

The Snake and the Mirror

by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

Chapter Sketch

This is a frightening story told by a doctor to his friends in a humorous way and has an unusual ending. The person telling the story is a young bachelor homeopathic doctor just starting his practice. The young doctor tells about his encounter with a snake in his house and how a mirror helped him escape an immediate death.

About the Character

The Doctor He is a young bachelor homeopathic doctor who is conscious of how to look smart. He escapes uninjured from an encounter with a snake due to his presence of mind.

Summary of the Chapter

Doctor Sees his Face in Mirror

The narrator, who is a doctor, explains his experience with a snake. It was a hot summer night when he used to live in a room in the village. When he came to his room, it was about ten o'clock. The doctor was sitting in a chair in his house at night and wondering how to look more handsome as he watched his face in a mirror. He decided that he would shave daily, keep a thin moustache and always have a smile on his face. These measures would make him look smarter and more handsome. He heard a noise. There were many rats in the room that constantly made noise.

Snake Falls on the Doctor

Suddenly, a snake fell on doctor's shoulder from above. It may have come into the house due to the presence of many rats there. The snake coiled round doctor's left arm above the elbow. The snake's hood was only three to four inches away from the doctor's face. The doctor turned absolutely still in the face of danger so close by. He prayed to God and then realised that he was a foolish and stupid doctor as he did not have any medicine for snakebite with him. Thus, he would surely die if the snake bit him.

Doctor's Escape from the Snake

When the snake turned its hood, it saw its reflection in the mirror on the table. The snake unwound (freed) itself from the doctor's arm and crept over to the table to have a closer look at itself.

The doctor, thus, got an opportunity to escape from the house. He ran very fast and went to a friend's house. After bathing there, he spent the night at the friend's place.

Doctor Shifts from the House

The next morning, the narrator went to his room with his friend, as he had decided to vacate the house immediately, to go and collect his belongings. However, he found that some thieves had stolen most of his belongings, leaving behind only one of the doctor's dirty vests.

Chapter Highlights

- 1 The narrator and his friends are listening to a story being told by a homeopathic doctor about his encounter with a snake.
- 2 The doctor tells that this happened on a hot summer night when after having dinner at a restaurant he had returned to his house. His room was shared by lots of rats who lived in the tiled roof.
- 3 When he sat down at the table to read, he looked in the mirror there and decided that he would shave daily, grow a thin moustache and would always smile all for looking more handsome. After all, he was a young bachelor. He also thought of marriage to a fat woman doctor who would have medical practice and lots of money.
- 4 Suddenly a snake fell down on his shoulder, coiling round his left arm, with its hood less than four inches from the doctor's face. He saw that it was a cobra.
- 5 The doctor did not move but started praying to God because he realised that he did not have any medicine for snakebite. He thought of himself as a stupid doctor.
- 6 The snake turned and saw its own reflection in the mirror on the table. It uncoiled itself from the doctor's arm to move closer to the mirror, maybe to appreciate its own beauty.
- 7 The doctor got a chance to run away from the room. He stayed the rest of the night at a friend's room.
- 8 Deciding to vacate his room immediately next morning, the doctor returned to his room with his friend to collect his belongings.
- 9 However, he found that a thief had stolen all of his belongings except for a dirty vest.
- 10 The doctor ended his story by saying that he never again saw the snake that was fascinated by its own beauty.

Word Meanings

The given page nos. correspond to the pages in the prescribed textbook.

Word	Meaning
PAGE 56	
electrified	having electric connection
meagre	small in quantity
not-so-white	dirty
tiled	having tiles

