

Class IX
Subject- English
Chapter- A Legend of Northland

A Legend of Northland Introduction to the poem

'A Legend of the Northland' is a ballad. A ballad is a poem narrating a story in short stanzas. Ballad is the kind of poem that tells a story in short stanzas and in the poem all the stanzas comprise four lines. In total, there are 16 stanzas in this poem and these stanzas will tell us a story. Ballads are a part of folk culture or popular culture and are passed on orally from one generation to the next. (Folk culture is a story of any area and is known as ballad). Folk culture comprises traditional stories which are passed on from one generation to the next generation.

This story is of the Northland area, the area which is near the North Pole. This exact place is not specified but 'Northland' means the area in the northernmost part of the earth i.e., near the North Pole. 'Legend' means a historical story, one which is very old and has been passed on from generation to generation.

Theme

The poem 'A legend of the Northland' is a folktale that is passed from one generation to another in Northland. It is a story that revolves around Saint Peter and the little woman who was punished for her selfishness. The legend teaches us not to be greedy and that we should possess the qualities of kindness and empathy.

Summary of the poem A Legend of the Northland

A Legend of the Northland is folklore told to the children to instil this moral lesson. The poem talks about a little woman who was punished by saint Peter for refusing to give him any one of the cakes that she had baked. In the story, Saint Peter reaches the cottage of the little woman after travelling around the world. He was very tired and hungry. He was almost fainting due to hunger. Saint Peter asked her to give him one cake but the little woman's greed and selfishness did not allow her to do so. While baking the smallest and thinnest of cakes, she felt that the cake was too big to give away for free. The behaviour of the woman provokes Saint Peter who curses her and changes her into a woodpecker. Saint Peter teaches a lesson to all humans that we must not be miserly and stingy.

A Legend of Northland Poem Explanation

Stanza 1

Away, away in the Northland,
Where the hours of the day are few,
And the nights are so long in winter
That they cannot sleep them through;

In the region around the North Pole (Northland), the duration of the day is very less because its position is such that the Sun's rays reach for a very less time. When this area is experiencing the winter season, the duration of night is very long, and the daytime hours are very less. In line 4, 'they' refers to the people who live in this region. The poet says that the duration of the night time is so long that the people cannot sleep through. If they go to bed, take a few hours of sleep and then, when they wake up, it is still night time. He wants to emphasize on the fact that the duration of the night is very long.

Stanza 2

Where they harness the swift reindeer
To the sledges, when it snows;
And the children look like bear's cubs
In their funny, furry clothes:

Sledges: a vehicle on runners for conveying loads or passengers over snow or ice, often pulled by draught animals.

To harness means to tie the reindeers with a rope to a sledge so that it can be used for transportation.

Swift: something which runs very fast

The Northland region experiences severe cold conditions. It is a snowy area. The reindeer is an animal which is found in this polar region. People tie the reindeers to sledges and then the reindeers pull the sledges. He adds that the children look like young ones of a bear because they wear funny looking clothes made of fur which is like the furry skin of a bear.

Stanza 3

They tell them a curious story —
I don't believe 'tis true;

And yet you may learn a lesson

If I tell the tale to you.

Curious: strange

In line 1 'they' refers to the parents or elders and 'them' refers to the children or the younger generation. The elders of the Northland region tell a strange and interesting story to the younger generation. The poet says that he doesn't think that the story is true, but if he tells the story to the reader, maybe the reader could learn a lesson from it. The story gives an important message.

Stanza 4

Once, when the good Saint Peter

Lived in the world below,

And walked about it, preaching,

Just as he did, you know,

Saint Peter: an apostle of Christ, a disciple or follower of Jesus Christ

Preaching: to give a religious talk

The story is about Saint Peter. When Saint Peter used to live in the world and went around, giving religious lectures to the people just like all saints do, then an incident happened.

Stanza 5

He came to the door of a cottage,

In travelling round the earth,

Where a little woman was making cakes,

And baking them on the hearth;

hearth: fire place where you do cooking

When Saint Peter was moving around the world, giving religious lectures to the people, he reached the door of a cottage where a small woman was making cakes. She was baking the cakes in the fireplace.

Stanza 6

And being faint with fasting,
For the day was almost done,
He asked her, from her store of cakes,
To give him a single one.

faint: to be weak, famished

As Saint Peter had not eaten anything the entire day, he was very hungry and was feeling weak. So, he went to this woman who was baking cakes and he asked for one cake out of the many cakes that she had baked.

Stanza 7

So she made a very little cake,
But as it baking lay,
She looked at it, and thought it seemed
Too large to give away.

The woman was selfish. She did not give cake from her store. Instead, she started making a very small cake for Saint Peter. She did not want to share her things. But, when she put the cake in for baking, she looked at it and thought that this cake was too big to be given to someone.

Stanza 8

Therefore she kneaded another,
And still a smaller one;
But it looked, when she turned it over,
As large as the first had done.

kneaded – to make dough from flour.

The little miser woman thought that the cake was too big to be given away. So, she started making another smaller cake. When she looked at that cake, she again felt that it was as big as the previous one. Again, she was not ready to give this smaller cake to Saint Peter.

