

## FLAMINGO

### THE LAST LESSON - ALPHONSE DAUDET

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alphonse Daudet was born in Nimes on May 13, 1840. He is considered one of the most iconic names of French literature, and all his novels have their roots in his life experiences, from which he would only at times break away for sudden incursions into the realms of fantasy.

Following the sudden financial ruin of his father in 1857, the young, impoverished Daudet was forced to seek work in a school at Alès, in the south of France, where he spent six unhappy months, later described in his semi-autobiographical novel *Le Petit Chose* (“The Little Thing”). In his unhappiness, he joined his equally poor brother in Paris and tried to support himself by writing.

During the Franco-German War, Daudet fled from Paris. His novel *Les Aventures prodigieuses de Tartarin de Tarascon* (1872) (“The Prodigious Adventures of Tartarin de Tarascon”) was initially not well received, but its hero was later widely celebrated as a humorous and adventurous caricature. His next novel, *Fromont jeune et Risler aîné* (1874) (“Fromont the Younger and Risler the Elder”), won an award from the French Academy, and for a few years, Daudet enjoyed prosperity and fame.

In his last years, Daudet suffered from an agonizing illness of the spinal cord, which he painstakingly described in *La Doulou* (“In the Land of Pain”), posthumously published in 1930. He died suddenly in Paris on December 16, 1897.

#### INTRODUCTION

‘The last lesson’ stresses on the importance of education and the necessity to respect and learn one's own language. This story draws our attention to the unfair practice of linguistic chauvinism. It refers to an unreasonable pride in one's own language while disregarding all the other languages as inferior.

#### BACKGROUND OF THE STORY

The story, ‘The Last Lesson’ has been set in the background of the Franco-Prussian war that was fought in 1870- 71 between Prussia and France. The Prussians captured the districts of Alsace and Lorraine.

New orders were issued according to which German language was to be taught in place of French in these two districts.

## **SUMMARY OF THE STORY**

The narration of this story is by a French boy, Franz. Franz is a lazy boy. However, in spite of his laziness, Franz likes to play and is of a sensitive nature. Furthermore, Franz hates his teacher M. Hamel in his school and has no interest in studying French.

An order has come from Berlin after taking over the districts of Alsace and Lorraine in France that the German language rather than the French should be taught in the schools there. Furthermore, it is the school French teacher M. Hamel's last day. This teacher has been working there for forty years.

Moreover, the teacher has feelings of patriotism. He is also full of nostalgia and grief. The village men also attend his 'last lesson' so as to honour and respect him. The village is regretting and is sad that they didn't learn their mother tongue in their childhood.

Franz receives a big shock when he learns that this is his last lesson in French. He is shocked because he does not know French. Furthermore, on learning about the last lesson, a sudden interest arises in him for learning French. Moreover, he pays careful attention and learns everything taught on this last day.

Instantly, he develops a liking for the teacher M. Hamel. His feelings of hatred for him suddenly came to an end. Moreover, Franz develops respect for the hard work and sincerity of his teacher. Franz is sad and ashamed for being unable to recite his lesson.

Hamel explains that they all are at fault for lacking eagerness to learn. Furthermore, he also includes himself in this fault. He blames himself for lack of sincerity in teaching them.

There is a reflection of his patriotism in his praise for the French language. He says that the French language is the most logical and beautiful language in the world. It seems that M. Hamel got emotional on this occasion. Furthermore, he asks the class to guard their language. He says that being close to one's language is a way to escape the clutches of slavery. This language will assist them in attaining freedom from the Germans. The people realize the significance of their mother tongue. Moreover, they feel the reason for their defeat is illiteracy.

Franz feels that it is impossible to remove one's language from a person. This is because it is something that is natural to a person. This means that no matter how hard the opposition may try, they will fail to remove one's language.

## **MAIN POINTS**

The story covers the times when French districts of Alsace and Lorraine were taken over by Prussia. The language German was imposed on French people. People were deeply shattered. They realized what they had lost.

