

The Tale of Custard the Dragon

By Ogden Nash

Central Idea:

Everything created whether small or big has its specific importance. Usually, we underestimate talented persons but they prove themselves by their wits and right actions. We should never look down upon other. Moreover, right and timely actions are always beneficial. In other words a stitch in time saves nine, is also the nucleus of the poem.

Theme

The theme of the poem is that everyone has his own capabilities and should never be judged on the basis of his appearance. In the poem, Belinda and all pets she owns boast about their bravery. Belinda is as strong as barrel full of bears, Ink and Blink were brave and fearless enough to chase down lions down the stairs and Mustard considered itself as brave as an angry tiger.

However Custard never boasted about its might and power and instead always cried for nice and safe cage. Hence Belinda and all her pets used to make joke of Custard. They would tease him mercilessly and call him bad names. But Custard never reacted and rather accepted what they said.

But, when the pirate attacks the house of Belinda, all the so-called brave animals run away to save their lives though Belinda keeps crying for help. At this time, Custard comes forward at once and faces the pirate. The pirate tries to kill him by firing bullets. However they do not hit him and Custard eats him up.

Message

The story tells us that we should never judge a person on the basis of his looks or what others say about him. Every person is unique and capable in his own way.

Summary:

The tale of custard the dragon is a ballad. It is a humorous poem about a cowardly dragon named custard. Custard is a pet of Belinda, a little girl who lives in a little white house with her pets. She had a black kitten named ink, a grey mouse named blink, a yellow dog mustard and a cowardly dragon custard. The poet says that all of them are very brave except the dragon. Others were described as brave and are compared with animals like bear, tiger or lion but the dragon is very timid. He always demands a safe place for himself. All the other characters make fun of him. But one night they are surprised by the entry of a pirate in the house. All of them get frightened and start hiding here and there. But to everyone's surprise, the dragon not only tackles him but also eats him up. As all of them are saved by custard, they thank him. But at the end, they realize that they used to make fun of the dragon because of his being timid. So, all of them suddenly start saying that they are more brave and could have handled the situation in a much better way. Here the poet has tried to say that sometimes a timid person is the actual hero in the toughest situations of life.

Rhyme scheme

The **rhyme scheme**- 'aabb', 'ccdd'.

Poetic devices

- a. Metaphor: In this **poem**, the **poet** uses the **device of** metaphor in the 3rd line of the 3rd stanza when he compares the **dragon's** nose with a chimney.
- b. Personification: In this **poem**, the **poet** uses the **device of** personification with respect to Belinda's kitten, mouse, and dog.
- c. Simile: 'like a fireplace', 'as brave as a tiger'.
- d. Refrain: Repetition of a sentence again and again (And a realio, trulio,)
- e. Onomatopoeia: usage of sound words to create a dramatic effect (giggled, weeck)

Textbook Questions:

1. Who are the characters in this poem? List them with their pet names.

The characters in this poem are Belinda, a little girl, and her pets: a little black kitten, a little grey mouse, a little yellow dog, a little pet dragon and a pirate.

Characters	Pet name
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Kitten	Ink
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Mouse	Blink
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Dog	Mustard
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Dragon	Custard
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2. Why did Custard cry for a nice safe cage? Why is the dragon called "cowardly dragon"?

Custard cried for a nice safe cage because it was a coward and was scared very easily. It is called "cowardly dragon" because everyone else in the house is very brave while the dragon is the only one, who fears a lot and looks for a nice safe cage for himself. Belinda is as brave as a barrel full of bears, Ink and Blink can chase lions and Mustard is as brave as an angry tiger.

3. "Belinda tickled him, she tickled him unmerciful..." Why?

Tickling always works on people, who are a little softer. So, Belinda tickled the dragon unmerciful as it worked a lot on him. Despite being a dragon, a tickling could disturb him and this showed his cowardice on which everyone laughed.

4. The poet has employed many poetic devices in the poem. For example "Clashed his tail like iron in a dungeon" – the poetic device here is a simile. Can you, with your partner, list some more such poetic devices used in the poem?

In the poem, 'The tale of Custard, the Dragon', the poet has used a lot of poetic devices. Following are the devices used

1. Simile: mouth like a fireplace
2. Repetition: the repetitive use of the word 'little' in stanza 1.

6. Can you find out the rhyme scheme of two or three stanzas of the poem?

The rhyme scheme of the poem is 'aabb

7. Writers use words to give us a picture or image without actually saying what they mean. Can you trace some images used in the poem?

