

UNIT 8:

MIJBIL THE OTTER

Gavin Maxwell lives in a cottage in Camusfearna, in the West Highlands in Scotland. When his dog Jonnie died, Maxwell was too sad to think of keeping a dog again. But life without a pet was lonely...

Mijbil the Otter- 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.

GIST

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. The most shocking reaction came when a labourer digging the hole asked the author, "What is that supposed to be?"

Extract based comprehension questions:

1. Mijbil, as I called the otter, was, in fact, of a race previously unknown to science, and was at length christened by zoologists *Lutrogale Perspicillata Maxwelli*, or Maxwell's otter. For the twenty-four hours Mijbil was either hostile or friendly; he was simply aloof and indifferent, choosing to sleep on the floor as far from my bed as possible.

Question

- a) Who was Mijbil?
- b) How did the otter behave for the first twenty-four hours?
- c) Find exact word from the extract which means 'having no particular interest'.
- d) Why is the otter called 'Maxwell's otter'?

Answers

- a) Mijbil was the name of the otter brought by the narrator
 - b) The otter was indifferent and stayed as far as possible from the narrator for the first 24 hours.
 - c) 'Indifferent' from the extract means 'having no particular interest'.
 - d) The otter was christened by zoologist Maxwell. So, in his honour, it was called Maxwell's otter.
2. Mij was out of the box in a flash. He disappeared at high speed down the aircraft. There was squawks and shrieks, and a woman stood up on her seat screaming out, "A rat! A rat!"
- a) Why did the woman scream?
 - b) What did Mij do?
 - c) Find the exact word from the extract which means 'makes a loud noise'.
 - d) What had Mij been compared with a rat.

Answers

- a) the woman screamed as she thought that there was a rat inside the plane.
- b) Mij came out of the box and disappeared.
- c) ‘Squawk ‘from the extract means’ make a loud noise’
- d) In the extract, Mij had been compared with a rat.

Short Answer Questions (30-40 words)

Q1. What happened when Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom? What did it do two days after that?

A. When Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom, for half an hour 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 later, it escaped into the bathroom and Maxwell saw it opening the tap, all by itself.

Q2. Why did Maxwell put the otter back in the box? How do you think he felt when he did this?

A. Maxwell removed every bit of the shredded inner lining so that Mij won't hurt himself. He then kept the otter back in the box as they had to reach the flight on time. He must have felt pity and be worried about Mij.

Q3. Why does Maxwell say the airhostess was “the very queen of her kind”?

A. When Maxwell boarded the flight, he took the air hostess into confidence about the latest incidents. Being understanding, friendly and kind, she advised him to keep the box on his lap. Thus, the way she listened and helped him, led to an admiration that made the narrator say that she was “the very queen of her kind”.

Q4. Describe the physical appearance of Mijbil, the otter.

Ans. The creature that emerged from the sack was a unique one. He resembled like a very small imaginary dragon of the middle Ages. Its body was coated with pointed scales. Between them a soft velvet fur was visible. It was like a chocolate brown mole.

Long Answer Questions :(100 -150 words)

Q1. Describe the relationship between the otter and Maxwell in your own words.

Ans. Maxwell and the otter Mijbil shared a lovely relationship. Maxwell treated Mij like his own son. He took very good care of him. He gave him many toys including marbles, rubber bands, rubber fruits and a terrapin shell to play with. He took him to the bathtub to play in the water knowing the fascination of

otters with water. He noticed his habits and traits. Mijbil hesitated on the first day but then became very friendly. Maxwell encouraged Mijbil to do whatever he liked to do. He took him out for exercise every day. When Maxwell saw blood on the box in which Mij was packed, he was horrified. When Mij came out of the box he jumped all over but then came and sat on Maxwell's knees quietly.

Q2. Why did Maxwell decide to have an otter as a pet? How did he get it?

Ans. Maxwell's pet dog Jonnie died. He felt alone without a pet. This time he decided to change his pet. He decided to own an otter as his pet. His place, Camusfearna was ringed by water. It would be a suitable place for this new experiment. One of his friends suggested that he could get an otter in the Tigris marshes. Otters were as common in the Tigris marshes as were mosquitoes. They were often tamed by the Arabs as pets. Maxwell got his mail after five days. He carried it to his bedroom to read. There he found two Arabs squatting on the floor. A sack lay beside them. There was something moving and twisting in it. The Arabs handed him a note from his friend. It read, "Here is your otter ...". The sack was opened. And there emerged a Unique creature from the sack. Later on, this otter was named Mijbil by Maxwell.

