

## Questions & Answers about The Portrait of a Lady

### 3-mark questions

**1. Describe the relationship between the author and his grandmother during his childhood.**

During his childhood, the author's grandmother was an integral part of his life. She used to wake him up, pack his wooden slate, prepare his breakfast, and accompany him to school. They shared "a relationship that was very close." At school, she would sit and read scriptures, proving how deeply involved she was in his upbringing.

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**2. How was the grandmother's physical appearance described in the chapter?**

The author describes his grandmother as "an expanse of pure white serenity." Her face was "criss-crossed with wrinkles," and she was always dressed in spotless white, with silver locks scattered around her pale face. She appeared "grandmotherly" from the very start, and was portrayed as beautiful in the way "the winter landscape is beautiful."

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**3. What was the grandmother's daily routine in the village, as mentioned in the text?**

The grandmother would wake the author up in the morning, bathe and dress him, and then set out for school together. She carried several stale chapattis for the village dogs. While the author attended school, she would "sit inside the temple and read scriptures." Their routine was simple and filled with caring companionship.

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**4. Why did the grandmother feed the village dogs, and what does this reveal about her character?**

She carried stale chapattis with her to feed the village dogs on their way back from school. This act reveals her compassion and mercy towards animals. The author notes that "all the dogs would gather round her," indicating she was "kind-hearted" and saw all beings as deserving of care and love.

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**5. How did the city life change the grandmother's relationship with the author?**

After shifting to the city, the grandmother's role was diminished. The author started going to an English school by motorbus, and she could not accompany him anymore. The grandmother felt "distressed" because she could "no longer help him with his lessons," marking the drift in their relationship as the author became more independent.

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**6. Why was the grandmother unhappy with the author's English school education?**

The grandmother was unhappy because there was "no teaching about God and scriptures." She felt the author was being taught "science and music, not about the scriptures," and considered music not a respectable thing for gentlefolk. Her disappointment reflected a clash between tradition and modernity.

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### **7. What did grandmother do after the author started attending university?**

After the author went to university, the grandmother became more withdrawn, spent time in spinning wheel, and rarely interacted with the author. "She accepted her seclusion with resignation," spending most of her day "spinning and reciting prayers." Her routine shows she clung to her faith and found solace in meditation and prayer.

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### **8. How did the grandmother react to the sparrows in her final days?**

When she was ill and confined to bed, hundreds of sparrows gathered around her. They "sat scattered on the floor," accepting pieces of bread offered by grandchildren. After her death, the sparrows swept away the pieces of bread but did not eat, mourning silently. This reflected the special bond she shared with animals, especially the sparrows.

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### **9. Why was music considered inappropriate by the grandmother?**

For grandmother, music was "lewd" and associated with beggars or harlots. She believed that "music is not meant for gentlefolk," reflecting her strict traditional values and cultural notions. This shows her resistance to modern changes and highlights the generational gap between her and the author.

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### **10. Describe the events that took place during the grandmother's last moments.**

On her last day, grandmother spent her time praying and chanting hymns. "Even before the sun could set," she passed away peacefully. The family covered her body with a red shroud, and hundreds of sparrows gathered to mourn her death. Her passing was dignified and marked by a silent tribute from sparrows.

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### **11. What was the significance of the author's grandmother spinning the wheel?**

Spinning the wheel became "her happiest hour of the day." It was a symbol of her meditative routine and spiritual contentment. She recited prayers while spinning, showing her devotion and faith. This act signified her resilience and how she kept herself engaged in prayers when she felt isolated in the city.

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**12. What does the author mean by saying his grandmother was “beautiful”?**

The author says, “She was beautiful like the winter landscape in the mountains.” By this he meant her “peaceful, white-serene appearance” rather than physical beauty. Her wrinkled face and gentle demeanor made her seem timeless. This description highlights the purity and tranquil beauty of old age.

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**13. Why did the grandmother disconnect herself from the author as he grew older?**

As the author matured, attended university, and got a room of his own, the grandmother “accepted her seclusion with resignation.” She withdrew emotionally, believing her role as caregiver was over and that modern education had replaced her values. This marked a natural transition as the author grew up.

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**14. How did the grandmother’s attitude reflect her faith and traditional beliefs?**

Grandmother was deeply religious, spending hours in prayer and reading scriptures. She disapproved of English education and music, preferring spiritual lessons. Even during illness, she insisted on chanting prayers. Her life and actions consistently reflected “her faith in God and the scriptures,” showcasing her adherence to traditional values.

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**15. Why was grandmother’s death mourned by the sparrows?**

The sparrows, who had always been affectionate towards the grandmother, gathered in silence around her body. The author notes, “the sparrows mourned in silence,” refusing to eat the crumbs offered, a unique act reflecting their love and sorrow. This symbolic mourning illustrated how her compassion extended beyond humans.

