Vikram’s English Academy (ICSE)

**ABOU BEN ADHEM**

**About the poet:**

James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784 – 1859) famously known as Leigh Hunt was an English poet, writer and essayist. He was born in London and educated at Christ’s Hospital (known as the Bluecoat School). He had to cut short his education due to a speech impediment. He would keep writing verses in that phase. His poems were published in 1801 under the title of *Juvenilia* introducing him to the literary and theatre society. Leigh then began to write for newspapers and also published a volume of theatre criticism and critical essays on authors. In 1816, Leigh made a mark in English Literature with the publication of *Story of Rimini* in 1818 he published a collection of poems ‘Foliage’, followed by Hero and Leander, and Bacchus and Ariadne in 1819. Some of Leigh Hunt’s most popular poems are ‘Jenny Kiss’d Me ‘, ‘Abou Ben Adhem’, and the ‘Angel’.

The poem ‘Abou Ben Adhem’ clearly brings out the second great commandment ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ through the central character. Abou Ben Adhem is the anglicized name of an ascetic Sufi Saint, Ibrahim Ibn Adhem, He was the King of Balkhi (Afghanistan) who later renounced his throne and chose asceticism. His life closely echoes the life of Gautam Buddha. He was known for his countless acts of righteousness and his humble lifestyle. He gave a lot of importance to stillness and meditation, which were the most important prerequisites for asceticism.

**About the poem:**

One night, Abou Ben Adhem, woke up from a peaceful sleep and saw an unusual sight. He saw an angel in the moonlight that had filtered in his room. The angel looked like a blooming white lily and the presence of the angel brightened the room. The angel was writing something in a book of gold. Abou asked the angel what he was writing in the book. Raising his head, the angel answered that it was writing the names of those who loved the Lord. Abou then asked if his name was in the list. When the angel said that his name was not in the list, Abou calmly and humbly requested the angel to write his name as the one who loves his fellow men. The angel wrote something and vanished. It returned the next night with a dazzling light and showed the names whom the love of God had blessed. To Abou’s surprise, his name appeared on top of the list. Through this simple narration, the poet brings out the fact God loves those who love their fellow beings.

**Glossary:**

tribe – class or race, here it refers to people like Abou Ben Adhem

deep – undisturbed

bloom – blossom, flourish

exceeding – excessive, in a great measure

presence – (here) the angel in the room

vision – (here) the sight of the angel in the room

accord – harmony

nay – (archaic) no

low – in a soft, humble tone

cheerly – (archaic) happily (now ‘cheerily’)

pray – request

thou – (archaic) you

thee – (archaic) you

vanished – disappeared

wakening light – very bright light

writest – (archaic) ‘write’

blest – (archaic) ‘blessed’

lo – behold, see

led – (here) on top of the list, first in the list

**Questions and Answers:**

1. **What happened one night? What did Abou Ben Adhem see?**

Ans: One night when Abou Ben Adhem was in deep and peaceful sleep, he was suddenly awakened. He saw that moonlight had filled his room and an angel appeared in the bright light and was writing something in a golden book.

1. **Where did Abou Ben Adhem see the angel? What was the angel doing?**

Ans: Abou Ben Adhem saw the angel in his room which at that moment was filled with moonlight. The angel was writing something in a book of gold.

1. **What has the poet compared the angel to? Why?**

Ans: The moonlight which filtered into the room made the it bright and the angel standing in the white light in its white robe made it look like a lily blooming in the brightness of the moonlight. The poet has thus compared the angel to a blooming lily.

1. **What does the ‘book of gold’ symbolize?**

Ans: The book belongs to the angel who is writing the names of all the people who love the Lord. It is a divine book and therefore its pages or leaves are of gold. Thus the ‘book of gold’ symbolizes Godliness or divinity.

1. **What does the poet mean by ‘may his tribe increase’? Why does he say so?**

Ans: Abou Ben Adhem was a pious human being who loved his fellow beings. He was the epitome of goodness and righteousness. Thus, in the above line the poet wishes that people like Abou Ben Adhem should increase in this world which is otherwise full of selfish and wicked people.

