

The Legend of the Northland - Phoebe Cary

Answers to NCERT Questions

THINKING ABOUT THE POEM

1. Which country or countries do you think “the Northland refers to?

Ans: Northland is described as a land somewhere in the north of the earth. It is a cold country where people move on sledges drawn by reindeers. People wear heavy fur clothes to keep themselves warm.

2. What did Saint Peter ask the old lady for? What was the lady’s reaction?

Ans: Saint Peter asked for a piece of cake to satiate his hunger as it had been a long day preaching the gospels to humanity. The little woman did not refuse, but each time she baked a cake for him, she found it was too small to eat but too big to give away for free. She could not make herself give him even a wafer thin cake.

3. How did he punish her?

Ans: He punished her by transforming her into a woodpecker. Like a woodpecker, she would have to make her own house and go in search of the scanty food she needed by boring in the hard wood of trees.

4. How does a woodpecker get her food?

Ans: A woodpecker gets her food by boring/pecking in the hard barks of the trees.

5. Do you think that the old lady would have been so ungenerous if she had known who Saint Peter really was? What would she have done?

Ans: Definitely not, she would not have behaved in such a selfish and greedy way. Instead, she would have pleased him and served him most generously with as many cakes as he wanted. Her behaviour was inhuman because of her ignorance.

6. Is this a true story? Which part of this poem do you feel is the most important?

Ans: It is a legend as humans cannot be changed to birds or vice versa. The main purpose of the story is to teach and ingrain in the minds of the young, the value of generosity and charity without any discrimination.

7. What is a legend? Why is this poem called a legend?

Ans: A legend is an old traditional story, usually with a moral teaching. The story is a narration for children. The poet in the very onset says that she doesn’t believe this tale to be true. This poem is called a legend because it teaches the purpose and value of generosity and charity to all fellow beings.

8. Write a story of ‘A Legend of the Northland’ in about ten sentences.

Ans: Once, Saint Peter stopped by a little woman’s cottage as he was very tired and hungry, after a long day of preaching to humanity. The woman was baking cakes and placing them in the shelf. He requested the lady to give him a single piece of cake. She was not ready to part with any from her stock, as they seemed too big to be given in charity. She therefore, started to prepare cakes, but each time she was to give it to him, she thought it was too big. So, every time she took smaller balls of dough to bake the cake. Finally, when she prepared a wafer-thin cake, she could not bear to part with that too, as it also seemed too big to give for free. This act of the woman angered the saint and in turn, he cursed her. She was punished to be a woodpecker, who would have to struggle to secure food to remain alive.

II. Answer the following questions:

1. Let’s look at the words at the end of the second and fourth lines, viz, ‘snows’and ‘clothes’ ‘true ‘ and ‘you’, ‘below’ and ‘know’. We find that snow rhymes with clothes, true with you and below with know. Find more such rhyming words.

Ans: The rhyming words in the poem are given below, in the 2nd and 4th lines of each stanza.

Stanza		
1	few	through
2	snows	clothes
3	true	you
4	below	know
5	earth	hearth
6	done	one
7	lay	away
8	flat	that
9	myself	shelf
10	faint	saint
11	form	warm
12	food	wood
13	same	flame

2. Go to the local library or talk to older persons in your locality and find legends in your own language. Tell the class these legends.

Ans:

The Garland of Manjula

There is a banyan tree a few metres away from the Guruvayoor temple on the Eastern part of the temple. A young Varasyar (a caste that worked within temples) girl would make a garland every day and offer it to the Lord in the night. The Chief Priest would adorn the idol with it. One day, she was late and the "Sri Koil was closed. Manjula stood near the banyan tree crying and Poonthanam who passed by told her "Guruvayurappan knows what's in your heart, keep the garland on the banyan tree and he will take it. The following morning, when the Chief Priest began to remove the used flowers, one garland stuck to the idol and would not come off. When Poonthanam saw this, he called out to the Lord saying, "That's Manjula's Garland, let it also fall. The garland fell and the devotees were awestruck and started chanting the Lord's name. From that day, the banyan tree is called Manjula.

Additional Questions

Extract Based Questions

Read the following extracts carefully and answer the questions that follow: (4 Marks each)

1. Away, away in the Northland

Where the hours of the day are few,
And the nights are so long in winter
That they cannot sleep them through;
Where they harness the swift reindeer
To the sledges, when it snows;
And the children look like bear's cubs
In their funny, furry clothes:

- (a)** Where is the setting of the poem?
- (b)** How are the children dressed?
- (c)** What do the people do when it snows?
- (d)** Which festival is reindeer associated with?

