

# THE LAST LESSON

- *Alphonse Daudet*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The French novelist, dramatist, and short-storywriter **Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897)** is remembered chiefly for his regionalist sketches of Provence and for his transitional role in the evolution of 19th-century theatre.

Born in Nîmes, as a child Alphonse Daudet experienced the heady delights of a sun-drenched Provence and the darkening contrasts of his family's steadily worsening financial condition. His father, a silk manufacturer, had to abandon business there in 1849, moving the family north to Lyons; never fully recovering from the depression which followed the Revolution of 1848, the Daudets finally lost everything in 1857. The family became scattered, and Alphonse—never an enthusiastic student—found himself miserably placed as a pion, or monitor, in a provincial Collège. After a few months he was rescued by his elder brother Ernest, who brought him to Paris and generously encouraged the boy's already evident literary talents. A collection of undistinguished love verses, 'Les Amoureuses', represented a most traditional debut for Alphonse, but again through his brother's influence he was directed by the opportunities of journalism to contribute prose chroniques, stylish social sketches, which won him entry to the prestigious Figaro (1859); already in these early compositions, a mixture of what critics have called "rose-water fantasy" and often sharp satire reveals Daudet's most characteristic modes: sentimentality and imaginative flight.

Alphonse Daudet is considered to be one of the most iconic names of French literature. Unlike many famous writers in world history, Alphonse wasn't very well educated, and wrote his first novel at the age of fourteen. Many of Alphonse's works drew inspiration from instances of his life. His liaison with a model, and the depressing times of his childhood were reflected in few of his books. His works 'Trenteans de Paris' and 'Souvenirs d'un homme de lettres' seemed to be more like autobiographies. Though he passed away in the final decade of the 19th century, his name still continues to be popular amongst the citizens of France. A lot of educational institutions in France have been named after this famous writer. However, he was also criticized by many for being anti-Jewish and a monarchist. His book 'Le Nabab', revolved around a Jewish politician, and spoke about Alphonse's strong dislike towards the community. However, Alphonse, till date, is considered by many literature lovers to be one of the handful writers who portray human emotions in a very realistic manner.

## SUMMARY

The prose 'The Last Lesson' describes the year 1870 when the Prussian forces (Prussia was then a European state that consisted of Germany, Poland and parts of Austria) under Bismarck attacked and captured two provinces of France, i.e., Alsace and Lorraine. The new Prussian rulers discontinued the teaching of French in the schools of these two districts of France. The French teachers were asked to leave. The story describes the last day of one such French class under Mr. M. Hamel. Mr. Hamel could no longer remain in his old school. He gave his last lesson with utmost devotion.

### Late for School

The narrator (Franz) started for school very late that morning. He feared M. Hamel. He would question the students on participles. The narrator didn't know even the first word about them. He feared a scolding, He thought of running away and spending the day out of doors. The weather was very warm and bright. But he decided otherwise and hurried off to school.

### Crowd in Front of the Bulletin-board

As Franz passed the town hall, he saw a big crowd in front of the bulletin-board. For the last two years all the bad news had come from there. The people got the news of the lost battles and other important information only from there.

### Unusual Calm at School

Usually, when the school began there was a lot of hustle and bustle. The opening and closing of desks and lessons orally repeated in unison, created a lot of commotion. But now it was all so still. He could depend on the commotion to get to his desk without being noticed. But now he went in before everybody. He blushed and was quite frightened. But nothing happened. No punishment. M. Hamel saw him and asked very kindly to take his seat.

### The Last Lesson

M. Hamel was in clothes that he wore only on inspection and prize days. The whole school seemed so strange and silent. But the most surprising thing was the presence of the village elders sitting quietly on the back benches. M. Hamel mounted his chair and spoke in a grave and gentle tone. "My children, this is the last lesson I shall give you." He told them that an order had come from Berlin. Only German would be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The new master would come the next day. It was their last French lesson. He wanted them to be very attentive.

### Sudden Love for French

The narrator felt sorry for not learning his lessons in French. He never liked his books. He didn't have any interest in grammar and history. But now he developed a fascination for them. Even he started liking M. Hamel. The idea that he would not teach them anymore, made Franz forget all about his ruler. He even forgot how cranky his teacher was. Now it was his turn to recite. But he got mixed up and confused. M. Hamel didn't scold him.

### M. Hamel went on to talk of the French Language

M. Hamel showed his concern that people of Alsace generally gave no importance to French. They put off learning their own native language. Franz was not the only culprit. Many others also shared the same fate, He declared that French language was the most beautiful language in the world. It was the clearest and most logical. They must guard it among themselves and never forget it. It appeared that M. Hamel wanted to give them all he knew before going away.

### "Vive La France" ("Long Live France!")

All at once the church-clock struck twelve. The trumpet of the Prussian soldiers sounded under their windows. M. Hamel stood up, very pale, in his chair. He tried to speak but something choked him. He couldn't speak. Then he turned to the blackboard. He took a piece of chalk and wrote as large as he could: "Vive La France! Long Live France!") Then without a word, he made a gesture to them with his hand: "School is dismissed you may go."