### **Franz notices the changes around him and in the school:**

- ❖ It was a bright day; birds were chirping and the Prussian soldiers were drilling
- ❖ A crowd was gathered around the bulletin board
- ❖ School was unusually quiet- No sound of desks opening
  - ❖ No Sound of lessons repeated
  - ❖ No Sound of rapping of teacher's ruler
- ❖ Mr. Hamel didn't scold him
- ❖ Mr. Hamel was wearing his Sunday dress -green coat, frilled shirt and black silk hat
- ❖ The backbenches were occupied by the adults of the village-Hauser, postmaster and others
- ❖ Mr. Hamel announced about that being the last lesson in French

### **Franz's reaction to the last lesson in French:**

- ❖ He was shocked.
- ❖ He realized his deficiency in the language and wished that he had not wasted his time.
- ❖ He repented wasting his time in fruitless activities (chasing bird's eggs, sliding on the saar)
- ❖ He appreciated the efforts of Mr. Hamel and accepted him with all his faults
- ❖ He suddenly wanted to impress Mr. Hamel with his knowledge in French
- ❖ He understood why the villagers had come to the school
- ❖ To thank the Master for his services • To show solidarity for the country that no longer was theirs
- ❖ To express their repentance for not attending school and making themselves proficient in their language

Mr. Hamel laments and reflects upon the reasons for the students' deficiency in the language

- ❖ The Germans will laugh at their inability to speak their language
- ❖ This is all because of their habit of postponing learning to tomorrow
- ❖ It's too late to make amends that is there is no time to makeup for the lost time
- ❖ They are all to blame for the situation • Parents preferred sending them to work at farms than to school
- ❖ He himself sent them to water the plants whenever he wanted to go fishing, he declared a holiday.

### **Theme**

- ❖ The story beautifully highlights the human tendency to postpone learning of things for one feels that there is plenty of time to do so. One never knows when the doomsday will dawn and bring an end to all our plans, hopes and aspirations.
- ❖ The natives of Alsace realize their folly of not giving importance to the study of French in their school days. So, they become victims of Linguistic Chauvinism with the acquisition of their districts by Prussia.
- ❖ The story also brings to light the brutality of war which makes man insensitive to human feelings and sentiments.

### EXTRACT BASED QUESTIONS:

1. Reading the bulletin, called after me, —Don't go so fast, bub; you'll get to your school in plenty of time! "I thought he was making fun of me and reached M. Hamel's little garden all out of breath.

A. Who was reading the bulletin & with whom?

- (i) M. Hamel with his pupils
- (ii) Mr. Hauser with the former postmaster
- (iii) Mr. Watcher with his apprentice
- (iv) Franz alone

B. Identify the tone in which the speaker said the words, — "*Don't go so fast, bub; you'll get to your school in plenty of time!*"?

- (i) sarcastic
- (ii) humorous
- (iii) depressive
- (iv) cheerful

C. Choose the most appropriate option with reference to the following statements

Statement 1. The speaker was out of breath when he reached M Hamel's garden.

Statement 2. He was being chased by a ferocious dog.

- (i) Both the statements are true
- (ii) Statement 1 is true, statement 2 is wrong
- (iii) Neither of the statements is true
- (iv) Statement 1 is wrong, statement 2 is right

D. The speaker was in a hurry to ....

- (i) read the bulletin board
- (ii) to escape from a ferocious dog
- (iii) to water the garden of his teacher, M Hamel
- (iv) to reach his school

2. *Usually, when school began, there was a great bustle, which could be heard out in the street, the opening and closing of desks, lessons repeated in unison, very loud, with our hands over our ears to understand better, and the teacher's great ruler rapping on the table. But now it was all so still! I had counted on the commotion to get to my desk without being seen; but, of course, that day everything had to be as quiet as Sunday morning. Through the window I saw my classmates, already in their places, and M. Hamel walking up and down up and down with his terrible iron ruler under his arm.*

A. Which of the following sounds could be heard at Franz's school usually?

- 1) banging of desks
- 2) voices of students
- 3) tapping on wood
- 4) screams of students
- 5) swishing of rulers
- 6) rustle of paper

- (a) (1), (2), & (3)
- (b) (4), (5) & (6)
- (c) (1), (3) & (5)
- (d) (2), (5) & (6)

B. Choose another word that means 'bustle' and 'commotion'.

- a. tranquility
- b. serenity
- c. mess
- d. furore

C. How did Franz usually slip into class?

- a. By using magical powers
- b. By hiding his face behind his satchel
- c. By sneaking in through the window exploiting the noisy confusion
- d. By taking advantage of his teacher's carelessness

D. Why does Franz call M. Hamel's iron ruler 'terrible'?

- a. The iron ruler was gigantic and sharp.
- b. Franz was used to seeing the iron ruler.
- c. The ruler was used as a drilling tool.
- d. Franz might have been at the receiving end of it.

