

CHAPTER 05

A Legend of the Northland

by Phoebe Cary



Central Idea of the Poem

This poem is a folk tale passed down from one generation to another which teaches us not to be selfish. It is meant to be read by small children. It is based in Northland, a very cold place, where once Saint Peter came to the door of a little woman who was baking cakes and asked her for a cake as he was feeling very weak due to a fast. She was selfish and did not even give him a small piece. Saint Peter cursed her and told her that she was not fit to live in human form and enjoy food and warmth. He turned her into a woodpecker who has to bore a hole in hard and dry wood to get its scant food. The woman was punished for her greed and selfishness.

Explanation of the Poem

Stanza 1 & 2

Away, away in the Northland,
Where the hours of the day are few,
And the nights are so long in winter
That they cannot sleep them through;
Where they harness the swift reindeer
To the sledges, when it snows;
And the children look like bear's cubs
In their funny, furry clothes:

WORD MEANINGS

legend (in title)	old traditional story
away, away	very far away ('away' is repeated for emphasis)
Northland	a place located in the far North of Europe
hours of the day	daylight hours
cannot sleep them through	cannot sleep through the entire night
harness	tie
reindeer	animal residing in the far North
sledges	animal drawn carriage used for transportation over snow
furry	made of fur

Explanation Here the poet introduces the place from which her story is derived, which is the 'Northland' where the days are short, and nights are long in winter. It is so cold in that season that people cannot sleep comfortably the whole night, and often wake up. As the nights are very long, they are also not able to sleep the entire night. When the snow falls, people like to go sledging by tying reindeers to their sledges to pull them. Because of the cold, children wear heavy woollen and fur clothes that cover them up fully and make them look like bear cubs.

Stanza 3 & 4

They tell them a curious story —
I don't believe 'tis true;
And yet you may learn a lesson
If I tell the tale to you.
Once, when the good Saint Peter
Lived in the world below,
And walked about it, preaching,
Just as he did, you know,

WORD MEANINGS

curious	strange
'tis	short form of 'it is'
tale	story
Saint Peter	an apostle of Christ
lived in the world below	was alive
preaching	giving sermons

Explanation Parents in the Northland tell their children a story. Although, the poet does not think the story is true, it should be told, nonetheless, because it teaches children an important lesson. Then the poet begins to tell the story. The story is about Saint Peter as he travelled around the world preaching the word of God.

Stanza 5 & 6

He came to the door of a cottage,
In travelling round the earth,
Where a little woman was making cakes,
And baking them on the hearth;
And being faint with fasting,
For the day was almost done,
He asked her, from her store of cakes,
To give him a single one.

WORD MEANINGS

cottage	small house
baking	cooking
hearth	fireplace
being faint	feeling like fainting
store	what she is already having
single one	'one' is emphasised for showing that it is a small amount

Explanation Saint Peter came to a woman's house in the Northland just when she was baking cakes in her fireplace for herself. Saint Peter's body was pale and tired at the end of a long day, during which he had been fasting. To sustain himself, he asked the woman to give him only one of the many cakes that she was baking.

Stanza 7 & 8

So she made a very little cake,
But as it baking lay,
She looked at it, and thought it seemed
Too large to give away.
Therefore she kneaded another,
And still a smaller one;
But it looked, when she turned it over,
As large as the first had done.

WORD MEANINGS

baking lay	was being baked
give away	donate free
kneaded	moulded the dough of
turned it over	reversed while baking

Explanation So the woman baked a very small cake, but before she could give it to Saint Peter, she started thinking that it was too big to just be given away like that. So the woman went on to make an even smaller cake, but this also looked as big as the first one to her.

Stanza 9 & 10

Then she took a tiny scrap of dough,
And rolled and rolled it flat;
And baked it thin as a wafer —
But she couldn't part with that.
For she said, "My cakes that seem too small
When I eat of them myself
Are yet too large to give away."
So she put them on the shelf.

