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The Boy and the Robbers

Contexts

'The Boy and the Robbers' tells the story of a young boy named Otanes. A character named Otanes appears many times in the works of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus. It has not been confirmed whether the name 'Otanés' was used for several different people or referred to one person alone. However, in Herodotus' works, Otanes is shown to be a wise, righteous and truthful person. It is also recorded that Otanes was an important political figure in Persia. He gave advice to kings and also led armies in many wars as the supreme commander.

'The Boy and the Robbers' is a fictionalized story of Otanes' childhood written by James Baldwin for his book *Fifty Famous People*. The story presents a challenging incident in Otanes' life and ends with an important moral lesson for the reader.

Summary

In Persia, a young Otanes prepares to attend a famous school in a distant city and sets off on the journey with a small group of merchants. His parents send him off with a crucial piece of advice: to value truth over everything else.

The journey to the city is smooth until the group of travellers is waylaid by a band of robbers. Alas! The merchants have no skills in fighting and are forced to give up their goods and money. When the bandits approach Otanes demanding his belongings, he truthfully admits that he has forty gold coins safe in his hat.

At first, the robbers laugh at the boy's innocence. How could a young boy possibly carry so much gold? Imagine their surprise when the chief of the robbers finds the treasure exactly where Otanes said it was! Highly impressed by the boy's truthfulness and courage, the band of robbers safely escort him to his destination.

Perspectives

- ▶ In the story, Otanes is helped by the robbers after telling them the truth. But what if the robbers had simply snatched the gold from him and abandoned him?
 - Do you think it is possible that telling the truth might get you in trouble sometimes? Should we always tell the truth, even if it means getting into trouble?

- Have you faced a situation where you had to tell a lie? What happened afterwards?
- ▶ The robbers were bad people who attacked travellers and took away their money and goods by force. However, when they saw how truthful Otanes was, they took care of him and made sure he reached his destination. Thus, the band of robbers also seemed to have some goodness and a code of honour which they abided by.
 - Would you agree that the band of robbers was not entirely wrong or evil? Is it possible for someone to be both good and evil at the same time?
 - Do you know of a person or character who was not entirely good or bad?
- ▶ We know that telling a lie is a bad thing. But what if something good were to come out of the lie we tell? For example, sometimes we may have to lie in order not to hurt someone's feelings. Such lies are called white lies.
 - Have you ever told a white lie? What was the good thing that happened because of the lie?

Higher Order Thinking Skills

1. According to the story, does the truth save you from trouble or lead you to it?
2. Otanes speaks the truth and makes the robbers realize that truth is valuable. Have you been through a similar situation, where a simple act has had a huge impact on someone?
3. Why do you think Otanes became one of the famous men of his country?

Language in Use

Vocabulary

A. Opposites

Divide the class into ten groups. Your teacher will give each team a set of cards with ten to twenty pairs of opposites written on them. Arrange the shuffled cards face down in a grid. Students from each group will take turns to flip over a card and then

another card to find its opposite. The goal of the game is to match pairs of opposites. If you don't find a pair, flip the cards back face down. If you match a pair, you get a point. Keep removing the matched pairs from the grid. To score more points than other members of your group, you have to remember the position of each card opened by them. The student with the maximum points in each group wins.

B. Homonyms

Divide the class into groups. Each of you will receive a card will from your teacher. Some of the cards will have homonyms on them, while the others will have two separate meanings of those homonyms. Once you receive your card, talk to your classmates to find out the word or meaning that you need in order to complete your set. Stand aside when you find your partners. Then use the homonym you have in two sentences of your own. The sentences must make use of the two different meanings of the homonym. The first five groups to frame correct sentences after matching with their partners will be the winners.

Grammar

Descriptive Sentences

Play the game 'Who am I?' in groups of four to five students. Write down a few objects that are found in or around your classroom. Note down as many adjectives as you can to describe them. Then, taking turns, describe the first object to the rest of the class using complete sentences. The team to guess the object first scores a point. Each team takes turns with the riddles. The team with the highest score at the end of five rounds wins.

Note: The game can be extended to include people, places and animals as well.

Appreciation

The king of Persia in the story is referred to as 'Cyrus the Great'. The king's name was 'Cyrus' and the phrase 'the Great' was added to his name. It expresses his character. Such a word or title is called an epithet. An epithet is a descriptive word or phrase that describes a person, place or object by accompanying or replacing it. In older times epithets were given to famous rulers, but recently have also been given to well-known personalities from different professions. Some examples of epithets are Ashoka the Great, Ivan the Terrible, The Boy Who Lived (Harry Potter), The Prince of Pop (Michael Jackson), The Bard (William Shakespeare) and Leopold the Able.

Interact

Listening

Your teacher will tell you a story of a man who was looking for a successor. Listen to the story carefully then answer the following questions.

1. Why was the old man looking for a successor?
2. What was the old man afraid of?
3. What advice did his friend give him?
4. Why was the old man disappointed?
5. Whom did the old man choose as his successor?

Speaking

Talk to your classmates about your favourite book, and why you like it. You can talk about the characters in the story, and the character that is most like you. You can dress up like that character and/or create a poster to highlight the important aspects of the book.

Express

Make a list of:

- Things you would pack with you if you were going on a school trip
- Reasons to read books
- Five things you would do if you were invisible

Learn by Doing

What precautionary measures could the merchants have taken to avoid being robbed? In groups of four or five, discuss the safety measures that we should adopt when travelling to unknown places.