## **DIFFICULT WORDS AND THEIR MEANING/S**

1. Sawmill: a factory for cutting wood
2. Drilling: exercising
3. Tempting: attracting
4. Resist: to stay away
5. a great bustle: a lot of noise created by many people
6. in unison: at the same time
7. rapping: striking
8. counted on: depended upon
9. commotion: noise and confusion
10. Blushed: face turned red in colour due to shame
11. Solemn: serious
12. Primer: basic reader of any language
13. Grave: serious
14. Thunderclap: used in comparison to refer to something startling or unexpected
15. Wretches: here, it refers to an unfortunate happening
16. Saar: a river which passes through France
17. Nuisance: problem, burden
18. couldn't give up: cannot leave
19. Sunday clothes: the best dress that a person has.
20. Cranky: strange, short – tempered
21. Dreadful: frightening
22. mixed up: confused
23. Pretend: show
24. to reproach: blame
25. where we've come out: result
26. at one stroke: at once, in one go.
27. beetles: a large sized insect
28. not even the littlest ones: refers to the pigeons
29. who worked right on tracing their fish-hooks: scratching with their claws.
30. Cooed: the sound made by the pigeons
31. Gazing: looking intently
32. fix in his mind: store or keep forever
33. worn smooth: had worn out and became smooth due to overuse
34. twined: twisted
35. Angelus: prayer song in the church, the start is marked by the ringing of the bell.
36. Trumpets: a musical instrument
37. Pale: used to describe a person's face or skin if it has less colour than usual
38. Choked: became unable to speak due to strong emotions
39. Gesture: a signal
40. Vive la France: Long Live France

## **THEME/S**

1. The pain that is inflicted on the people of a territory by its conquerors by taking away the right to study or speak their own language.
2. Student and teacher attitudes to learning and teaching.
3. Language loyalty and language imposition.
4. Linguistic chauvinism.
5. Linguistic and cultural hegemony.
6. Linguistic and cultural imperialism.
7. Linguistic human rights/ Language rights of the citizens of a country.
8. The importance of one's mother tongue in his/her education.

## **CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

'The Last Lesson' is an intensely poignant story about what it means to speak a certain language and how closely one's language is linked to one's identity. The story demonstrates how the linguistic chauvinism of one race can lead to the enslavement of another and what we as individuals can do to overcome such a challenge. Themes of war, identity, linguistic chauvinism, uncertainty and displacement are replete in the story.

Because the story is narrated from the perspective of a little boy instead of an adult figure, the story becomes all the more powerful in showing the magnitude of the damage that has been done through neglecting one's language. This is because a child narrator like Franz represents the future of France and the French language. The fact that this future of France is so unprepared to face the challenges that lie ahead doesn't bode well for France and her people. Franz's situation may also be seen as a generational failure – the failure of his parents and the teacher who did not do enough to inculcate the love of language in the new generation. However, everything hasn't been lost just yet. As long as the memory of the Last Lesson is fresh in Franz's mind, the language still has a future. And the great detail with which he remembers the Last Lesson is a sign of hope:

"Ah, how well I remember it, that last lesson!"

The use of the child narrator is very effective in such stories because it allows one to talk about the most serious matters in the most innocent manner. The simple, straightforward narration by the child narrator sets the reader completely off guard. Furthermore, the character of Franz elicits sympathy and the sincere representation of his joys, fears, apprehensions and embarrassment endears him to the reader. A case in point may be Franz's musings about the cooing pigeons:

I thought to myself, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?"

These seemingly harmless lines present a sharp critique of the linguistic chauvinism of the Prussians and the repressive nature of the Prussian regime. It also hints at the limits beyond which they will never be able to assert their brute force.

The literary device of contrast is employed at the end of the lesson when the striking of the church clock is followed by the recital of the Angelus, a Catholic prayer. Simultaneously, the Prussians sound their trumpet and the two contrasting worlds of peace and violence, faith and force meet at a brief moment in time. And it is in this moment that the last lesson comes to an end.

The deep connection between identity and language becomes prominent when the Prussians, out of their linguistic chauvinism impose their language on a French speaking populace of the districts they have captured. This connection between the two is also expressed in the passage where M. Hamel suggests that by neglecting the language, the residents of Alsace have given up their identity:

Now those fellows out there will have the right to say to you, "How is it; you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?"

The theme of uncertainty is seen in the first paragraph of the story through the eyes of the narrator when he learns the inconvenient fact that it is M. Hamel's Last Lesson. Also, the lines spoken by M. Hamel "she (Alsace) puts off learning till tomorrow" shows the mistake of not recognizing the presence of uncertainty in our lives and taking the present for granted.

Finally, the fact that M. Hamel is being evicted from the place after forty years of service to the very place brings forth the theme of displacement. His emotional suffering is dealt with in most empathic terms:

"Fancy! For forty years he had been there in the same place, with his garden outside the window and his class in front of him, just like that...How it must have broken his heart to leave it all, poor man...."

M. Hamel's individuality isn't taken into consideration when he is displaced. He is just another agent of the French Language that must be replaced with one of the German Language. This is what war effectively does to people. Wars do not recognize the humanity of the individual, whether it be a soldier on the battlefield ground or a teacher in the classroom. Note that M. Hamel wasn't just a teacher but also a politically dangerous element in the eyes of the Prussian regime. His eviction is not only a linguistic change but careful political decision.

'The Last Lesson' is a story as relatable today as it was when it was written. With the imposition of language in different areas by various regimes, it should be amply clear that the need to learn and respect one's language is of great importance. One should not be as naive as the residents of Alsace as presented in 'The Last Lesson' and commit the same mistake in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which they did in the 19<sup>th</sup>, especially not after having read the story.

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