Writers always use such phrases and words that do not tell us directly about what they mean but always gives us an indication of the meaning. Such words or phrases are used to trigger our own imagination in painting the picture that they mean. Use of such images in the poem is the following: 'mouth like a fireplace', 'chimney for a nose', 'brave as a barrel full of bears', 'brave as a tiger in a rage', 'went at the pirate like a robin at a worm', etc.

Extra Question Answers:

1. Do you find "The Tale of Custard the Dragon" a serious or funny poem? Give reasons for your answer.

We find "The Tale of Custard the Dragon" both serious and funny. It seems serious to us because poor dragon is criticized and teased by his companions. On the contrary, Custard, the dragon does not offend or resist them. Instead he retreats to a safer place. But later in the poem, he proves his metal by protecting his family members from the pirate. The poem is funny as well because the members tease and criticize him. Moreover, the characters and their names are very funny. They boast about themselves when the dragon kills the pirate instead of appreciating him.

2. What did Custard look like?

Custard looked really dangerous with spikes on his top and scales underneath. His mouth was like a fireplace and nose like a chimney. His toes looked like daggers.

3. But Custard cried for a nice safe cage. ' Who is Custard? Why did he cry for a 'nice safe cage'?

Custard is Belinda's pet Dragon. He cried for a nice safe cage because he was a coward, who feared easily and looked for comfort and safety of himself.

4. How did the other three pet boast of their bravery?

After Mustard, Ink and Blink fled on seeing the pirate, it was Custard, who fought him and killed him. The other pets soon made excuses for their cowardice and said that they would have been twice and thrice as brave as Custard.

5. The dragon, custard was considered a coward. The humble dragon proved his bravery in adversity. Analyse that certain qualities like bravery and courage are situational and spontaneous. Express your views with reference to the poem.

Custard's humbleness won every reader's heart as he showed true bravery and did not boast like Belinda and her other pets. Everyone boasted of their bravery but when they faced real danger, it was only Custard, who had the courage to face it. And he proved his bravery by not running away and facing the pirate and killing him. Qualities like bravery and courage can only be tested when someone is actually put in a dangerous situation. Therefore, these qualities are situational as becomes clear from Custard's example. Custard looked for comfort all the time but this did not mean that he was a coward.

6. Do you think that one should be made fun of because of their preferences and choices in life? Explain in the context of Custard, the dragon.

It is not right to make fun of anyone on the basis of their life style and their choices. Custard, the dragon, always wanted comfort and safety for him and therefore always cried for a nice safe cage. Belinda and other pets of the house made fun of him because they thought that he was a coward. Custard proved that just because he likes comfort, he is not a coward. In fact, he was the only one, who had the courage to face the pirate and kill him.

Mijbil the Otter

By Gavin Maxwell

Introduction

In this lesson, the author tells us how his life changed after he decided to domesticate an otter after he lost his pet dog. He takes us through his journey of adjusting, playing and travelling with Mijbil (or Mij) the otter, from Iraq to London and how during this journey, he developed an inseparable bond with him.

Theme

The story clearly reflects the love that the author had for animals, especially, the otter. After having lost his pet dog, the author decides to keep an otter as a pet. Naturally, handling an otter or for that matter, any animal out of its habitat, is not an easy task. One has to be well aware of its habits, nature, food etc.

Message

Owning a pet is a lifetime commitment involving considerable responsibility. The decision to acquire one, therefore, should be made by the whole family. Without full agreement by everyone, the pet could end up unwanted. Unfortunately, cute looking animals often suffer disadvantages, because people purchase them without consideration and the knowledge on how to take proper care of them. Hence, it is very important to read and research before adopting or buying a pet.

Summary

The story begins with the author travelling to Basra along with his friend. During their journey, the author expresses his desire to domesticate an otter because after he had lost his pet dog, life had become lonely for him. His friend suggested that he should get one from the Marshes along river Tigris in Iraq. When they reached the destination, they found that only the friend's mail had arrived. After a few days, the friend left while the narrator was still waiting to receive his mail. Upon receiving it, he went to his room only to find an otter (brought to him in a sack), accompanied by two Arabs with a note. It was a gift from his friend. He named the otter Mijbil or shortly, Mij. It took some time for Mij to open up and get acquainted with his surroundings. He was covered in mud to an extent that it took almost a month of cleaning and washing to reveal his actual colour. Mij loved playing with water so much so that he even learned to open the tap on his own. He believed that each drop of water should be squished and splashed till the bowl had been emptied. Everything was going smoothly in Basra, but now it was time to fly back to London. British airlines did not allow animals, so he had to book another flight that allowed Mij with a condition that he had to be carried in a box. The narrator put him in a box an hour before the flight so that Mij could get accustomed to it and then left for a quick meal. When he returned, he found that the box was still and Mij had created a mess by destroying the inner lining. As a result, blood was dripping out of the holes.