WORD MEANINGS

tiny scrap	very small piece
dough	cake mixture
rolled and rolled	'rolled' is repeated to show that it was rolled very thin
wafer	thin slice
part with	give away
eat of them	eat them
shelf	place of storage

Explanation In her third attempt to make a cake so small that she wouldn't mind giving it away, she took an extremely small lump of dough, and when she rolled out the dough, her cake was as flat and thin as a wafer. However, she couldn't even bear to give that small cake away. The woman said that the cakes that seemed small when she herself ate them, were all too big to be donated for free. As a result, she ended up keeping all the cakes on the shelf and not giving any to Saint Peter.

Stanza 11 & 12

Then good Saint Peter grew angry,
For he was hungry and faint;
And surely such a woman
Was enough to provoke a saint.
And he said, "You are far too selfish
To dwell in a human form,
To have both food and shelter,
And fire to keep you warm.

WORD MEANINGS

for	because
surely	definitely
provoke	irritate or anger
selfish	greedy or not considerate
dwell	live

Explanation This angered Saint Peter because he was hungry and weak and needed some food. It is not easy to anger a saint, but the selfish woman had been able to do so. So, Saint Peter put a curse on the selfish woman, telling her she did not deserve to have such comforts of human life like a warm fire, a house to live in and good food to eat whenever she wanted.

Stanza 13 & 14

Now, you shall build as the birds do,
And shall get your scanty food
By boring, and boring, and boring,
All day in the hard, dry wood."
Then up she went through the chimney,
Never speaking a word,
And out of the top flew a woodpecker,
For she was changed to a bird.

WORD MEANINGS

build	make your nest
as the birds	just like the birds
boring	making holes in tree trunks with the beak to find food like insects
chimney	shaft to draw away the smoke from a fireplace
woodpecker	a bird with a reddish crown on the head which bores trees for food

Explanation Saint Peter cursed the woman that she would have to build her own nest like birds do, and must dig holes into hard, dry wood to get food to feed herself. The woman went up the chimney of her house, being speechless, and had turned into a woodpecker. This woodpecker could be seen flying out of the top of the chimney.

Stanza 15 & 16

She had a scarlet cap on her head,
And that was left the same;
But all the rest of her clothes were burned
Black as a coal in the flame.
And every country schoolboy
Has seen her in the wood,
Where she lives in the trees till this very day,
Boring and boring for food.

WORD MEANINGS

scarlet	bright red
black as a coal	jet black
flame	fire in the hearth
country schoolboy	schoolboys who live in rural areas
wood	forest
this very day	today
boring for food	making holes in tree trunks with her beak for finding food

Explanation As the woman had been wearing a red cap in human form, as a woodpecker her head was still the same shade of red in colour. However, all the clothes she had been wearing seemed to have been burnt and had become black, and that is what the colour of the woodpecker's body was. The poet says that every schoolboy living in the villages had seen this woodpecker and that she still digs into the bark of trees looking for worms and insects to feed on.

Poetic Devices Used in the Poem

Assonance Repetition of vowel sounds.

Stanza 1 "Away, away..."

Simile A device which compares two different things by using the words 'as' or 'like'.

Stanza 2 the children look like bears' cubs

Consonance Repetition of consonant sounds.

Stanza 2 swift, sledges, snows

Allusion A reference to the statement, person, place etc from history, religion, literature or any other field.

Stanza 4 onwards Saint Peter

Repetition Repetition of words/phrases in the same line.

Stanza 13 boring, and boring, and boring

NCERT FOLDER

(Here we have covered questions given in the NCERT textbook along with their answers.)

I Thinking about the Poem (Page 67)

1 Which country or countries do you think 'the Northland' refers to?

Ans. The name and description suggest that 'the Northland' is the North polar region of the world, probably the Northern regions of the Scandinavian countries Norway, Sweden and Finland.

2 What did Saint Peter ask the old lady for? What was the lady's reaction?

Ans. Saint Peter asked the old lady for one of her baked cakes to satisfy his hunger, as he had been fasting all day. The lady baked three cakes in succession, one smaller than the others, but could not bear to give any of them away.