Ans: (a) The setting of the poem is in the Northern Highlands, the northern-most part of Scotland. The poet calls the place Northland.

(b) The children are in funny furry clothes to protect against the extreme cold. They appear to look like bear cubs.

(c) They like to harness the fast moving reindeers to the sledge and move out in the snow.

(d) The reindeer is associated with Christmas and Santa Claus.

2. He came to the door of a cottage,

In travelling round the earth,
Where a little woman was making cakes,
And baking them on the hearth;
And being faint with fasting,
For the day was almost done,
He asked her, from her store of cakes,
To give him a single one.

(a) Who came to the cottage door?

(b) What was the little woman doing?

(c) Why did the man come to the door of the woman?

(d) Where had the man come from?

Ans: (a) Saint Peter came to the cottage door.

(b) The little woman was baking cakes.

(c) The man came with the hope of getting a piece of cake as he was weak, tired and hungry.

(d) The man had been travelling round the earth preaching sermons.

3. For she said, "My cakes that seem too small

When I eat of them myself
Are yet too large to give away.
So she put them on the shelf.
Then good Saint Peter grew angry,
For he was hungry and faint;
And surely such a woman
Was enough to provoke a saint.

(a) Why did the woman not give the cake to the man?

(b) How did the Saint react to the woman's attitude?

(c) "My cakes that seem too small. What does this mean?"

(d) "Such a woman. What kind of a woman is she?"

Ans: (a) She reasoned that the cake seemed small for her to eat but too big to give away for free, so she kept the cake in the shelf.

(b) He was very angry because she was selfish and uncharitable.

(c) “My cakes that seem too small means that when it was for herself, the cakes however big, seemed small.

(d) The woman was not empathising with the man’s condition. Alternately, she was trying to be a stingy person.

4. And he said, “You are far too selfish

To dwell in a human form,
To have both food and shelter,
And fire to keep you warm.
Now, you shall build as the birds do,
And shall get your scanty food
By boring, and boring, and boring,
All day in the hard, dry wood..

(a) What comforts did the woman enjoy?

(b) What curse did the saint cast on her?

(c) Do you feel she deserved such a fate?

(d) Why is the word ‘boring’ repeated three times?

Ans: (a) She enjoyed being a human being and had food and shelter and fire to keep her warm from the freezing cold.

(b) The saint cursed that henceforth she would have to make her house like a bird does and make holes in the dry hard wood all day in search of food.

(c) Yes, I feel she should have been charitable as the tired and hungry traveller had only wanted one piece of cake.

(d) The word ‘boring’ is repeated to emphasise that she would have to work hard and struggle to get little food because despite making the Saint wait unendingly, she did not have the courtesy to give him a cake.

5. Then up she went through the chimney,

Never speaking a word,
And out of the top flew a woodpecker,
For she was changed to a bird.
She had a scarlet cap on her head,
And that was left the same;
But all the rest of her clothes were burned
Black as a coal in the flame.

- (a) Who is 'she' and how did she respond to the saint's words?
- (b) Mention a simile in the above lines.
- (c) What message does the poet want to convey to its readers?
- (d) What happened to the lady?

Ans: (a) She is the little woman and she did not say a word as she was dumbstruck by his words.

(b) The simile in the above lines – 'black as a coal'.

(c) The underlying message is that we should be charitable (and not greedy and selfish) to anyone in need, irrespective of his status.

(d) The lady was transformed into a bird. Her scarf remained as the red colour on the neck of the bird, and the rest of her clothes were burnt to ashes.

Short Answer Questions (30–40 words: 2 Marks each)

1. Why does the poet say the hours of the day are few?

Ans: The legend is of the Northlanders and the place is Northland. Being close to the north pole, the climate is very cold. Besides, the days are very short and the nights are long. The poet therefore, says that the hours for the day are few.

2. Why does the poet want to tell its readers the story when she says 'I don't believe it is true'?

Ans: The poet acknowledges the story may not be true but chooses to narrate the story as she felt that it has an important message for all, particularly for the young children. The message the legend imparts is that we should not be selfish or greedy, but be helpful and empathetic with a person who comes to your doorstep requesting for food or aid.

3. 'And surely such a woman was enough to provoke a Saint.' Who was the woman and how did she provoke the Saint?

