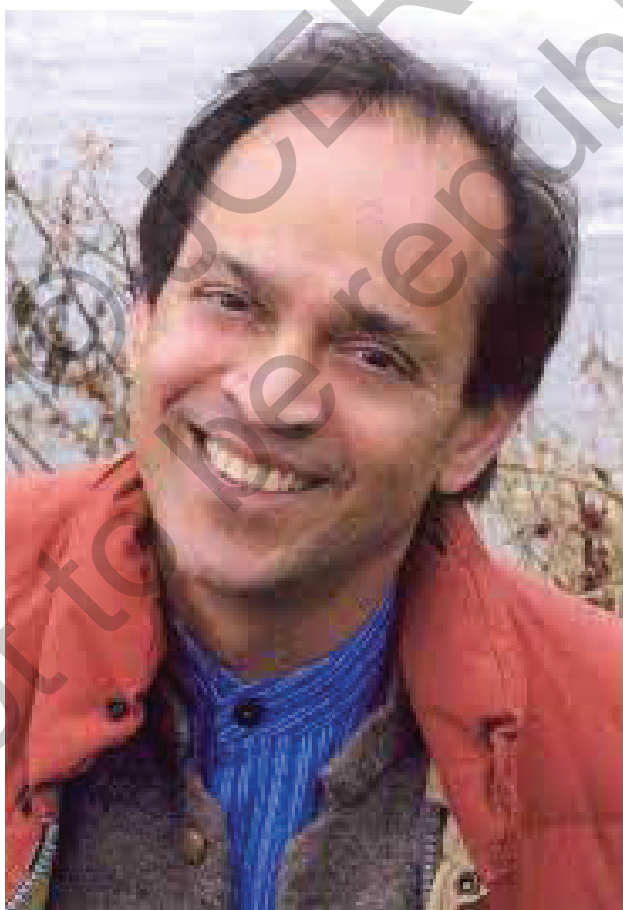


The Tale of Melon City



Vikram Seth

ABOUT THE POET

Vikram Seth, born on 20th June, 1952, is an Indian poet, novelist and travel writer. He is best known for his verse novel *The Golden Gate* (1986) and his epic novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993). The following poem is taken from *Mappings* which was published in 1981 and is included in the *Collected Poems* by Vikram Seth.

INTRODUCTION

The Tale of Melon City is a long satirical poem written by Vikram Seth about a city full of fools. In the poem, everybody including the king, the ministers, the wise, and the common men are fools. The poet uses various puns to indirectly reveal their foolishness and lack of wisdom.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poet says that he is going to talk about a justice-loving and peace-loving king who ordered to build an arch (a curved structure) that would cover a part of the road so as to impress the spectator (those who pass through). The workers built the arch. But when the king rode through the arch (in order to impress the people there, something happened.

According to the poet, the arch was a little bit short which made the crown of the king fall down. The face of the king grows red and orders that the chief of builders should be hanged for

his mistake. Note that the king was described as just and placid in the beginning. However, it was sarcastic because the king became angry at such a petty matter. The rope and gallows are arranged for hanging him and the chief is taken to that place. However, he pleads to the king that it was rather the mistake of workers. The hanging is stopped.

Hearing the chief of builders, the king orders the hanging of workers instead. However the workers look surprised over the decision and tell the king that it was the mistake of masons as they made the bricks of wrong size. The masons are summoned for hanging. However, the masons tell the king that it was the mistake of the architect. Now the architect is summoned.

The king tells the architect that he is going to hang him (the architect) for his grave mistake. At this, the architect says that the king himself made changes to the plans made by the architect. The king grows red with anger but is unable to reach a conclusion. He sighs saying that it is a tricky situation.

The king summons the wisest man of his country. The orders are followed and the wisest man who can neither walk nor see is taken to the Royal Court. He is old and shivering. He says that it was the mistake of the arch so the arch should be hanged.

The king agrees and the arch is taken for hanging. But soon, a counselor says that this arch has touched the head of

the king so it cannot be hanged. The king agrees. At this the crowd becomes eager. The king, seeing the mood of the public, announces that the matter should be postponed.

However, now that the crowd wants to hang someone, the king has to reach a conclusion. The noose (the rope for hanging) is set up in height. Every man is taken to the noose but no one's height matches it except the king. Thus

the king is hanged. The public finally feels relieved as someone is finally hung.

The crowd says that it would be a bad omen if the hanging had not been done. They praise the king (who is no more). Now, they have to choose their new king. So, it is decided that the one who will pass through the City Gate first will choose the ruler of their country.