3 How did he punish her?

Ans. He punished her by changing her into a woodpecker that built her nest 'as birds do' and gathered scanty food by boring in the 'hard, dry wood' all day long.

4 How does the woodpecker get her food?

Ans. The woodpecker gets her food (worms and insects) by boring holes into trees. They are known for tapping on tree trunks in order to find insects living in holes in the tree.

5 Do you think that the old lady would have been so ungenerous if she had known who Saint Peter really was? What would she have done then?

Ans. No, probably the old lady would not have been so ungenerous if she had known who Saint Peter really was. Instead, she would have tried to please him with her cakes for the fulfilment of her desires.

6 Is this a true story? Which part of this poem do you feel is the most important?

Ans. No, this is not a true story; it is a legend, because people can't be changed into woodpeckers. I feel that the point in the story where the little woman is changed into a woodpecker is the most important. This is because the punishment meted out to the woman teaches us the value of generosity and charity.

7 What is a legend? Why is this poem called a legend?

Ans. A legend is an old traditional story, usually with a moral. Here it is meant to be narrated to children. The poet herself says that she doesn't believe this tale to be true. This poem is called a 'legend' because it preaches generosity towards fellow beings.

8 Write the story of 'A Legend of the Northland' in about ten sentences.

Ans. Once Saint Peter stopped by an old lady's cottage because he was feeling hungry and weak after the day's fasting. The lady was baking cakes on the hearth. As he was weak with fasting, he asked her for a cake from her store of cakes. The selfish lady tried to bake small cakes but each time they seemed too big for her to give away. Finally, she baked one that was as thin as a wafer. Unable to part with it too, she put it on a shelf and did not give any cake to the Saint.

So Saint Peter became very angry with her behaviour and said she was too selfish to live as a human and have food, shelter and a fire to keep her warm. He punished her by changing her into a woodpecker that would have to build a nest to live in and bore for food in the trunks of trees. Her clothes were burned and she was left with her scarlet cap on her head as she flew out through the chimney. Even today she still lives in the woods and is seen by all the rural schoolboys.

II Thinking about the Poem (Page 67)

1 Let's look at the words at the end of the second and fourth lines, viz., 'snows' and 'clothes', 'true' and 'you', 'below' and 'know.' We find that 'snows' rhymes with 'clothes', 'true' rhymes with 'you' and 'below' rhymes with 'know'. Find more such rhyming words.

Ans. The rhyming words in the poem are given below.

Stanza	Line	Word	Line	Word
1	2	few	4	through
2	2	snows	4	clothes
3	2	true	4	you
4	2	below	4	know
5	2	earth	4	hearth
6	2	done	4	one
7	2	lay	4	away
8	2	one	4	done
9	2	flat	4	that
10	2	myself	4	shelf
11	2	faint	4	saint
12	2	form	4	warm
13	2	food	4	wood
14	2	word	4	bird
15	2	same	4	flame
16	2	wood	4	food

2 Go to the local library or talk to older persons in your locality and find legends in your own language. Tell the class these legends.

Ans. Yes, there are many legends in my language. (Do it yourself)

Exam Practice

Extract Based Questions

[4 Marks each]

Read the following extracts carefully and choose the correct option.

- 1 Away, away in the Northland,
Where the hours of the day are few,
And the nights are so long in winter
That they cannot sleep them through;
- (i) Which place is the poet talking about?
☒ (a) Northland (b) Greenland
(c) Iceland (d) Poland
- (ii) How are days in that place these days?
(a) Long (b) ~~Short~~
(c) Very hot (d) Very cold
- (iii) Which word in the extract means 'not many'?
(a) Away (b) Hours
☒ (c) Few (d) Long
- (iv) Which poetic device is used in the stanza?
(a) Simile (b) Metaphor
(c) Personification ☒ (d) Assonance / *repetition*