Word	Meaning
gables	upper parts of walls below a sloping roof
ceiling	inside roof of room
PAGE 57	
traffic	movement
wind god seemed to have taken time off	there was no breeze
tempted	have an urge
admirer	person who looks with pleasure
make my presence felt	have a noticeable effect
parting	line on the head made by combing hair sideways
earth-shaking	important
paced	walked
resumed	went back to
thud	sound of something heavy falling
PAGE 58	
wriggled	twisted and turned quickly
landed	dropped
slithered	moved with a twisting motion
merely	just
holding my breath	without breathing
turned to stone	totally still
the creator of this world and this universe	God
lead	heavy metal
made of molten fire	burning hot
drained of all strength	feeling weak
lurked	waited in hiding
it struck	the snake bit
PAGE 59	
vermillion spot	orange spot put on centre of forehead by women
at closer quarters	from nearer
no mere image cut in granite	no longer still
willed otherwise	wanted something different
life companion	wife
reedy	tall
the gift of a sprinter	quick running ability
PAGE 60	
smeared	spread
removed	stolen
cleaned out	removed of all belongings
rascal	mischievous person
taken with	attracted by

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NCERT FOLDER

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

Thinking about the Text (Page 60)

- I. Discuss in pairs and answer each question below in a short paragraph (30–40 words).

- 1 “The sound was a familiar one.” What sound did the doctor hear? What did he think it was? How many times did he hear it? (Find the places in the text.) When and why did the sounds stop?

Ans. When the doctor entered his house, he heard the familiar sound of rats scurrying (running) through the beams of the roof. The statement that he and the rats were housemates gives an impression that the house was full of rats. The doctor was used to the noises made by the rats. So, he was not bothered about the noise. The doctor heard the sound of the rats three times. When a snake fell from the roof, the sounds stopped because the snake must have come there to catch its prey, the rats.

- 2 What two ‘important’ and ‘earth-shaking’ decisions did the doctor take while he was looking into the mirror?

Ans. The first important and earth-shaking (significant) decision taken by the doctor was to shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look handsome. The second decision was to smile the way he was smiling when looking at the mirror. He thought that he should look handsome because he was a bachelor and a doctor, so he was one of the most eligible bachelors.

- 3 “I looked into the mirror and smiled”, says the doctor. A little later he says, “I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself.” What is the doctor’s opinion about himself when: (i) he first smiles, and (ii) he smiles again? In what way do his thoughts change in between, and why?

Ans. When he first smiled, the doctor was smiling to appreciate his youthful beauty. This happens to most of the people when they are in the age group that the doctor was. When he smiles again, the snake has coiled (wrapped) round his arm, so he is smiling feebly as if to laugh at his helplessness, foolishness and stupidity. His thoughts changed because of the encounter (chance meeting) with the snake.

- II. This story about a frightening incident is narrated in a humorous way. What makes it humorous? (Think of the contrasts it presents between dreams and reality. Some of them are listed below.)

- 1 (i) The kind of person the doctor is (money, possessions)
(ii) The kind of person he wants to be (appearance, ambition)

Ans. The story shows a contrast between dreams and reality in a humorous manner. The doctor’s earnings are very less because he has just started his career. He was living in a small rented unelectrified (without electricity) room. He had few clothes and very little money. Even his room was full of rats. However, his dreams and ambition were totally in contrast to this. He was a great admirer of beauty and believed in looking handsome. He emphasises that he is a very eligible bachelor, as he was an unmarried doctor. He was also pleased with his appearance. He decided to shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome. The manner in which he decided that this was an important decision is funny. Later on, he decided to keep smiling always to look more handsome. This contrast between the kind of person he was and the kind of person he wanted to be makes the story humorous (entertaining).

- 2 (i) The person he wants to marry
(ii) The person he actually marries

Ans. The doctor had thought that he would get married to a woman doctor who had plenty of money and a good medical practice. She would be fat, so that if he made a silly mistake and needed to run away she should not be able to run after him and catch him. However, the woman he actually married was slender (thin) who could run like a sprinter (racer). This contrast between the kind of wife he wanted and the kind of wife he actually got adds to the humour of the story.

- 3 (i) His thoughts when he looks into the mirror.
(ii) His thoughts when the snake is coiled around his arm.
Write short paragraphs on each of these to get your answer.

Ans. When the doctor looked into the mirror, he appreciated his good looks and wanted to look even more handsome by shaving daily and growing a thin moustache. When he smiled he looked even more attractive and so he decided to keep smiling. However, when the snake is coiled around his arm, he turned into a stone. He felt that God was very close to him at this time. He realised that if the snake bit him, he did not have any medicines in his house to save himself. That was when he thought that he was a poor, foolish and stupid doctor. This shows how his thoughts changed. This sequence (order) of events also adds humour to the story.

