

The Last Lesson

About the Author — Alphonse Daudet

Born — 13 May 1840 Nîmes, France

Died — 16 December 1897 (Aged 57) Paris, France

Occupation — Novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet

Literary movement — Naturalism.

Daudet was born in Nîmes, France. His family, on both sides, belonged to the bourgeoisie. His father, Vincent Daudet, was a silk manufacturer — a man dogged through life by misfortune and failure. Alphonse, amid much tragedy, had a depressing boyhood. In 1856 he left Lyon, where his schooldays had been mainly spent, and began his as a school teacher at Alès, Uzd, in south of France. The position proved to be intolerable and Daudet said later that for months after ~~to~~ leaving Alès he would wake with horrors, thinking he was friend of Cervantes.

Famous Lit Literary Works :

- Les Amoureux (1858, first published work)
- Tartarin de Tarascon (1872, English: Tartarin of Tarascon, 1896)
- Jack (1876)
- Le Nabab (1877)

Setting -

The present story is set during the days of Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), in which France was defeated by Prussia led by Otto von Bismarck. At that time Prussia consisted of Germany, Poland, and some parts of Austria.

Theme -

- (i) Language imposition and loyalty towards one's own language.
- (ii) The role of language in preserving identity, culture, and tradition.
- (iii) Ability of language to arouse patriotism.
- (iv) Value of something is realised when it is snatched away.
- (v) Linguistic ~~showism~~ chauvinism.

Q1. What changes did the order from Berlin cause in school that day?

A1. The order from Berlin caused many changes in the school that day. The entire school seemed strange and solemn. The old villagers were sitting on the back benches of the classroom quietly to ~~for~~ thank M. Hamel for his forty years of faithful service and for showing their respect for their country. M. Hamel was dressed in his best beautiful green coat, his frilled shirt, and the little black silk embroidered cap, though it was not an inspection or prize day. The order from Berlin had also brought a sense of repentance for those who in spite of having time hadn't learned ~~the~~ French properly.

Q. 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 order had come from Berlin that henceforth only German would be taught in schools, people realised that ~~if~~ it was the last day to learn their mother tongue. To show their affection for the language, many elderly people came to attend school, occupying the last benches, which had usually remained vacant earlier. Franz regretted not having ~~learn't~~ learnt the ~~pr~~ participles, when M. Hamel suddenly apprised them of the fact that they would become a laughing stock before

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the Germans. Their language was their identity, the 'key' to their prison. The strongest evidence of how important their language was can be M. Hamel's mesmerising last lesson. Everyone was extremely attentive. Franz too found the lesson quite easy to understand, whereas earlier he had found the French class very difficult.

Q. Franz thinks, "Well they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" What could this mean?

Aj. This shows a Frenchman's typical reaction to the imposition of learning German, the language of the conqueror. Being deprived of their mother tongue would mean cutting off all bonds to their motherland. Teaching the pigeons to sing in German indicate how far can the Germans go in their attempts of linguistic ~~showism~~ chauvinism.

Franz in his innocent imagination, wonders if it is really possible to insalve the minds of people. He is sarcastic towards the critical attitude of Germans. Pigeons are a symbol of nature. Franz indicates that just as it is impossible to insalve the spirit of the pigeons and take away their right to 'coo' naturally, similarly, no one can take the right of the French people to think and speak in their own language.

Q. "When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison." Can you think of examples in history where a conquered people had their language taken away from them or had a language imposed on them?

A. There are many examples in history where a conquered people had their language taken away from them or had a language imposed on them. Some of them are: The German tribes conquered the native Brythonic people of what is now England and imposed their culture and language upon them; When Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States as a consequence of the Spanish-American War, its population used the Spanish language, but the Americans imposed English as the co-official language; And finally, when India was under British rule, ~~they~~ Britishers imposed their culture and language to major parts of India.

Q. What happens to a linguistic minority in a state? How do you think they can keep their language alive? For example: Punjabis in Bangalore, Tamilians in Mumbai, Kannadigas in Delhi or Gujaratis in Kolkata.

A. A linguistic minority in a state cannot exercise linguistic skills like the natives of the state. At the workplace and educational organisation, English/Hindi or any other link language helps a lot to cope with the work and learning process. But, when it comes to understanding the basic norms of society, in order to socialise, they face linguistic barriers during communication.

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To keep their language alive, the linguistic minorities can form small common communities where they can celebrate their festivals as per their traditions. They can also continue to speak their native language in their homes and make their children learn the language. They should also try to visit their native places at regular intervals to stay close to their roots.

Q. Is it possible to carry pride in one's language too far? Do you know ~~was~~ what 'linguistic chauvinism' means?

A. 'Linguistic chauvinism' means an aggressive and unreasonable belief that ~~or~~ your own language is better than all others. This shows an excessive or prejudiced support for one's own language. Sometimes pride in one's own language goes too far and the linguistic enthusiasts can be easily identified by their extreme zeal for the preservation and spread of their language. In their enthusiasm, love, and support for their own language, they tend to forget that other languages too have their own merits, long history of art, culture and literature behind them. Instead of bringing unity and winning over others as friends, having excessive pride in one's own language creates ill-will and disintegration.