- Ans. (i) (a) Northland
(ii) (b) Short
(iii) (c) Few
(iv) (d) Assonance

- 2 Where they harness the swift reindeer
To the sledges, when it snows;
And the children look like bear's cubs
In their funny, furry clothes:
- (i) Which of the following animals is/are mentioned in the extract?
(a) Reindeer ☒ (b) ~~Bear~~
☒ (c) Both of these (d) None of these
- (ii) What makes children look like bears?
☒ (a) Furry clothes (b) Funny looks
(c) Childish acts (d) Snow peaks
- (iii) Which word in the extract means 'fast'?
(a) Harness ☒ (b) Swift
(c) Sledges (d) Furry
- (iv) What do people do when it snows?
(a) Stay in igloo
(b) Play with bear's cubs
(c) Collect snow
☒ (d) Go sledging

- Ans. (i) (c) Both of these
(ii) (a) Furry clothes
(iii) (b) Swift
(iv) (d) Go sledging

- 3 He came to the door of a cottage,
In travelling round the earth,
Where a little woman was making cakes,
And baking them on the hearth;
- (i) At whose house did St Peter arrive?
(a) At the house of a potter
☒ (b) At the house of a cake baking woman
(c) At the house of a bangle seller
(d) At the house of a shoe-maker
- (ii) What was the little woman doing?
(a) Washing clothes (b) Knitting sweater
(c) Watering the plants ☒ (d) Baking cakes
- (iii) What did Saint Peter ask the woman?
☒ (a) To give him a cake
(b) To give him water
(c) To give him warm clothes
(d) To let him stay at her place
- (iv) Write a word similar in meaning to 'hearth' in the extract.
(a) Hut (b) Cake dough
☒ (c) Fire place (d) Blanket

- Ans. (i) (b) At the house of a cake baking woman
(ii) (d) Baking cakes
(iii) (a) To give him a cake
(iv) (c) Fire place

- 4 And being faint with fasting,
For the day was almost done,
He asked her, from her store of cakes,
To give him a single one.
- (i) Who is he in the above lines?
☒ (a) Saint Peter
(b) Cake baker
(c) Wanderer
(d) Snow leopard
- (ii) Why did he seem to be fainting?
(a) Because of extreme cold
(b) Because of tiredness
☒ (c) Because of whole day fasting
what? (d) Because of impact of drugs
- (iii) What is meant by 'the day was almost done'?
(a) It had worked
☒ (b) The day had passed
(c) He had utilised the day
(d) He had wasted the day

- (iv) Which word is the exact means 'staying hungry'?
- (a) Being (b) Faint
(c) Store (d) Fasting

Ans. (i) (a) Saint Peter

- (ii) (c) Because of whole day fasting
(iii) (b) The day had passed
(iv) (d) Fasting

5 Then good Saint Peter grew angry, for he was hungry and faint, and surely such a woman was enough to provoke a saint!

- (i) Why was Saint Peter angry?
- (a) Because the woman gave him no cake
(b) Because she gave him very little cake
(c) Because she did not welcome him
(d) Because she refused to marry him
- (ii) What does 'such a woman' imply here?
- (a) Bold and beautiful
(b) Cunning and cruel
(c) Greedy and selfish
(d) Kind and loving
- (iii) Why was Saint Peter about to faint?
- (a) He was pretending
(b) He was hungry after whole day's preaching
(c) He was drunk
(d) He had not slept for long
- (iv) What is the rhyming scheme of the given stanza?
- (a) aabb (b) abab
(c) aabc (d) abcb

Ans. (i) (a) Because the woman gave him no cake
(ii) (c) Greedy and selfish
(iii) (b) He was hungry after whole day's preaching
(iv) (d) abcb

6 And he said, "You are far too selfish
To dwell in a human form,
To have both food and shelter,
And fire to keep you warm.
Now, you shall build as the birds do,
And shall get your scanty food
By boring, and boring and boring,
All day in the hard, dry wood."

