

Important Questions with Answers

Q. What do you think is the colour of 'sour cream'? Why do you think the poet has used this expression to describe the classroom walls?

Ans. The colour of sour cream is white but not pleasant to look at. The poet uses this expression to describe the white class room walls which are also white but not pleasant looking.

Q. The walls of the classroom are decorated with the pictures of 'Shakespeare', buildings with domes, 'world maps' and beautiful valleys. How do these contrast with the world of these children?

Ans. These contrast with the world of the children. There is no love for art or literature in their lives of which Shakespeare is a symbol. Instead of 'buildings with domes' they live in the dark slum houses. The world map for them means nothing because they have hardly seen anything out of their slums.

Q. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

Ans. The poet wants a better life for these children of the slums. He wants that they should be given better surroundings and better opportunity to study.

Q. How is the atmosphere inside an elementary slum classroom different from the one outside it?

Ans. The children sitting inside the elementary classroom, are sick and under nourished. The atmosphere and surroundings are pale and morose. The world outside is filled with beauty and luxuries.

Q. Which words/phrases in the poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' show that the slum children are suffering from acute malnutrition?

Ans. The words or phrases in the poem which show that the slum children are suffering from acute malnutrition are, 'faces like rootless weeds', 'the hair torn round their pallor', 'paper-seeming boy', 'stunted, unlucky heir of twisted bones' and 'wear skins peeped through by bones'.

Q. The poet says, 'And yet, for these Children, these windows, not this map, their world'. Which world do these children belong to? Which world is, inaccessible to them?

Ans. There is a map on the wall. There are pictures, which show beautiful hills and valleys. But the world of the poor school children is not what is shown in the map. Their world is not sunny. It is darkened with the fog of poverty and pain from their slum only dull and dreary sky can be seen.

Q. Why does Stephen Spender feel the maps in the elementary school classroom are meaningless?

Ans. Stephen Spender feels that the maps in the elementary classroom are meaningless because the children in the classroom would never be able to reach those places.

Q. How is 'Shakespeare wicked and the map a bad example' for the children of the school in a slum?

Ans. Both represent a beautiful world and high values which the slum children will have never experienced. Since the slum children cannot relate to these things, there was no point in giving such examples.

Q. To whom does the poet in the poem, 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' make an appeal? What is his appeal?

Ans. The poet makes an appeal to his readers, especially the educated and well-off people the appeal is to help the poor children of the slum come out and be freed from their miserable surroundings. His appeal is that these children should be given quality education, because education holds the key to their emancipation.

Q. What change does the poet hope for in the lives of the slum children?

Ans. Stephen Spender wants a better life for the children of the slums. He wants the officials to help these poor children come out of their miserable surroundings. He wishes that these children should be given education, because education is the key to prosperity.

Key Facts about The Rattrap

Full Title: "The Rattrap"

Where Written: Sweden

Literary Period: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century literature

Genre: Short story, Swedish literature

Setting: Rural Sweden

Climax: Edla returns to find the peddler's package.

Point of View: Third person omniscient

Historical Context of The Rattrap

"The Rattrap" takes place somewhere in rural western Sweden, in a vaguely nostalgic past that is not specified—but its very vagueness helps give the story its timeless, fairy-tale quality. Still, an ironworks figures prominently in the work, and its setting relies on the culture of mining and the iron processing industry dominant in Varmland in the early to mid-1800s. Varmland's iron trade then faltered in the late 1800s when central Europe and the U.S.

became more dominant in the industry, as reflected by the narrator's comment that the once-thriving Ramsjö Ironworks is now shut down.

Theme

The idea which recurs in the story again and again is that the world is nothing but a big rattrap which exists for no other purpose but to set bait for poor people. This idea has been corroborated through the story of a peddler who went around selling rattraps made of wire but as the business was not profitable, he resorted to petty thievery and begging. One day he was caught into the rattrap of the world by stealing a crofter's money but came out of it due to the kindness, trust and compassion shown by Edla, the Iron Master's daughter.

Lagerlöf also forefronts the poverty endured by the vagabond—in the very first paragraph, she describes his destitution. She tells her reader that though he sells rat traps to survive, "the business was not especially profitable, so he had to resort to both begging and petty thievery to keep body and soul together. Even so, his clothes were in rags, his cheeks were sunken, and hunger gleamed in his eyes" (66). The tone of the story is not one of judgment; the reportorial manner with which Lagerlöf simply lays out the facts of the vagabond's condition suggests that Lagerlöf recognizes the impossible challenge of surviving poverty while also following the law and abstaining from thievery.

On the other hand, Lagerlöf also portrays the crofter and the Willmanssons, who represent, respectively, two socioeconomic classes that are very distinct from each other and from the vagabond's.

The most subtle theme in this otherwise unsubtle, didactic tale is loneliness

Another theme of the story is that most human beings are prone to fall into the trap of material benefit. However, every human being has an essential goodness that can be awakened through understanding and love. A human being has the tendency to redeem himself from dishonest ways

Setting

This story is set amidst the mines of Sweden, rich in iron ore which figure large in the history and legends of that country. More particularly, the action takes place in and around the iron works and the house of the Iron Master.