Words	Meanings
Just	One who does and likes justice
Placid	Calm
Thoroughfare	Main road in a city
Edify	Improve
Spectator	Onlooker
Frown	Expression of anger
Gallows	Structure for hanging a person, Scaffold
Summon	To call, To order to be present
Quivering	Shivering, Trembling
Nay	Rather
Mutter	To speak in a low voice
Perceived	Understood
Noose	The rope for hanging someone
Royal Decree	Order of the King
Unruly	Difficult to control or manage; Disorderly
Dilemma	Difficult situation
Pondered	Thought carefully
Liberty	Freedom, Independence
Laissez faire	The policy of non-interference by government in commercial matters

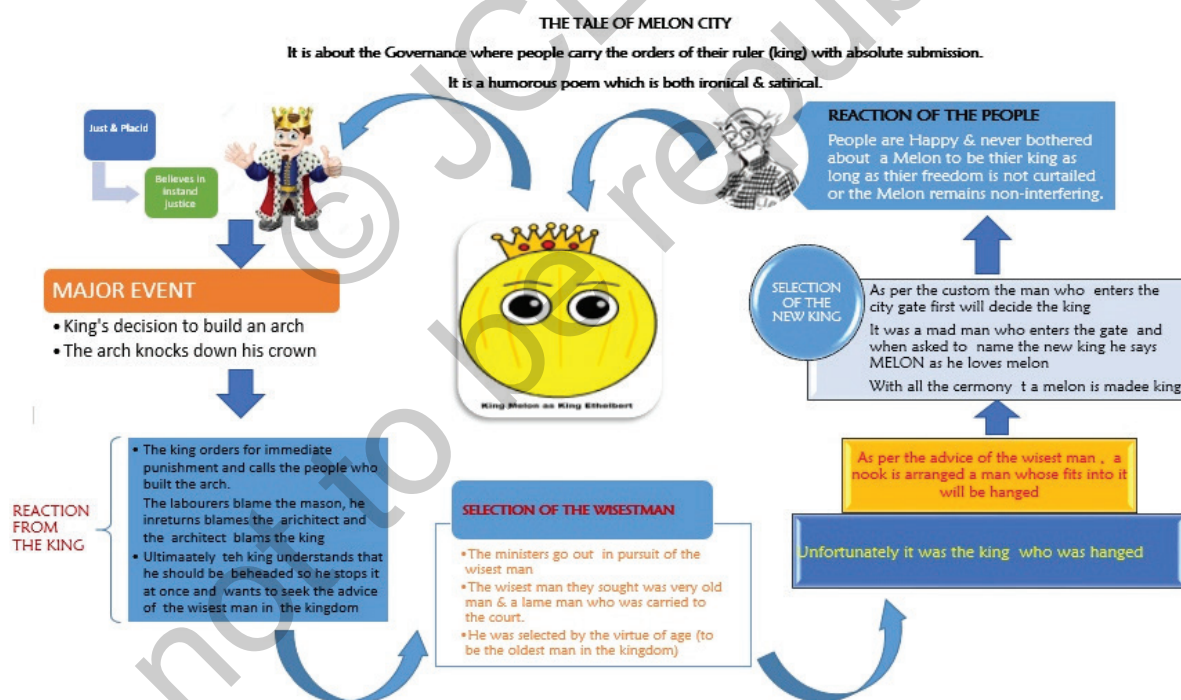
This is their custom to choose the king and hence it is decided that the new king will be chosen the same way at the ceremony. Soon, an idiot passes by the City Gate. The guards ask him who their new king should be. He answers, "Melon" because he loves melons. The ministers agree.

So, a melon is made king. It is taken to the throne and crowned. According to the poet, it happened many years ago. Now the people often ask how a melon can become a king. The poet answers them that it was their customary choice.

If the throne wants a melon to become a king then only a melon would become king as long as he lets the people live in peace and liberty. The poet further says that the principles of laissez-faire (minimal interference of government) were well established in Melon City.

IMPORTANT WORD NOTES

MINDMAP



MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. How does the poet describe the King?

- A. Arrogant
- B. Just and placid
- C. Egocentric
- D. Merciful

Ans : b) Just and placid

2. Finally, who was tall enough to reach the noose?

- A. The chief of the builders
- B. The architect
- C. Someone from the crowd
- D. The King

Ans : d) The King

3. What did the King order to be constructed?

- A. An arch B. A tomb
- C. Footsteps D. A building

Ans : a) An arch

4. What was the purpose of the construction ordered by the King?

- A. To continue a legacy
- B. To solidify the King's rule

C. To improve viewers morally

D. To carry out a ritual

Ans : c) To improve viewers morally

5. Why did the King's crown fall?

- A. Because the arch was built too low
- B. Because he lost his balance
- C. Because the crown was heavy
- D. Because he was attacked