- (i) Who is 'he' in the above stanza?
- (a) The Peddler (b) Saint Peter
(c) Vendor (d) Thief

- (ii) What did he tell the woman?
- (a) That she was very beautiful.
(b) That she was ugly and cruel
(c) That she was rude
(d) That she was greedy and selfish
- (iii) Which word in the extract means 'very little'?
- (a) Scanty (b) Dwell
(c) Shelter (d) Boring
- (iv) Why did he curse the woman?
- (a) For disturbing in his prayer
(b) For lying to him
(c) For not giving cake to the hungry
(d) For being vulgar and romantic

Ans. (i) (b) Saint Peter

- (ii) (d) That she was greedy and selfish
(iii) (a) Scanty
(iv) (c) For not giving cake to the hungry

7 And every country schoolboy
Has seen her in the wood,
Where she lives in the trees till this very day,
Boring and boring for food.

- (i) Who is 'her' in the above lines?
- (a) The little girl
(b) Wife of Saint Peter
(c) The cake baking woman who was turned into a woodpecker
(d) The Princess of Northland
- (ii) What is she doing there?
- (a) Boring into trees in search of food
(b) Baking cakes
(c) Cutting wood
(d) Feeding the baby
- (iii) Which word in the extract means 'digging on making holes'?
- (a) Country (b) Wood
(c) Lives (d) Boring
- (iv) Which poetic device has been used in the stanza?
- (a) Simile
(b) Repetition
(c) Metaphor
(d) Hyperbole

Ans. (i) (c) The cake baking woman who was turned into a woodpecker
(ii) (a) Boring into trees in search of food
(iii) (d) Boring
(iv) (b) Repetition

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

[2 Marks each]

1 Why can't people in the Northland sleep through the nights during winter?

Ans. The people in the Northland are not able to sleep through the nights during winter because the nights are very cold and long. Due to excessive cold and long duration, people often get up in the middle of night.

2 'For she was changed to a bird'. Who was she and why was she changed to a bird?

Ans. 'She' was a little woman living in the Northland, who, in her selfishness, did not give anything to eat to Saint Peter when he visited her house. She was punished by being changed into a woodpecker bird, so that she would always have to look for her food.

3 What is a ballad? Is this poem a ballad?

Ans. A ballad is a song narrating a story in short stanzas which is passed on orally from one generation to the next.

This poem is also a ballad, as it recounts the story of a little woman who was punished by Saint Peter for her selfishness.

4 To what have the children in the Northland been compared? Why?

Ans. The children in the Northland have been compared to bear cubs because the place is very cold and they have to wear fur clothes, to protect themselves so they look like bear cubs.

5 The poet says, 'I don't believe 'tis true; and yet you may learn a lesson.' What does the poet believe? Why does she want to tell the tale?

Ans. The poet believes that the story may not be true. She still wants to tell the story because it contains an important lesson for all, but particularly for children, that one should not be selfish or greedy but help the needy.

6 The poet says, 'It seemed too large to give away.' What does 'it' mean here? What does this sentence show about the little woman?

Ans. 'It' refers to the cake the woman had baked. However, even though it was a small cake, she felt in her selfishness that it was too large to give away. This shows her selfish and mean nature.

7 'And surely such a woman was enough to provoke a saint.' Who was the woman and how did she provoke the saint?

Ans. The woman was selfish and greedy, refusing to give him even a small cake to eat, although she was baking cakes at that time on her hearth. He was tired at the end of the day and this refusal provoked him.

8 "You are far too selfish to dwell in a human form." Who said this to whom? Why did he say so?

Ans. Saint Peter said this to a little woman who refused to give him a cake to eat because of her selfishness. Saint Peter became angry at her due to this and said this, cursing her to change into a woodpecker.

9 Who was Saint Peter? How did he reach the little woman's cottage?

Ans. Saint Peter was an apostle of Christ. He travelled from place to place while preaching. He reached the little woman's cottage at the end of a tiring day during his travels.

10 What did the woman feel about her cakes?

Ans. The woman felt that the cakes she had baked were too large to be given away, but appeared too small when she wanted to eat them. So she kept them on the shelf. Her feelings show her greedy nature.