3. *M. Hamel went on to talk of the French language, saying that it was the most beautiful language in the world — the clearest, the most logical; that we must guard it among us and never forget it, because 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. Then he opened a grammar book and read us our lesson. I was amazed to see how well I understood it. All he said seemed so easy, so easy!*

A. Which of the following can be attributed to M. Hamel's declaration about the French language?

- a. subject expertise
- b. nostalgic pride
- c. factual accuracy
- d. patriotic magnification

B. Read the quotes given below. Choose the option that might best describe M. Hamel's viewpoint

- (i) Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own-- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe 92 88
- (ii) Language is the road map It tells you where people come from and where they are going. – Rita Mae Brown
- (iii) A poor man is like a foreigner in his own country- Ali Ibn Abi Talib
- (iv) The greatest propaganda in the world is our mother tongue, that is what learn as children, and which we learn –unconsciously. That shapes our perceptions for life. – Marshal McLuhan

- (a) Option (i)
- (b) Option (ii)
- (c) Option (iii)
- (d) Option (iv)

C. *"I was amazed to see how well I understood it."* Select the option that does NOT explain why Franz found the grammar lesson — "easy".

- a. Franz was paying careful attention in class this time.
- b. M. Hamel was being extremely patient and calm in his teaching.
- c. Franz was inspired and had found a new meaning and purpose to learning
- d. Franz had realized that French was the clearest and most logical language

D. Franz was able to understand the grammar lesson easily because he was -

- a. Receptive.
- b. Appreciative.
- c. Introspective.
- d. Competitive

*4. After the grammar, we had a lesson in writing. That day M. Hamel had new copies for us, written in a beautiful round hand-France, Alsace, France, Alsace. They looked like little flags flooded everywhere in the school-room, hung from the rod at the top of our desks. You ought to have seen how everyone set to work, and how quiet it was! The only sound was the scratching of the pens over the paper. Once some beetles flew in but nobody paid any attention to them not even the littlest ones, who worked right on tracing their fish-hooks, as if that was French, too. On the roof the pigeons cooed very low, and I thought to myself, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons."*

A. Why does the author compare the copies of writing to flags?

- 1) Because they were colourful and large.
- 2) Because they were in the colours of the French flag.
- 3) Because they were hung on the rod above the desks.

4) Because flag is an aspect of a nation's identity.

- (a) (1) & (3)
- (b) (2) & (3)
- (c) (2) & (4)
- (d) (3) & (4)

B. Why did M. Hamel give the writing exercise 'France, Alsace, France, Alsace'?

- 1) to instill feelings of patriotism towards France.
- 2) to create a sense of unity and harmony
- 3) to make sure students know where they are from
- 4) to make them proud of belonging to Prussia

- (a) (1) & (4)
- (b) (2) & (3)
- (c) (1) & (3)
- (d) (2) & (4)

C. Which of the following French letters show what 'a fish hook' is?

- (a) â
- (b) é
- (c) ê
- (d) ë

D. "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" Who is referred to as 'they' here?

- a. the French government
- b. the Prussian government
- c. the village elders
- d. the school students

**SHORT ANS. TYPE QUESTIONS-SOLVED (40-50 WORDS.)**

1. Why according to you, was little Franz afraid of being scolded?

Ans. Franz was afraid of being scolded that day because he had not prepared his lesson on participles which Mr. Hamel was going to test that day. Secondly, he had reached the school very late that morning.

2. What three things in school surprised Franz the most that day?

Ans. Franz was surprised to note that the school was unusually calm and quiet as Sunday morning. Mr. Hamel wore his beautiful occasional dress and thirdly the village elders sat quietly like school children on the back benches that usually remained empty.

