

Unit One: Education and Life

Lesson 1

The Parrot's Tale

A. "Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach a person to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." This ancient proverb explains the long lasting effects of education in our lives. Work with a partner. Discuss the following questions with your friend sitting next to you.

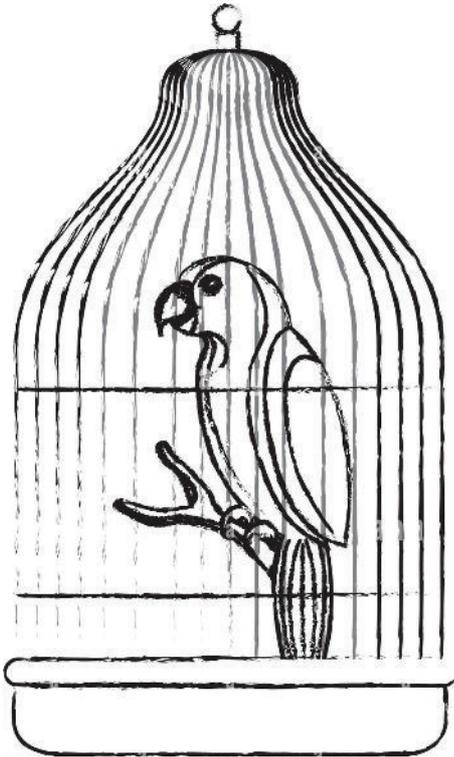
- What, according to you, is the ultimate goal of education?
- Who and what do you associate with education?

B. Here is a short story on education. Read the story and answer the questions that follow.

The Parrot's Tale

Rabindranath Tagore

(Translated by Kaiser Haq)



1.

Once upon a time there lived a bird. It was unlettered. It sang but couldn't recite a word of scripture. It hopped and it flew but lacked all sense of manners.

The King said, "Such a bird is of no use. Yet it devours fruit from the forest, bringing down the profits of fruiterers in the royal market."

He summoned the Minister and commanded, "Educate the bird!"

2.

The task of educating the bird fell on the King's nephews, his sisters' sons.

The learned men of the court deliberated long. They pondered the reasons behind the ignorance of the creature in question. The conclusion: the bird's nest made of straw and twigs could not hold much knowledge. Therefore, the first thing needed was a proper cage.

The royal scholars received handsome fees and happily went home.

3.

A goldsmith set to work on a gilded cage. It turned out to be of such exquisite workmanship that people from far and near crowded round for a look. Some said, "This is education par excellence." Others said, "Even if it learns nothing, it has got the cage. What a lucky bird."

The goldsmith was delighted to get a bagful of money as reward and went home at once.

A teacher came to give lessons to the bird. He took a pinch of snuff and declared, "This isn't a matter of just a few texts."

One of the royal nephews sent for scribes. They made multiple copies of various texts until there was a veritable mountain. "Bravo!" exclaimed those who saw it, "There is no room for any more knowledge."

The scribes loaded their wages onto bullocks and merrily headed home. They would never again want for anything.

The nephews were constantly busy looking after the expensive cage. Repairs were always under way. Anyone who saw the endless dusting, wiping and polishing had to agree that there was "marked improvement".

A large maintenance crew was needed, and more personnel to supervise them. They all got handsome monthly salaries, which they saved in their wooden chests. Even their cousins came to live with them in cushioned comfort.

4.

The world is short of many things but not detractors. They said, "The cage looks better no doubt, but has anyone taken notice of the bird?"

This was reported to the King. He said to a nephew, "What's this I hear?"

"Your Majesty," replied the nephew, "If you wish to hear the truth, summon the goldsmiths, the scholars, the scribes, the maintenance crew and their supervisors. Those who haven't got a share of the royal bounty are resorting to slander."

Everything became clear to the King and he rewarded his nephew with a gold chain.

5.

The King wished to see for himself at what an awesome pace the bird's schooling was going on. One day he turned up at the schoolroom with his friends, counselors and courtiers. At once the musicians at the gate struck up on their many wind and percussion instruments. The teachers shook their sacred tufts of hair as they loudly chanted mantras, and all the workmen, labourers, goldsmiths, scribes and their numerous cousins raised slogans in praise of the King.



A nephew commented, “Your Majesty can see how things are going on.”

“Astonishing!” replied the King, “the din isn’t negligible.”

“Not only the noise,” said the nephew. “The meaning behind it isn’t negligible either.”