Thinking about Language (Page 61)

Here are some sentences from the text. Say which of them tell you, that the author: (a) was afraid of the snake, (b) was proud of his appearance, (c) had a sense of humour, (d) was no longer afraid of the snake.

- (i) I was turned to stone.
- (ii) I was no mere image cut in granite.
- (iii) The arm was beginning to be drained of strength.
- (iv) I tried in my imagination to write in bright letters outside my little heart the words, 'O God'.
- (v) I didn't tremble. I didn't cry out.
- (vi) I looked into the mirror and smiled. It was an attractive smile.
- (vii) I was suddenly a man of flesh and blood.
- (viii) I was after all a bachelor, and a doctor too on top of it!

- Ans. (i) (a), (ii) (c), (iii) (a), (iv) (a), (v) (a), (vi) (b), (vii) (d), (viii) (b)

II. Expressions used to show fear

Can you find the expressions in the story that tell you that the author was frightened? Read the story and complete the following sentences.

- (i) I was turned
- (ii) I sat there holding
- (iii) In the light of the lamp, I sat there like

- Ans. (i) to stone, (ii) my breath, (iii) a stone image in the flesh

III. In the sentences given below some words and expressions are italicised. They variously mean that one

- is very frightened.
- is too scared to move.
- is frightened by something that happens suddenly.
- makes another feel frightened.

Match the meanings with the words/ expressions in italics and write the appropriate meaning next to the sentence. The first one has been done for you.

- (i) I knew a man was following me, I was scared out of *my wits*. (very frightened)
- (ii) I got a *fright* when I realised how close I was to the cliff edge.
- (iii) He *nearly jumped out of his skin* when he saw the bull coming towards him.
- (iv) You really *gave me a fright* when you crept up behind me like that.
- (v) Wait until I tell his story — it will *make your hair stand on end*.

- (vi) *Paralysed with fear*, the boy faced his abductors.
- (vii) The boy hid behind the door, *not moving a muscle*.

- Ans. (ii) frightened by something that happens suddenly
(iii) very frightened
(iv) frightened by something that happens suddenly
(v) makes another feel frightened
(vi) too scared to move (vii) too scared to move

Translation

The text you read is a translation of a story by a well-known Malayalam writer, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. In translating a story from one language to another, a translator must keep the content intact. However, the language and the style differ in different translations of the same text. Here are two translations of the opening paragraphs of a novel by the Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami. Read them and answer the questions given below.

Translation A	Translation B
When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along with an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's <i>The Thieving Magpie</i> , which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.	I'm in the kitchen cooking spaghetti when the woman calls. Another moment until the spaghetti is done; there I am, whistling the prelude to Rossini's <i>La Gazza Ladra</i> along with the FM radio. Perfect spaghetti-cooking music!
I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done, but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax.	I hear the telephone ring but tell myself, ignore it. Let the spaghetti finish cooking. It's almost done, and besides, Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra are coming to a crescendo.

Compare the two translations on the basis of the following points:

- (i) the tense of narration (past and present tense)
- (ii) short, incomplete sentences
- (iii) sentence length

Which of these translations do you like? Give reasons for your choice.

- Ans. (i) Translation A is in the past tense while translation B is in the present tense.
(ii) Translation A has complete sentences while translation B has short, incomplete sentences.
(iii) Translation A has long sentences while translation B has short sentences.

I prefer translation B because it is more direct and uses powerful language with a lot of imagery. It uses more personal language which is the way it should be in stories and novels.

Exam Practice

Extract Based Questions

[4 Marks each]

Read the following extracts carefully and choose the correct option.

1 I had my meal at a restaurant and returned to my room. I heard a noise from above as I opened the door. The sound was a familiar one.