Characters

1. Peddler - He is the main character of this story around whom the story revolves. He sells rat traps made of wire. But the business is not very profitable so he has to resort to petty thievery and begging. Once while walking along the road, he gets an idea of the world being a rattrap and one day he himself is caught in the trap.

2. Iron Master - He is the owner of the Ramsjö Iron Works. His greatest ambition is to ship out good iron into the market. He watches both day and night to see that the work is done well. He wrongly identifies the peddler as one of his old acquaintances.

3. Edla Wilmansson - She is the daughter of the Iron Master. She is not very pretty but modest and shy. She helps the peddler come out of the trap of the world.

4. Master Blacksmith - He is the first man to meet the peddler. He treats the peddler very coldly.

The Rattrap Summary

The Rattrap is a story about a rattrap seller who leads a very poor life as his earnings are very low. He has to resort to thievery and begging to make both ends meet.

He is alone in this whole world and leads a miserable life. So he starts knitting up various kinds of thoughts. One of these thoughts is of supposing the whole world as a big rattrap. His views are that the world offers us various types of baits in the form of comforts of life. This in return traps us into the rattrap of the world and leads us to various types of miseries. Every night, the peddler had to search for shelter as he had no home. One evening he was offered shelter by an old crofter. The next morning he stole the crofter's money which he had earned by selling his cow's milk. To safeguard himself, the peddler chose the path through the forest which was secluded, but soon found himself trapped in the forest as he wasn't able to find the way out of the dense forest. Later on, he finds a way to a forge and takes shelter there. Something unusual happens. The ironmaster mistakes him as an old friend and invites him to his house. The poor peddler rejects the offer due to the fear of being caught. Soon he is invited by the ironmaster's daughter. The next morning he is somehow stopped by the ironmaster's daughter for Christmas Eve even after being caught that he was a peddler and not Captain Stalhe.

The next day after Christmas, when the iron master and his daughter visit the church, they come to know that the man is a thief who had stolen money from the old crofter. The iron master and his daughter repent for sheltering a thief and wonder at what all things he would have stolen by that time. Here comes a twist as instead of stealing, the peddler gifts the ironmaster's daughter a rattrap. She finds a letter of thanks and the stolen money inside the rattrap. The peddler thanks Edla for her kindness and requests her to return the stolen money to the crofter. This story gives us the message that goodness in a human being can be awakened at any time with your own good deeds.

The Rattrap Explanation

Once upon a time there was a man who went around selling small rattraps of wire. He made them himself at odd moments, from the material he got by begging in the stores or at the big farms. But even so, the business was not especially profitable, so he had to resort to both begging and petty thievery to keep body and soul together. Even so, his clothes were in rags, his cheeks were sunken, and hunger gleamed in his eyes.

Odd Moments: A short period of free time.

Sunken: lowered

Gleamed: Shone

Once there was a man who used to sell small rattraps made of wire. These rattraps were made by him in his free time. He used to collect the material required by begging from stores or big farms. Still his business was not earning him any profits. Therefore, he had to beg or steal in order to survive. His clothes were old and torn. His cheeks were lowered inside due to malnutrition and one could easily see the hunger in his eyes.

No one can imagine how sad and monotonous life can appear to such a vagabond, who plods along the road, left to his own meditations. But one day this man had fallen into a line of thought, which really seemed to him entertaining.

Monotonous: boring

Vagabond: wanderer

Plods: walks heavily

The life of the rattrap seller was very sad and boring. He was homeless and slowly, with heavy feet, he walked along the road, lost in his own thoughts. But one day he got lost in a series of thoughts which he found very interesting.

He had naturally been thinking of his rattraps when suddenly he was struck by the idea that the whole world about him — the whole world with its lands and seas, its cities and villages — was nothing but a big rattrap. It had never existed for any other purpose than to set baits for people. It offered riches and joys, shelter and food, heat and clothing, exactly as the rattrap offered cheese and pork, and as soon as anyone let himself be tempted to touch the bait, it closed in on him, and then everything came to an end.

Bait: Food placed on a hook to trap a rat, here it is referred to the comforts of life, which is offered to trap someone

Tempted: convinced

The man was thinking about the rattrap and suddenly, a thought came to his mind that the whole world which includes land, sea, cities and villages was similar to a rattrap. He thought that there was no meaning of the existence of this world. It was nothing but a temptation, just like cheese and pork which we offer as bait to catch the rat. So according to him, as soon as someone tries to comfort himself with joy, food and shelter he at once gets trapped into this rattrap which is known as 'world'.

The world had, of course, never been very kind to him, so it gave him unusual joy to think ill of it in this way. It became a cherished pastime of his, during many dreary ploddings, to think of people he knew who had let themselves be caught in the dangerous snare, and of others who were still circling around the bait.

Cherished: to love, protect

Dreary: dull

Ploddings: walk heavily

Snare: trap

No one in the world had ever been kind to the rattrap seller. So, he started thinking ill of others. It became a favorite pastime for him. During dull moments, these thoughts made him happy. So, he continued with thinking ill of those who were known to him. He would imagine those people who were already trapped in the rattrap of worldly things and also those who were about to get trapped in it.