Ans: The little woman who was baking cakes in her cottage was selfish and greedy. She had plenty of cakes in the shelf and was baking more on the hearth. The saint was tired and hungry after a long day of preaching and travelling. Her hesitation to part with one single piece of cake, provoked him to anger.

4. What was the impact of the curse on the lady?

Ans: The little woman was too shocked to react to the curse of being transformed into a bird. She rushed up to the chimney, and in the process, every thing on her body got

burnt and charred in the flames. Her red cap got transformed into the plume of the woodpecker, and like a bird, she flew out of the chimney into the woods.

5. Do you feel the story is a folklore of the Northland?

Ans: This is indeed a folklore of the Northland as the poet says in the last stanza, that every country school boy has seen her in the woods. Earlier in the second and the third stanza too, the poet informed that the children were told this curious story.

Long Answer Questions (100–150 words: 8 Marks each)

1. Greed is a quality which God does not like. Discuss it in context of the poem.

Ans: Man is one creation of God who never reaches a state of contentment. He keeps wanting more and more. His limit for satiation is unmeasurable. Our hands are always with the palm facing upwards to receive more and more, and never downwards to give more and more. This is the quality of man that has been described in 'The Legend of Northland'.

The baker woman is hesitant to part with the goodies she is baking, and accepts herself, the difficulty she faces while giving. The cake that appears small on her plate, seems very big on the plate meant for serving to another. Unconsciously, she does accept her flaw, but does not make attempts to correct this flaw. We get transformed into inhuman characters in our madness to satisfy each and every greed/desire of ours. Eventually, just as the baker woman was cursed, we too will have to suffer for our misdeeds.

2. What do you understand by dramatic narrative?

Ans: Poems with dramatic narrative are a form of poetry that has a plot and tells a story. Poems can vary in length from short or long to tell a complex story. Many times, these poems use the voices of characters and narrators and usually the story is written in metered verse. Dramatic narrative is a specific style of writing in which the poet chooses to share only the action of a scene and not the internal thoughts or emotions of a character. Some people refer to this as the "fly-on-the-wall, where the narrator is a fly observing the events but not commenting upon them.

This poem is a dramatic narrative, as the poet is narrating to the readers of her poem, the legend that had been passed on to her by her elders from the far cold Northland. She is not putting across her thoughts or feelings of acceptance or refusal to be part of the legend. A moral story is narrated perhaps for the common good of all.

(Meter is a unit of rhythm in poetry, the pattern of the beats. It is also called a foot. Each foot has a certain number of syllables in it, usually two or three syllables.)

Self- Assessment Test

Extract Based Questions

Read the following extracts carefully and answer the questions that follow.

1. They tell them a curious story —

I don't believe 'tis true;

and yet you may learn a lesson

If I tell the tale to you.

Once, when the good Saint Peter

Lived in the world below,

And walked about it, preaching,

Just as he did, you know,

- (a) Who are 'they' and what do they tell?
- (b) Who does not believe the stories?
- (c) Where did the saint come from and why?
- (d) What can we learn from the story?

2. Therefore she kneaded another,

And still a smaller one;

But it looked, when she turned it over,

As large as the first had done.

Then she took a tiny scrap of dough,

And rolled and rolled it flat;

And baked it thin as a wafer —

But she couldn't part with that.

- (a) Who is 'she' in the above lines?
 - (b) What did she bake and for whom?
 - (c) What does the expression 'she rolled and rolled' convey in the extract?
 - (d) Do you think the little woman was generous? Which statement in the extract tells the sort of woman she was?
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Short Answer Questions

1. 'I don't believe 'tis' true; and yet you may learn a lesson'. What does the poet want to tell and why?
 2. What is the theme of the ballad, 'The Legend of the Northland'?
 3. Was the woman wrong? Justify your answer.
 4. Why did the little woman not say anything when she was cursed by Saint Peter?
 5. Why was Saint Peter tired and hungry?
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Long Answer Questions

1. Rewrite the poem, 'The Legend of the Northland' as a short story. Highlight the conversation between Saint Peter and the little woman as written dialogues.
2. Is it right for anyone to curse another or wish ill for another as shown in 'The Legend of the Northland?' Express your opinion in the matter.
3. John was a little boy.....lived in an orphanage.....youngest child.....Complete the story and give it a suitable title. Take references from the poem, "The Legend of the Northland.