- (i) Who is 'I' in these lines?
 - (a) The patient
 - (b) Doctor-narrator
 - (c) The landlord
 - (d) The neighbour
- (ii) Where did the narrator have his meal?
 - (a) In house
 - (b) In a friend's room
 - (c) In club
 - (d) In a restaurant
- (iii) Which sound was heard as door was opened?
 - (a) Rats moving around
 - (b) Someone walking on roof
 - (c) Water running
 - (d) Mosquitoes buzzing
- (iv) What will be the antonym of the word 'unknown' in the passage?
 - (a) Movement
 - (b) Familiar
 - (c) Close
 - (d) Common

Ans. (i) (b) Doctor-narrator
(ii) (d) In a restaurant
(iii) (a) Rats moving around
(iv) (b) Familiar

2 At my slightest movement the snake would strike me! Death lurked four inches away. Suppose it struck, what was the medicine I had to take? There were no medicines in the room. I was but a poor, foolish and stupid doctor. I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself. It seemed as if God appreciated that.

- (i) What has happened to the narrator in the passage?
 - (a) Met with an accident
 - (b) Snake had curled around his arm
 - (c) A robber had entered
 - (d) Police caught him
- (ii) Explain the phrase 'death lurked four inches away'.
 - (a) Snake's hood was just four inches away from him
 - (b) Robber's pistol was just four inches away
 - (c) A lion was just little away from him
 - (d) A scorpion was coming towards him

(iii) Find the word from the passage that means 'waited in hiding'.

- (a) Sneaked
- (b) Slipped
- (c) Lurked
- (d) Came out

(iv) Why did the doctor call himself poor and foolish?

- (a) He was scared
- (b) He didn't know the medicine to cure snake bite
- (c) He was comparing
- (d) He was nervous

Ans. (i) (b) Snake had curled around his arm

(ii) (a) Snake's hood was just four inches away from him

(iii) (c) Lurked

(iv) (b) He didn't know the medicine to cure snake bite

3 I looked into the mirror and smiled. It was an attractive smile. I made another earthshaking decision. I would always keep that attractive smile on my face to look more handsome. I was after all a bachelor, and a doctor too on top of it!

(i) Who is 'I' referred to in these lines?

- (a) The landlord
- (b) Doctor's friend
- (c) Homeopathic doctor
- (d) His neighbours

(ii) Find out the word from the passage which may also mean 'extremely important'.

- (a) Decision
- (b) Smiled
- (c) Earthshaking
- (d) Attractive

(iii) What did the doctor decide that day?

- (a) To keep emergency medicines handy
- (b) To lock the room carefully
- (c) To keep an attractive smile always
- (d) To make lots of money

(iv) What were two special qualifications of the narrator as mentioned by him?

- (a) Young and a handsome
- (b) A bachelor and a doctor
- (c) Young and rich
- (d) Handsome and rich

Ans. (i) (c) Homeopathic doctor

(ii) (c) Earthshaking

(iii) (c) To keep an attractive smile always

(iv) (b) A bachelor and a doctor

4 Immediately I smeared oil all over myself and took a bath. I changed into fresh clothes. The next morning I took my friend to my room to move my things from there. But, we found we had little to carry. Some thief had removed most of my things.

- (i) Where did the doctor stay in the night?
- At neighbour's place
 - In a hotel
 - At a friend's house
 - In his own house
- (ii) Why did the doctor take bath and change his clothes?
- He has fallen in mud
 - His clothes were smelling badly

- A snake has fallen on him and touched his arm
 - Feeling very hot
- (iii) Trace the word from the extract that means 'spread'.
- Changed
 - Moved
 - Smeared
 - Removed
- (iv) What happened to doctor's things?
- Everything got spoiled by snake
 - A thief took away most of the things
 - Neighbours removed his stuff
 - None of the above

- Ans. (i) (c) At a friend's house
- (ii) (c) A snake has fallen on him and touched his arm
- (iii) (c) Smeared
- (iv) (b) A thief took away most of the things

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

[2 Marks each]

1 What were the two important decisions taken by the doctor to look more handsome?

Ans. The two important decisions taken by the doctor while looking into the mirror to look more handsome were

- He would shave daily and grow a thin moustache.
- He would always keep that attractive smile on his face.

These two decisions were taken because he was a bachelor and wanted himself to look prettier.

