj): angry, infuriated  
**ethics** (n): the study of morality  
**effeminate** (adj): womanish  
**raucously** (adv): harshly, roughly  
**confiscated** (v): took away, seized  
**inconspicuous** (adj): not easily noticed, ordinary  
**vindictive** (adj): determined to punish  
**rhetoric** (n): forceful speech  
**whine** (n): moan  
**grabbed** (v): took hold of, seized  
**bawled** (v): cried, roared  
**porter** (n): attendant  
**yen** (n): units of currency in Japan  
**astounded** (adj): amazed  
**astute** (adj): clever, smart  
**adamant** (adj): unyielding, resolute  
**engrossed** (v): absorbed, engaged

### C. 1. Long Answer Questions

1. Who was Seibei? What was his hobby?
2. Pick out instances from the story to show that Seibei was passionate towards gourd collection.
3. Explain the views of Seibei's father about him and his hobby.

4. Why did Seibei's teacher become angry with him? Was his anger justified?
5. Seibei's teacher held his parents responsible for Seibei's mistake. Do you agree with the teacher? Explain.
6. Describe in your own words the attitude and reaction of the teacher to Seibei's passion.
7. Why and how did Seibei change his hobby? Describe in your own words.
8. Do you have similar experiences? Describe in your own words.
9. Sketch the character of Seibei as an artist.

### C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. An artist can change his tools but not his mind
2. Hobbies should have some limits.

### C. 3. COMPOSITION

1. Write a letter to your friend describing your favourite pastime.
2. Write a short essay in about 150 words on the 'Role of teacher in the life of the student'.

### D. WORD STUDY

#### D.1. Dictionary Use

**Ex. 1.** Correct the spelling of the following words:

embaras	glimpes	enterupt
symetrical	emidiatly	persinoms
favrite	intrest	confesner

**Ex. 2.** Look up a dictionary and write two synonyms of each of the following words:

passion	absorbed	startled
mistake	precious	clumsy

#### D.2. Word-formation

Read the following sentence carefully:

*In an agony of **embarrassment**, Seibei's mother muttered some apology.*

Mark how **embarrassment**, a noun, is formed by adding '-ment' to 'embarrass', a verb.

Make nouns from the verbs given below by adding '-ment' to them

amend	amuse	bewilder	improvel	invest
judge	rabble	punish	astonish	govern

### D.3. Word-meaning

**Ex 1.** Find from the lesson words the meanings of which have been given in Column A. The last part of each word is given in Column B:

A	B
Japanese currency	.....n
Well shaped	.....cal
A yellow fruit	.....mon
Study of morality	.....ics
Not easily noticed	.....ous
absorbed	.....ed

### D. 4. Phrases

**Ex.1.** Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Use these phrases in sentences of your own:

get rid of	at all	instead of	look for
set out	part with	a sigh of	

### E. GRAMMAR

**Ex.1.** Read the following sentences, taken from the lesson, carefully:

- Seibei's parents knew...*
- He laughed all the way home.*

These sentences can be made more emphatic by adding question tags to them:

- Seibei's parents knew, didn't they?*
- He laughed all the way home, didn't he?*

**Add question tags to the sentences given below:**

- I am right, .....?
- Mamta is not wrong, .....?
- You are sure, .....?
- They were not well, .....?
- Rimjhim has broken the glass, .....?
- They have played well, .....?
- Please do me a favour, .....?
- Don't go there, .....?
- Don't make a noise, .....?
- Please shut the door, .....?

**F. ACTIVITY**

**Ex. 1.** Make a survey of your friends and find out their hobbies and their passionate involvements.

**Ex.2.** 'Yen' is the currency of Japan. Find out the currency of the following countries :

England,	Finland,	Spain,	France,	Nigeria,
Nepal,	Chile,	Myanmar,	Sri Lanka,	
Afghanistan,	Saudi Arabia,	China.		