3. What used to be the usual scene at Franz's school ?

Ans. Usually, when the school began, there would be great hustle and bustle, opening and closing of desks, lessons repeated loudly in unison, teacher's ruler rapping on the table. The noise could be heard even out in the street.

4. How was the learning of the boys like Franz neglected in Alsace?

Ans. The people of Alsace would put off learning till tomorrow. Parents put their children to work on a farm or at mills in order to have more money. Mr. Hamel got his flowers watered or gave them a holiday.

5. Those who were in class, suddenly realised the importance of French language. Why did this happen?

Ans. Mr. Hamel called French language as the most beautiful, the most logical and the clearest language in the world. He said that their language was the key to their prison. Then the people realised the importance of French language.

#### **SHORT ANS. TYPE QUESTIONS-UNSOLVED. 40-50 WORDS.**

1. Franz was very late for school that morning. What was he tempted to do on being late?
2. Why were even the villagers present in the school room on the last lesson morning?
3. What was put up on the town hall bulletin board on the morning of 'The Last lesson'?
4. How did the opinion of Franz about his teacher change?

#### **LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS-SOLVED. 120-150 WORDS**

1. What in your opinion, is the main theme of the story 'The Last Lesson'? Do you think it has a universal appeal?

Ans. The main theme of the story is linguistic chauvinism of the proud conquerors who show an excessive or prejudiced support for their own language. It also shows the pain that is inflicted on the people of a territory conquered by them by taking away the right to study or speak their own language and make them prisoners in their own land of birth. The story also highlights the attitudes of the students and teachers to learning and teaching. The story theme has a universal appeal even though the story is located in a particular village of Alsace in France which had passed into Prussian hands. Taking away mother tongue from the people is the harshest punishment

2. Describe the feelings, emotions and behaviour of Mr. Hamel on the day of 'Last Lesson'.  
Ans.

- ❖ Mr. Hamel in the dress for ceremonial occasions.
- ❖ Talked of the French language as a proud French man.
- ❖ Explained everything with great patience grammar, writing, lesson in History.
- ❖ Sat motionless in the chair fixing everything around in his mind.
- ❖ Thought of leaving next day made him sad, choked, his voice became emotional.
- ❖ Mustered courage and wrote "Vive La France!" leaning sadly against the wall dismissed the Class with a gesture

3. What Order had come from Berlin that day? How did it effect the life at school?  
Ans.

- ❖ The order was - only German would be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine.
- ❖ Had far reaching effect on the life at school.
- ❖ Mr. Hamel teaching French for the last forty years would deliver his last lesson that day. The teacher dressed in his best clothes.
- ❖ Old villagers quietly sitting at the back of class room.
- ❖ Everybody in class realised the importance of French language.
- ❖ Mr. Hamel solemn and used gentle tone.
- ❖ Those present in class very attentive and eager to learn.
- ❖ Mr. Hamel's appeal to preserve French language. Mr. Hamel overwhelmed with emotions in the end.

1. Comment on the significance of the villagers sitting at the back in M. Hamel's classroom.  
Ans.

- ❖ As a sign of repentance for not attending school often.
- ❖ They wanted to thank M. Hamel for his 40 years of dedicated service.
- ❖ As a mark of respect for the country which was no longer theirs.

2. Who did M. Hamel blame when Franz was unable to answer a question on French participles?  
Ans. M. Hamel blames:

- ❖ People of Alsace for postponing learning.
- ❖ Parents who preferred to send their children to work in fields and mills instead of sending them to school.
- ❖ Himself for not fulfilling his duty as a teacher sincerely - by sending the children to water the plants in the garden & declaring a holiday whenever he wanted to go fishing.

### **EXTRA QUESTIONS: UNSOLVED**

1. How and why was M. Hamel dressed differently that day?
2. Why was Franz surprised by the school's atmosphere on that day?
3. Why was Little Franz scared to go to school that morning?
4. What were the usual sounds heard out at the street when school began?
5. What was like a thunderclap to Little Franz?
6. What was M.Hamel's view on the French language?
7. Give a brief character-sketch of M.Hamel.