2 How did the doctor show presence of mind when he encountered the snake?

Ans. The doctor showed great presence of mind on encountering the snake. He neither jumped nor cried out. He sat still on the chair like a statue, holding his breath. His body was still but his mind remained very active.

3 What was the first important decision taken by the doctor in 'The Snake and the Mirror' and why?

Ans. The first important decision taken by the doctor was that he would shave daily and grow a thin moustache because he wanted to look more handsome as an eligible bachelor and a respectable professional, i.e. a doctor.

4 What made the doctor think "Death lurked four inches away."?

Ans. The doctor thought that death lurked four inches away because the snake had coiled around his upper arm and

the snake's head was hardly four inches from his face. The snake could bite him at any moment and he would surely die if the snake bit him.

5 Why did the snake leave the doctor's arm?

Ans. The snake left the doctor's arm because it saw its reflection in the mirror, was fascinated (attracted) by it and wanted to enjoy its reflection by going closer to the mirror. In this way, the snake freed the arms of the doctor.

6 After the encounter with the snake, why did the narrator want to remove his things from his room? Why did he find that he had little to carry?

Ans. The narrator wanted to remove his things from his room and run away to his friend's house because he was afraid of the snake coming there again.

He found that he had little to carry because some thief had stolen most of his belongings in the night when he ran away to the house of his friend.

7 How did the snake change the writer's opinion about himself?

Ans. Before the encounter with the snake, the writer was proud of being a doctor. Coming face to face with the snake made him humble.

He realised he was only a poor and stupid doctor. He was not sure which medicine was to be taken in case he was bit by a snake.

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

[8 Marks each]

- 1 In the story 'The Snake and the Mirror' a frightening incident is narrated in a humorous way. What makes it humorous?

Ans. The story 'The Snake and the Mirror' is a mixed double of horror and comic. There is a horror of encounter with a snake and the comic was in the way it was narrated as well as the way thief did their work. The frightening incident is humorous because the doctor could think in a humorous way even when the snake was coiled round his arm. He thought of himself a poor, foolish and stupid doctor because he had no medicines for treatment of snakebite, which would be needed if the snake bit him. Being a doctor, he must know and keep it with him but unfortunately he had not. He was compelled with the situation and could do nothing but watch. When the snake was looking at its image in the mirror, the doctor thought that it was admiring its own beauty. Was it trying to make an important decision about growing a moustache or using eye shadow and mascara or wearing a vermilion spot on its forehead? The doctor even wondered what sex the snake was, male or female? The doctor was near the danger as the snake was coiled round him but he was down with the humour and narrated the episode very comically. This makes the narration humorous.

- 2 Describe in detail the doctor's feelings when he saw the snake coiled round his arm.

Ans. It was night and the doctor had returned after having his dinner. He came to his place and made his bed. But, before going to sleep, he wanted to look himself in the adjoining (nearby) mirror. He sat in front of the mirror and was looking at himself in an admiring way. He was about to take some important decisions when a snake fell down there and coiled itself around the arm of the doctor. When the doctor saw the snake coiled round his arm, he simply froze and sat holding his breath. He felt then the presence of God. He felt that he had said something which God did not like and God was angry with him. He realised that he was just a poor, foolish and stupid doctor. He forgot his danger and smiled feebly at himself. He felt that God appreciated this because the snake uncoiled itself from his arm and went nearer to the mirror to have a closer look at its own image in the mirror.

- 3 Justify the title of the story 'The Snake and the Mirror'.

Ans. The title of the story is soul indicator of its outline, theme and plot. The narrator of the story has centred around the snake and the mirror. Though, most part of the story is around the snake and the mirror, yet

the story revolves round the narrator of The Snake and the Mirror. Further, the narrator is saved from the potential danger posed by the snake due to the snake noticing its image in the mirror and uncoiling itself from the narrator's arm to move closer to the mirror. Thus, the mirror also plays an important role in the story by attracting the snake towards it, thus allowing the narrator to escape from the room and avoid the snake. Due to that snake, the narrator escaped from his place and all his belongings were stolen by thieves, making the story comical further. Thus, the title is justified.

- 4 What are the similarities between the doctor and the snake? What traits of their characters are revealed here? How are these traits helpful?