11 Why was the woman punished by Saint Peter?

Ans. The woman was punished by Saint Peter to teach her a lesson not to be selfish or greedy. So he changed her into a woodpecker so that she would have to hunt for food and build her own shelter.

12 List some examples of repetition in the poem.

Ans. The examples are
Stanza 9 And rolled and rolled it flat;
Stanza 13 By boring, and boring, and boring.
Stanza 16 Boring and boring for food.

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

[8 Marks each]

1 Do you agree that this poem has become part of the folklore of the Northland? Support your answer with reasons from the poem.

Ans. Yes, this poem will have become part of the folklore of the Northland. This is because, in the last stanza of the poem, the poet says, 'And every country schoolboy has seen her in the wood', showing that the story has been passed down from one generation to the next, as the schoolboys know about it.

Also, in the second and third stanzas, the children are told this curious story, reinforcing the fact that it has become part of the folklore.

2 What is the theme of the poem, 'A Legend of the Northland'?

Ans. The poem, 'A Legend of the Northland' carries the moral that we should not be selfish or greedy; instead we should help the needy. It is the story of a little woman who is baking cakes on her hearth when Saint Peter comes to her door. He asked her for one cake, but she felt that the cakes were too big to give away, despite trying to make smaller and smaller cakes. Ultimately she does not give him any, which makes him angry. He changes her into a woodpecker, which will always need to bore into hard dry wood with her beak to find food, thus giving the moral of the story. A saint maintains his tool most of the time but his tolerance gave way and St Peter cursed the woman for being so ungenerous as not to part with even a small cake and give it to a hungry and tired traveller.

Self Assessment

Extract Based Questions

Read the following extracts carefully and choose the correct option.

1 They tell them a curious story —

I don't believe 'tis true;
And yet you may learn a lesson
If I tell the tale to you.
Once, when the good Saint Peter
Lived in the world below,
And walked about it, preaching,
Just as he did, you know,

(i) Who tell whom the curious story?

- ☒ (a) Parents of Northland to their children
(c) Baking woman to a woodpecker

(b) Saint Peter to baking woman

(d) Woodpecker to Saint Peter

(ii) Where did the Saint Peter live during the course of the story?

(a) Up in the heaven

(c) In trees

☒ (b) In the Northland around the world below

(d) In desert

(iii) Which word in the extract means 'moral'?

(a) Curious

(c) Believe

☒ (b) Lesson

(d) True

(iv) What does the word 'preaching' in the extract mean?

(a) Befooling

☒ (c) Giving Sermon

(b) Cheating

(d) Benefitting

- 2 So she made a very little cake,
But as it baking lay,
he looked at it, and thought it seemed
Too large to give away.
Therefore she kneaded another,
And still a smaller one;
But it looked, when she turned it over,
As large as the first had done.
- (i) Who is the poet talking about here?
(a) The baking woman (b) Saint Peter
(c) Northland (d) People of Northland
- (ii) Why did she think that the cake was too large to give away?
(a) Because it was large (b) Because she was partially blind
(c) Because she was greedy and miser (d) Because she herself was hungry
- (iii) Which word in the extract means 'to squeeze or press with hands'?
(a) Lay (b) Baking
(c) Seem (d) Knead
- (iv) What did she do when she looked at the cake?
(a) Ate it herself (b) Gave it to Saint Peter
(c) Admired her art of baking (d) Made even smaller cake

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

- 3 What dress of the children in the Northland makes them look like bear cubs?
- 4 Is the weather in the Northland throughout the year similar to what has been described?
- 5 What were the feelings of the little woman about the cakes she baked?
- 6 Why was the little woman changed into a bird?
- 7 Justify whether the punishment given by Saint Peter to the woman was too harsh or not.

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

- 8 What is the message and moral of the poem?
- 9 What traits of character of the little woman are revealed by her actions and thinking? Illustrate with examples.
- 10 What do we come to know of the life, culture, climate and other aspects of the Northland after reading this poem?