Stanza 9

Then she took a tiny scrap of dough,
And rolled and rolled it flat;
And baked it thin as a wafer —
But she couldn't part with that.

scrap: small amount

The third time, she took a very small amount of dough and rolled it. The poet says that she rolled and rolled to lay emphasis on the fact that she rolled the dough and made it very thin like a wafer and baked it. But she was so greedy that she couldn't give that thin piece of bread to the saint.

Stanza 10

For she said, "My cakes that seem too small
When I eat of them myself
Are yet too large to give away."
So she put them on the shelf.

The woman reasoned that, when she ate the cakes, she felt that they were very small but if she had to give them to someone, she felt that they were too big to be given away. She put all the cakes on the shelf of her kitchen and she did not give any cake to Saint Peter.

Stanza 11

Then good Saint Peter grew angry,
For he was hungry and faint;
And surely such a woman
Was enough to provoke a saint.

provoke: cause to get angry

Saint Peter became angry. He was very hungry, he was feeling very weak and the selfish woman was not ready to give him even a small cake. This behavior of the greedy woman angered the saint.

Stanza 12

And he said, "You are far too selfish

To dwell in a human form,

To have both food and shelter,

And fire to keep you warm.

dwell: to live

Saint Peter cursed the woman and said that she was very selfish. She did not deserve to live like a human being. He added that God had given her food, shelter, fire to keep warm but she had become selfish for all the resources she had. She did not want to share them with anybody.

Stanza 13

Now, you shall build as the birds do,

And shall get your scanty food

By boring, and boring, and boring,

All day in the hard, dry wood."

scanty: very little

boring: make a hole in something with a tool or by digging.

Saint Peter cursed the woman that hence, she would become a bird because she did not deserve the human form. She shall become a bird and just like birds build their houses by boring into the wood and collect very little food by working hard the entire day, similarly, she would also work hard in the dry wood, all day and get little food and make a small place for herself to live in.

Stanza 14

Then up she went through the chimney,

Never speaking a word,

And out of the top flew a woodpecker,

For she was changed to a bird.

As soon as Saint Peter cursed the woman, she did not get a chance to speak for herself because that very moment, she flew up to the roof through the chimney and flew out in the form of a bird. Saint Peter's curse had converted the woman into a bird.

Stanza 15

She had a scarlet cap on her head,

And that was left the same;

But all the rest of her clothes were burned

Black as a coal in the flame.

scarlet: brilliant red colour

When the woman turned into a bird, at that time she was wearing a red - coloured cap on her head. This cap was there on the bird's head also, but the woman's remaining clothes had burned and turned black in colour just like coal.

Stanza 16

And every country schoolboy

Has seen her in the wood,

Where she lives in the trees till this very day,

Boring and boring for food.

country: belonging to the countryside i.e. rural areas

People who live in the countryside, even the small children who go to school, see this kind of bird in the woods. They see that she stays there all day and keeps on digging the wood with her beak, to collect her food. Whenever any child sees this kind of bird, then his elders tell him this story. They say that the bird used to be a woman earlier. She was very greedy and so, she was cursed by Saint Peter and turned into a bird. They get a teaching that they should not be greedy.

Literary Devices in the poem

1. **Rhyme Scheme:** abcb

2. **Alliteration:** is the repetition of a consonant sound in two or more close words.

Stanza 1 - that, they, them through - 'th' sound is repeating

Stanza 2 - they, the - 'th' sound is repeating

look, like - 'l' sound is repeating

funny, furry - 'f' sound is repeating

Stanza 3 - they, them- 'th' sound is repeating

yet, you - 'y' sound is repeating'

learn, lesson - 'l' sound is repeating

tell, tale, to - 't' sound is repeating

Stanza 5 - woman, was – 'w' sound is repeating

Them, the, hearth - 'th' sound is repeating

Stanza 6 - faint, fasting - 'f' sound is repeating

Stanza 8 - still, smaller - 's' sound is repeating

Stanza 9 - took, tiny -'t' sound is repeating

Stanza 10 - seem, small - 's' sound is repeating

Stanza 13 - build, birds - 'b' sound is repeating

by, boring, boring – 'b' sound is repeating

3. **Repetition:** any word or sentence is repeated to lay emphasis on it.

Stanza 1 - 'away' word is repeated

Stanza 9 – 'rolled' word is repeated

Stanza 13, 16 – 'boring' word is repeated

4. **Enjambment:** running lines of poetry from one to the next without using any kind of punctuation to indicate a stop

Stanza 1 - line 3 and 4

Stanza 2 - Line 1 and 2; line 3 and 4

Stanza 3 - Line 3 and 4

Stanza 4 - Line 1 and 2; 3 and 4

Stanza 10 - Line 1, 2 and 3

Stanza 11 - Line 1 and 2

5. **Simile:** Comparison using 'as' or 'like'

Stanza 2 – 'the children look like bear's cubs'. Children compared to bear's cubs

Stanza 9 – 'baked it thin as a wafer'. Cake is compared to a wafer.

Stanza 15 – 'clothes were burned black as a coal'. The colour of the burned clothes is compared to that of coal.