Ans : a) Because the arch was built too low

6. Why was it shameful to hang the arch?

- A. Because it was innocent
- B. Because it was non-living
- C. Because it was newly built
- D. Because it had touched the King's head

Ans : d) Because it had touched the King's head

7. After reading "The Tale of the Melon City", what opinion do you form of the King?

- A. He was a just King

- B. He was a rule abiding King
- C. He was a foolish King
- D. He was a wise King

Ans : c) He was a foolish King

8. Who did the chief of builders blame?
- A. The public
 - B. The architect
 - C. The masons
 - D. The workmen

Ans : d) The workmen

9. What reason did the workmen give to the King?
- A. Instructions given were wrong
 - B. Time provided was less
 - C. Bricks were of the wrong size
 - D. Changes were made at the last point

Ans : c) Bricks were of the wrong size

10. Who passed the City Gate?
- A. An old wise man
 - B. An idiot
 - C. A beggar
 - D. A child

Ans : b) An idiot

11. Who according to the counsel was the culprit that was brought before the King?

- A. The King
- B. The crown
- C. The arch
- D. The chief of the builders

Ans : c) The arch

12. Who was chosen as the new King?

- A. A minister
- B. A horse
- C. A melon
- D. A sword

Ans : c) A melon

13. What sort of principles seem to thrive in the state?

- A. Democratic
- B. Laissez faire
- C. Authoritative
- D. Communistic

Ans : b) Laissez faire

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

- Q1. Why does the king order an arch to be constructed over the public road?

Ans. The king ordered an arch to be

constructed over the public road because he felt that the road would edify the spectators, it would improve the morals and knowledge of the onlookers there.

Q2. What annoyed the king as he rode down that thoroughfare?

Ans. As the king rode down the road, his crown struck against the low-built arch. The crown was thrown off and lost. This infuriated the king.

Q3. The king, in this poem, is just and placid. Why does he then lose his temper? Does he carry his notion of justice too far?

Ans. The king was known to be calm and cool-headed. But that was a blatant lie. He soon lost his temper. Being just, he ordered the guilty person or thing to be hanged. But he was an utter fool. He carried his notion of justice too far. In doing so he had invited his own hanging.

Q4. How did the chief of builders, the workmen and the masons save their lives?

Ans. The chief of builders passed on the blame to the workmen. The workers in order to save their lives blamed the brick makers and the masons. The masons put the blame on the architect for the low arch.

Q5. How did circumstances lead to

the execution of the king himself?

Ans. On the wiseman's advice, the king ordered the arch to be executed. But a councillor defended the arch. The people, however, were restless. They demanded action and hanging. So a noose was set up to hang somebody. The king alone was tall enough to fit the noose. Hence, the king himself had to be hanged.

Q6. What custom was enforced to get a new ruler?

Ans. The state custom to find a new ruler was very funny. The first person to pass the city gates was to choose the ruler of the state. The idiot who passed by liked melons. Soon after his suggestion, a melon was put on the throne.

Q7. Why do the common people accept the melon-king without any protest?

Ans. The common people valued their peaceful living and freedom more than the quality of the king. It mattered little for them whether the king was wise or foolish, so long as he did not harass the people.

LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

Q1. Narrate 'The Tale of Melon City' in your own words

Ans. The king of that nameless state was known to be just and cool-headed. But truly speaking, he was foolish, crazy and brainless. Once he got an arch constructed above the public road for the mental and moral improvement of the onlookers.

One day as he rode down that highway, the low-built arch hit the king's crown. The angry king decided to hang the culprit. He summoned the builders, the workers, the masons, the architect to undergo punishment. They all passed on the blame to each other. On the old wise man's advice, the arch itself was to be hanged. But a councillor saved it. But somebody had to be hanged. The king alone was tall enough to fit the noose which was set very high. He was hanged.

As per the custom, whosoever passed the city gates first, had the honour of naming the next king. That day a fool was the first person to pass by the gates and he was asked to choose the king. He spoke only one-word "Melon" to all the questions and the Melon was crowned. The

common people had no say in the selection. They only wanted to live in peace and liberty.

Q2. How does a melon become the ruler of the state? Why are the people happy with him?

Ans. The king who never applied his own brain went by what others said. When the people demanded somebody to be hanged, the king had to pay a heavy price for his foolishness. He himself was taken to the gallows.

According to the state custom, the new ruler was to be chosen by the first person who passed by the city gates. That day an idiot happened to pass by the gates who said "Melon" to any question which people asked him. And the ministers followed the custom mindlessly. They brought a melon and crowned it as their new ruler.

The people raised no objection. They only wanted to live in peace and liberty. They accepted the melon king who followed the policy of non-interference in whatever the people did.