1. **What kind of a dream was Abou Ben Adhem in the midst of? Why did he get such a dream?**

Ans: Abou Ben Adhem was in the midst of a peaceful dream. He was a pious person who had renounced his kingly status and walked the path of service to humanity. Such a person is spiritually very evolved and is always calm and full of peace. Thus, his dreams were also peaceful.

1. **Was Abou Ben Adhem frightened to see the angel? Why?**

Ans: Abou Ben Adhem was not at all frightened to see the angel. Abou was a pious and holy man, who believed in not only loving God but also loving his fellow beings. He selflessly served people. Such human beings are always at peace and not afraid of anything. Even on seeing the angel, Abou was at peace and thus not afraid of the angel.

1. **What did Abou Ben Adhem ask the angel? What answer did the angel give?**

Ans: Abou Ben Adhem asked the angel what it was writing in the golden book. The angel replied that it was writing the names of people who loved the Lord.

1. **When Abou Ben Adhem heard what the angel was writing, what did he ask it? What was the angel’s answer?**

Ans: When Abou asked the angel what it was writing in the golden book, the angel replied that it was writing the name of the people who loved God. Abou then asked whether his name was there in that list.

1. **How did Abou Ben Adhem react when he heard the angel’s answer? What does this tell us about him?**

Ans: In spite of his name not being in the list of those who loved the Lord, Abou did not get upset or annoyed. On the contrary, he was very calm and humbly requested the angel to write his name in the list of those who loved their fellowmen. This time his tone was even lower than earlier.

1. **What did he request the angel to do?**

Ans: When Abou learned that his name was not in the list of the people who loved the Lord, he requested the angel to write his name in the list of those who loved their fellow beings.

1. **What did the angel do after Abou Ben Adhem made a request?**

Ans: After Abou Ben Adhem requested the angel to write his name in the list of people who loved their fellow beings, the angel wrote something in the golden book and vanished.

1. **When did the angel appear again? What did it do? What surprise did Abou get?**

Ans: The angel appeared in Abous room the next night. The angel showed the names of whom God had blessed. Abou saw that this time his name was above all the other names.

1. **Where was Abou’s name now? Why was it in that position? What lesson is learnt from this?**

Ans: The next day the angel appeared again and this time showed the names of those whom God had blessed. Abou’s name was now above all the other names in the list. God loves those who love others and Abou loved and served his fellow beings. Thus, his name appeared on the top most position of that list.

15. **What message does the poem convey?**

Ans: The poem clearly brings out the second great commandment ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’. Through the simple story, the poet tells us what it means to love God. People generally believe that performing various religious rituals was the way to express their love for the Lord. In reality, we must first learn to love and serve our fellow beings. Only a life lived in the service of mankind is worth living and the best way to express our love to God is by loving others, who are also His creation.

**16. What kind of a person was Abou Ben Adhem? Describe his character with examples from the poem.**

Ans: Abou Ben Adhem, originally a king of Balkh, had renounced his kingdom and gave up his life of luxury to lead a simple life devoted to the service of his fellow beings. He had attained a great level of spirituality and was at peace with himself. This can be clearly seen that he was not afraid at the sight of the angel. When he heard that his name was not in the list of the people who loved God, he did not get angry or upset. This shows that he was very humble. His love for people was true and selfless and therefore his name appeared on top of the list of people whom God had loved and blessed.

**17. Identify an example of Simile from the poem and give reasons.**

Ans: The line ‘making it rich, and like a lily in bloom’ is a Simile. Here there is a direct comparison between two unlike objects ‘the angel’ and ‘a lily’ using the word ‘like’.

**18. Identify the figure of speech in the following line from the poem. ‘Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace.’**

Ans: The above line is an Alliteration as the sound ‘d’ is repeated.

**19. Identify the archaic words from the poem and give their meaning.**

Ans. The following are the archaic words and their meanings: writest- writes , thou – you , thee- you, blest – blessed