The King was pleased and walked out of the gate to mount his elephant when one of the fault-finders, who had been lurking behind the bushes, shouted, “Have you seen the bird, Your Majesty?”

The King was startled. He said, “There! I’d forgotten about it. We haven’t seen the bird.”

He went back and said to the teacher, “We must see the manner in which you conduct the lessons.”

A demonstration followed. It pleased the King no end. The manner was so advanced that the bird was hardly visible. It seemed not at all necessary to see the bird. The King was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. Inside the cage there was neither any grain nor a drop of water. Only reams of texts were being torn and the pieces of paper thrust into the bird’s mouth with the point of a quill. Not only had the singing stopped, there wasn’t even scope for screeching. It was thrilling to watch.

This time, as the King mounted the elephant he ordered the officer entrusted with twisting the ears of mischief-makers to deal with the fault-finder.

6.

Predictably, the bird weakened with every passing day, and lay half-dead. The tutors considered it a good sign. Still, out of innate bad habit it would look out at the morning light and flutter its wings in a reprehensible manner. In fact, on some days it would try to cut the wires of the cage with its feeble beak.

“What impudence!” the Inspector of Police commented.

Then the blacksmith arrived with his furnace, bellows and hammer and anvil. What thunderous hammering began then. A chain was fastened on the bird’s foot and its wings were trimmed.

The King’s brothers-in-law looked greatly annoyed as they shook their heads and said, “It’s not just that the birds in this kingdom are stupid, they are also ungrateful.”

Then the teachers, armed with quill in one hand and lance in the other, gave a memorable demonstration of teaching.

The blacksmith’s trade flourished to such an extent that gold ornaments bedecked his wife’s body, and the Police Inspector’s alertness earned him a medal.

7.
 The bird died. When it died was not known. Thanks to the godforsaken detractors the rumour went round, “The bird is dead.”
 The King called his nephew and said, “What is this I hear?”
 “Your Majesty,” the nephew replied, “the bird’s education has been completed.”
 The King asked, “Does it hop?”
 “God forbid,” said the nephew.
 “Does it still fly?”
 “No.”
 “Does it still sing?”
 “No.”
 “Does it screech if it isn’t fed?”
 “No.”
 “Bring it to me so that I can see it,” said the King.
 The bird came. Along with it came the Inspector, a guard, a cavalry officer. The King pressed the bird; it made no sound, not even a squeak. Only its stomach let out the rustling noise of dry pieces of paper.
 Outside, the green shoots of early spring sighed in the southerly breeze, filling the sky above the budding forest trees with wistful melancholy.

C. You can listen to an audio version of the story using this QR code :



D. Read the following words/phrases taken from the story and write their contextual meanings in your own language in the blank spaces.

1. scriptures

2. educate the bird

3. pinch of snuff

4. veritable mountain

9. maintenance crew

10. sacred tufts of hair

11. hardly visible

12. mischief-maker



5. dusting, wiping and polishing

13. furnace, bellows and hammer and anvil

6. marked improvement

14. hop

7. cushioned comfort

15. green shoots of early spring

8. What is that I hear?

16. wistful melancholy

E . The following columns have some characters from the story. How would you like to portray them? Use the words in the box. You can also use your own words.

ambitious unrealistic dreamer theorist stupid
clever hypocritical over enthusiastic honest brave
likes flattery courageous believes in hype go with the flow

The King	Nephews	Teachers	Fault finders	Commoners



F . Read the texts below defining three types of literary work and decide what type of work “The Parrot’s Tale” is.

Satire: a genre of literature (and sometimes graphic and performing arts) in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government, or society itself into improvement.

Tragedy: a play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character.

Comedy: a kind of literary work that is amusing and satirical or humorous in tone. Generally it has a happy ending.

G . Read the questions below and write short answers.

1. Why did the King comment – “Such a bird is of no use?”
2. What, according to the scholars, was the reason of the bird’s ignorance and what measures were taken to educate it?
3. How did people react to see the bird caged?
4. Who were the ultimate beneficiaries of the parrot training?
5. Who were the King’s real friends? How were they rewarded?
6. How does the story reflect on the theme of education?
7. Do you like the story? Why/Why not?

H . Project work: Work in groups. Suppose you are the pundits who have come to teach the bird, what would you do? Why?

Or,

Suppose you are the King. What would you do after seeing the bird’s tragic end?