Ans. When one reads the whole story then one can find what are the similarities between the doctor and the snake. There are striking similarities between the doctor and the snake. Both are victims of self-adoration. The doctor takes two 'earth-shaking' decisions on seeing his image in the mirror – to shave daily and grow a thin moustache, besides wearing an attractive smile on his face to look handsome. After all, he was a doctor and on top of it, a bachelor. The smile and proper grooming will be suitable in getting a suitable match. On the other hand, the snake was enjoying its reflection in the mirror at closer quarters by uncoiling itself from the doctor's arm and moving closer to the mirror. Both doctor and snake revealed the characters like vanity and self-realisation. These traits are helpful in self-evaluation and take necessary measures to improve ourselves. These things reflect what one is and what one wishes to be. These traits are helpful in grooming one's stature and personality.

- 5 Without the mirror, the story will lose its charm and reality. Justify.

Ans. Every story has a protagonist (main character) which leads the story and keeps the readers intact. It anchors the theme and the characters as well. In this story, mirror is the protagonist which does the functions very well. Had it not been there in the story then it would seem tasteless and without charm. The mirror fascinates both the doctor and the snake. While looking in the mirror, the doctor makes two important decisions, i.e. shaving daily and growing a thin moustache to make himself more handsome and keeping a smile on the face all the time to look better. The snake feels attracted to look at itself in the mirror and leaves the doctor's arm to sit on the table in front of mirror. The doctor finds an opportunity to move away to save himself. Thus, without the mirror, the story will lose its charm and reality.

Self Assessment

Extract Based Questions

Read the following extracts carefully and choose the correct option.

- 1 I didn't jump. I didn't tremble. I didn't cry out. There was no time to do any such thing. The snake slithered along my shoulder and coiled around my left arm above the elbow. The hood was spread out and its head was hardly three or four inches from my face! It would not be correct to say merely that I sat there holding my breath I was turned to stone.
- (i) Why did doctor not make any movement?
- (a) He was scared (b) Could not move his legs
(c) A snake had wrapped itself on his arm (d) He was asked not to move
- (ii) What would have happened if the doctor had made any movements?
- (a) Snake would have run away (b) The thief would have seen him
(c) Snake would have bitten him (d) He would have fallen
- (iii) What is the antonym of the word 'stabilise' from the given passage?
- (a) Cry (b) Turn to stone (c) Tremble (d) Jump
- (iv) Why there was no time to jump or cry?
- (a) A robber had entered his room (b) A snake had coiled around his arm
(c) A thief had taken away all his stuff (d) The doctor had become paralysed
- 2 It seemed as if God appreciated that. The snake turned its head. It looked into the mirror and saw its reflection. I do not claim that it was the first snake that ever looked into the mirror. But it was certain that the snake was looking into the mirror. Was it admiring its own beauty?
- (i) What was the doctor sure about the snake?
- (a) It was poisonous (b) It wanted to bite the doctor
(c) It was looking into the mirror (d) Rats were running on the roof top
- (ii) What did God appreciate in this situation?
- (a) Doctor's nervousness (b) Self-pity by doctor
(c) Fear (d) Presence of snake
- (iii) What happened as snake looked into the mirror?
- (a) It was drawn towards it (b) It had no effect on snake
(c) Admired its beauty (d) Pitied the doctor
- (iv) Which word in the passage would mean the same as 'be grateful'?
- (a) Admire (b) Claim (c) Appreciate (d) Nominate

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

- 3 What did the doctor do on seeing the snake?
- 4 Why did the author of 'The Snake and the Mirror' fantasise a fat woman as his wife?
- 5 While looking into the mirror, what important and earth-shaking decisions did the doctor make?
- 6 What did the doctor think when the snake was looking into the mirror?
- 7 When the doctor returned to his room after having his meal, what did he do that shows that it was a hot summer night?

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

- 8 'Birds of a feather flock together' goes the saying. Does the encounter between the snake and the doctor in the story 'The Snake and the Mirror' support the saying? Why or why not?
- 9 The story 'The Snake and the Mirror' is humorous. Give examples in support of your answer.