One dark evening as he was trudging along the road he caught sight of a little gray cottage by the roadside, and he knocked on the door to ask for shelter for the night. Nor was he refused. Instead of the sour faces which ordinarily met him, the owner, who was an old man without a wife or child, was happy to get someone to talk to in his loneliness. Immediately he put the porridge pot on the fire and gave him supper; then he carved off such a big slice from his tobacco roll that it was enough both for the stranger's pipe and his own. Finally he got out an old pack of cards and played 'mjolis' with his guest until bedtime.

Trudging: walking slowly

Carved off: to divide something into parts

mjolis: a game played with playing cards

One evening the rattrap seller was walking very slowly. He saw a little gray cottage which stood by the road. He went up to the cottage and knocked at the door so as to get shelter for the night. Generally he was not helped by anyone but this time he was welcomed by the old man into his cottage. He was a lonely old man without wife and kids. The old man was happy to get company that night. So, the old man gave him some porridge to eat and then shared his tobacco with the guest. After this, both played cards till bedtime.

The old man was just as generous with his confidences as with his porridge and tobacco. The guest was informed at once that in his days of prosperity his host had been a crofter at Ramsjo Ironworks and had worked on the land. Now that he was no longer able to do day labour, it was his cow which supported him. Yes, that bossy was extraordinary. She could give milk for the creamery every day, and last month he had received all of thirty kronor in payment.

Generous: liberal

Confidences: Secrets

Prosperity: riches

Crofter: A person who works on a rented farm

Bossy: Latin word 'bos' used for a cow

Creamery: A factory that produces cheese and cream

Kronor: Currency of Sweden

The rattrap seller felt that the old man was not only liberal in sharing his porridge but also his secrets. He tells him that he was a rich man when he used to work on the rented farm. As he was old now and couldn't work, so, he had to depend upon his cow for his living. The cow gave enough milk everyday to be sold in the factory that produced cheese and cream. The old man said that he was able to earn thirty kronors last month because of the cow's milk.

The stranger must have seemed incredulous, for the old man got up and went to the window, took down a leather pouch which hung on a nail in the very window frame, and picked out three wrinkled ten-kronor bills. These he held up before the eyes of his guest, nodding knowingly, and then stuffed them back into the pouch.

Incredulous: unbelieving

Stuffed: to fill up with something

The rattrap seller did not believe the old man's words that a cow could earn him so much. Therefore, the old man took a leather pouch which hung on a window and took out three notes of ten kronor each which were old and crushed. He showed those currency notes to make him believe his words and then kept them back in the pouch.

The next day both men got up in good season. The crofter was in a hurry to milk his cow, and the other man probably thought he should not stay in bed when the head of the house had gotten up. They left the cottage at the same time. The crofter locked the door and put the key in his pocket. The man with the rattraps said goodbye and thank you, and thereupon each went his own way.

In a good season: early enough

Next morning, both the rattrap seller and the crofter woke up early as the crofter was in a hurry to milk his cow. Even the rattrap seller felt that as the owner of the house had awakened, so he should also leave the bed. They both came out of the cottage at the same time. The old man locked the door and went to his work. The rattrap seller also thanked him and went his own way.

But half an hour later the rattrap peddler stood again before the door. He did not try to get in, however. He only went up to the window, smashed a pane, stuck in his hand, and got hold of the pouch with the thirty kronor. He took the money and thrust it into his own pocket. Then he hung the leather pouch very carefully back in its place and went away.

Peddler: seller

Smashed: badly broken

After about half an hour the rattrap seller returned to the cottage and he broke down the window pane where the pouch hung. He took away the money, kept it in his pocket, put the pouch back at its place and walked off.

As he walked along with the money in his pocket he felt quite pleased with his smartness. He realised, of course, that at first he dared not continue on the public highway, but must turn off the road, into the woods. During the first hours this caused him no difficulty. Later in the day it became worse, for it was a big and confusing forest which he had gotten into. He tried, to be sure, to walk in a definite direction, but the paths twisted back and forth so strangely! He walked and walked without coming to the end of the wood, and finally he realised that he had only been walking around in the same part of the forest.

All at once he recalled his thoughts about the world and the rattrap. Now his own turn had come. He had let himself be fooled by a bait and had been caught. The whole forest, with its trunks and branches, its thickets and fallen logs, closed in upon him like an impenetrable prison from which he could never escape.

Thickets: A dense group of bushes

Impenetrable: impassable

The peddler was quite happy as he had money in his pocket. He then thought of walking through the forest as it was unsafe to walk on the highway because he feared being caught. So, initially it was not difficult to walk through the forest but later on it got confusing for him as he forgot his way. He tried hard to walk in the right direction but in vain as he found himself at the same place again and again. At this point of time he started thinking that now he himself was caught in the trap of the world just like other people. He was fooled by the bait of money which he had stolen from the old man's house. The forest seemed like a prison full of trunks and branches. It was like an impassable prison.