Scared as he was, he hurried. They were far away from the airport and there were only ten minutes left for the flight to take off. He cleaned it all, hurried in a cab and managed to reach just in time. He explained the series of events to a very kind and generous air hostess who advised him to keep the box on his lap. Gavin developed extreme admiration for the air hostess for she was very kind to him. As soon as he opened the box, the otter leaped out and disappeared thereby creating a chaos. Passengers were frightened. A lady climbed up her chair and in an attempt to get a hold of Mij, the author got himself covered in curry. The air hostess offered help and brought him back to Gavin and finally, they reached London. Mij was fond of playing with ping-pong balls and marbles. He even developed a game with the author's damaged suitcase. It could keep him engrossed for a long period of time. Narrator took him for walks while taking the lead and played with him. People of London, being unfamiliar with otters, had wild guesses about what Mij was. Some thought it to be a baby seal, squirrel or even a hippo.

Thinking about the Text (Page 110, 111)

Question 1. What things does Mij do which tell you that he is an intelligent, friendly and fun-loving animal who needs love?

Answer: Mij was an intelligent, friendly and fun-loving animal. When the author received it, for the first twenty-four hours it remained aloof and indifferent but later on he took interest in his surroundings. He became friendly to the author. He enjoyed his bath. One day he disappeared from the bedroom and entered the bathroom where he tried to open the tap.

His intelligence is further revealed when he invented a game of his own of ping-pong ball. Mij discovered that if the ball was placed on the high end of the suitcase, it would rather run down the length of the suitcase. He enjoyed playing with ball and marbles. Mij had developed certain compulsive habits like school children. He used to gallop at full speed on the thirty yards wall of a primary school.

Question 2. What are some of the things we come to know about otters from this text?

Answer: Otters belong to a comparatively small group of animals called Mustellines, shared by badger, mongoose, weasel, stoat, mink and others. They are found in large numbers in marshes. Arabs keep them as pets and tame them. Otters love to spread water and splash in it. Maxwell's otter was of a race previously unknown to science and was at length named by zoologists *Lutrogale Perspicillata Maxwelli*.

Question 3. Why is Mij's species now known to the world as Maxwell's otter?

Answer: Maxwell's otter was of a race previously unknown to science and was at length named by zoologists *Lutrogale Perspicillata Maxwelli*, hence, it is known as Maxwell's otter in short.

Question 5. Read the story and find the sentences where Maxwell describes his pet otter.

Then choose and arrange your sentences to illustrate those statements below that you think are true. Maxwell's description

1. makes Mij seem almost human, like a small boy.
2. shows that he is often irritated with what Mij does.
3. shows that he is often surprised by what Mij does.
4. of Mij's antics is comical.
5. shows that he observes the antics of Mij very carefully.
6. shows that he thinks Mij is a very ordinary otter.
7. shows that he thinks the otter is very unusual.

Answer:

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. True
6. False
7. True

Extra Question Answers:

1. Why does he go to Basra? How long does he wait there, and why?

He goes to Basra to the Consulate—General to collect and answer his mail from Europe. His mail did not arrive in time. He cabled to England, and when, three days later, nothing had happened, he tried to telephone. The call had to be booked twenty-four hours in advance. On the first day the line was out of order; on the second day, exchange was closed for a religious holiday. On the third day there was another breakdown. His mail arrived five days later. He had to wait for five days.

2. What happened when Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom? What did it do two days after that?

When Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom he went wild with joy in the water, plunging and rolling in it, shooting up and down the length of the bathtub underwater, and making enough slosh and splash for a hippo. Two days after, Mijbil escaped from the bedroom and entered the bathroom. He struggled with the chromium tap till it had a full flow.

3. How was Mij to be transported to England?

The British airline to London did not permit to fly animals. The author had to book a flight to Paris on another airline. The airline insisted that Mij should be packed into a box not more than eighteen inches square. The author acted accordingly and transported Mij to England.

4. What are 'compulsive habits'? What does Maxwell say are the compulsive habits of
- (i) school children
 - (ii) Mij ?

Compulsive habits are those acts which result from an irresistible urge. School children on their way to and from school must place their feet squarely on the centre of each paving block; must touch every seventh upright of the iron railings, or pass to the outside of every second lamp post. Mij had also developed certain compulsive habits. There was a single-storied primary school opposite to the author's home. There was a two feet high wall also. On his way to the home, Mij would tug the author to that wall, jump on to it, and gallop the full length of its thirty yards.