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**16. What was the role of prayer in grandmother’s life?**

Prayer was central to the grandmother’s existence. She recited “her prayers in a monotonous sing-song manner,” spent time reading scriptures, and her last act before dying was chanting prayers. Prayer provided her peace, strength, and a sense of purpose, illustrating her deep spirituality.

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**17. How does the author draw a contrast between his grandmother and modern urban life?**

The author highlights the contrast by describing her discomfort with city life and English education. She was “distressed” by the lack of spirituality and teaching about God in urban schools. Her seclusion, lack of involvement in the author’s studies, and focus on prayer emphasize this stark difference between tradition and modernity.

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**18. What made the author believe his grandmother had always been old?**

The author recalls, "She had always been as old as she looked." He could never imagine her being young and pretty. The "criss-crossed wrinkles" and her white attire made her seem ageless. This suggests a child's perception and also hints at the distance created by generational gaps.

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**19. How does the story portray the theme of faith versus change?**

The grandmother represented "unconditional faith in God and scriptures," while the author encountered modern subjects and ideas in city schools and university. The friction over music and science subjects, her disapproval of modern education, and her spiritual routine all highlight the conflict between tradition and change in their relationship.

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**20. Describe the grandmother's attitude towards the author's return from abroad.**

When the author returned after five years, his grandmother was "overjoyed." She sang prayers, thumped an old drum, and called village women to celebrate his homecoming. Although she had aged further, her devotion and joy reflected her unaltered love. This reunion demonstrates the deep bond of affection that survived distance and time.

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## 6-mark questions

**1. Describe the changing relationship between the author and his grandmother from childhood till he left for university.**

In the village, the author and his grandmother shared "a relationship that was very close." She woke him up, got him ready, walked him to school, and read scriptures in the adjoining temple. In the city, this intimacy "was snapped." He went to an English school by motorbus, and she could not help with his lessons or accompany him. She was "distressed" by the lack of teaching about God and scriptures. Music lessons displeased her as she felt "music is lewd." When he went to university and got a separate room, she accepted "her seclusion with resignation," spinning her wheel and reciting prayers all day. Their physical closeness reduced, but her silent affection remained unchanged through every stage.

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**2. How does the author describe the physical appearance and nature of his grandmother? What impression does it leave on the readers?**

The author describes his grandmother as an "expanse of pure white serenity," with a "pale face" criss-crossed with wrinkles. Her silvery hair spread untidily over her face and shoulders. She was always clad in spotless white and looked "like the winter landscape in the mountains"—tranquil and beautiful despite her age. Her nature reflected kindness, devotion, and unconditional love. She fed dogs in the village and later sparrows in the city, showing her compassion for all living beings. She was deeply religious, constantly reciting prayers, and reading scriptures. Her appearance and

behaviour leave an impression of a timeless figure rooted in tradition, embodying dignity, selflessness, and spiritual strength. She symbolises the grace of old age and the endurance of values despite change.

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### **3. What events were associated with the grandmother's last days, and how did the family and the sparrows react to her death?**

In her last days, the grandmother fell ill after overexerting herself by praying, beating an old drum, and singing to celebrate the author's return from abroad. She developed a fever but insisted it was because her end was near. She refused treatment, spent her last hours praying, and "her lips moved in a silent prayer." Before sunset, she passed away peacefully. The family covered her with a red shroud and placed her on the ground for the last rites. In an extraordinary scene, "thousands of sparrows sat mourning in and around the house" silently, not chirping or moving. They did not eat anything that day. The next morning, they quietly flew away, marking a sombre tribute to her pure and saintly life.

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### **4. How does the story highlight the grandmother's traditional values in contrast to the modern education received by the author?**

The grandmother strongly believed in the value of moral and spiritual education. In the village, she was happy that the author learned scriptures at the temple school. However, after moving to the city, she was "distressed" to see him learning English, science, and music instead of God's teachings. She could not understand "why there was no teaching about God and the scriptures" and openly disapproved of music, calling it "lewd," fit only for beggars and harlots. This shows her complete faith in traditional beliefs. In contrast, the author embraced modern education and later studied at university, reflecting the modern outlook. The story highlights the generational gap and the tension between tradition and modernity, yet also shows enduring love beyond these differences.

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### **5. What message does Khushwant Singh convey through the portrayal of his grandmother in 'The Portrait of a Lady'?**

Through the grandmother's portrayal, Khushwant Singh conveys themes of love, faith, acceptance, and the inevitability of change. She is shown as a woman of "pure white serenity," deeply religious, kind to animals, and accepting of life's transitions without complaint. Even when her role changed in the city, she "accepted her seclusion with resignation," filling her time with spinning and prayer. Her disapproval of modern ways reflects the clash between old traditions and new values, yet she never allowed these differences to weaken her affection. Her peaceful death, mourned even by sparrows, leaves a lasting image of purity and dignity. The story teaches us to value relationships, respect traditional wisdom, and accept life's changes gracefully while holding on to inner strength.

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