Additional questions for practice:

1. Why was the author not allowed to take a flight of British Airways?
2. Why were Maxwell and his friends going to Basra?
3. Give an example from the text to show that Mijbil is an intelligent animal.
4. What is a characteristic of otter and how did Mijbil behave in the water?
5. What did Maxwell do to transport Mijbil to England?
6. Why did Maxwell want to have an otter for a pet? How did he get one?
7. How did it come to the mind of the writer that an otter can be substituted for dogs or cats?
8. How did the author make arrangements for transporting his otter to London?
9. How did the otter look when the author got it? What name did he get it? How did the otter enjoy being in the bathroom?
10. Mijbil did things which demonstrated its personality. Which qualities of the narrator are shown in his care for Mijbil?

Fog – (Poem)

GIST

Fog is a very small poem written by Carl Sandburg. He has described the process of arrival of the fog into a city and the harbour. He has very beautifully compared it to a cat. The poet says that the fog which is generally seen during the winter season is coming towards the city and the harbour just like a cat. This means that it is approaching the city in a very silent manner so that no one can notice its arrival. He has compared its arrival to that of a cat because a cat always enters a place silently. Next he says that the fog has covered the whole of the city and harbour and it appears as if it is sitting by folding its legs and looking around just the way a cat does when it sits on the haunches and looks around. At the end, he describes the departure of the fog which very silently and unpredictably, again, similar to the departure of the cat, vanishes.

Extract Based Comprehension Questions:

1. The fog comes on little cat feet.
 It sits looking over harbour
 and city on silent haunches and then moves on.

Questions:

- (a) How does the fog come?
- (b) What does the fog do in the end?
- (c) For what does 'it' stand in the third line?
- (d) Name the poem and the poet. Answers:

Answers

- (a) The fog comes on little cat feet.
- (b) In the end, the fog marches on.
- (c) 'It', here is the fog.
- (d) The name of the poem is 'Fog' and the poet's name is Carl Sandburg.

2. The fog comes on little cat feet.
 It sits looking over harbour
 and city on silent haunches and then moves on.

Questions:

- (a) Why does the poet use the metaphor of a cat?
- (b) How does the fog enter?
- (c) How does it sit and what does it look?
- (d) How does it depart?

Answers:

- (a) The poet uses the metaphor of the cat because the fog changes into a cat and the cat morphs back into the fog.
- (b) The fog enters silently like a little cat.
- (c) The fog sits silently on its haunches overlooking the harbour and the city.
- (d) The fog stays for a while and departs silently.

Short Answer Questions (30-40 Words)

Q 1. How does the poet compare fog to a living being?

Ans: The poet compares the fog to a cat. The silent steps of a cat and the way it sits on its haunches is very similar to the way fog comes and surrounds the city and looks over it.

Q 2. What image does the poet give to the fog? What are the similarities between that image and fog? Ans:

The poet looks at fog as a living creature and compares it to a cat. The fog moves like a cat on little cat feet and sits on haunches like a cat.

Additional SAQ for practice

1. How is the fog like a cat? What poetic device is used by the poet here?
2. Name the three things that tell us that the fog is like a cat.

Long Answer Questions: (100-150 words)

Q 1. Difficulties come but they are not to stay forever. They come and go. Comment referring to the poem 'Fog'.

Ans: Difficulties, when faced by people, tend to leave them hopeless and shattered. It takes a lot of courage to overcome any problem and to solve it. If we take a clue from the poem and compare difficulties to fog, we find that just like fog, difficulties also come and go. Fog is a very small poem written by Carl Sandburg. He has described the process of arrival of the fog into a city and the harbour. He has very beautifully compared it to a cat. One need not be hopeless and lose courage when problems come, one should rather think of it as fog, meaning that it has not come to stay but will always leave, like fog.

Q 2. Nature has many wonders that people take for granted and never pay attention to. How is the poem 'Fog' different from this perspective?

Ans: Fog is a very small poem written by Carl Sandburg. He has described the process of arrival of the fog into a city and the harbour. He has very beautifully compared it to a cat. The poet has taken utmost pleasure in nature and natural phenomenon like fog. Fog is so special to the poet that he cared enough not only to write about it, but also thinks of its resemblance with other things in the world. In his close attention to fog, he found fog resembles a cat, in the way it moves and sits on its haunches. The fact that such a resemblance was found by the poet shows how connected he is to various things in nature. This poem serves as a motivation for people, who take nature for granted to find such interesting comparisons and similarities around them.

Additional LAQ for practice

1. How does the poet describe the fog as if it were a living being, Elaborate?
2. How does the poet make fog like a living being? What message does the 'Fog' give out?