



The Punishment of Shahpesh, the Persian, on Khipil, the Builder

George Meredith (1828-1909)

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this unit, the students will be able to:

- evaluate the particular elements of a story or drama (e.g., how the setting shapes the characters or plot).
- evaluate stages of plot development in a fictional text. (exposition, setting, climax, character development, resolution)
- examine how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- read, view and analyse a variety of readings grade-appropriate and high-interest books and texts from print and non-print sources: narratives (e.g., fables, historical fiction, science fiction, legends)
- construct sentences using the sentence patterns and structure for grade-specific genres.
- write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Pre-reading:

- Have you ever read any story from Persian or Middle Eastern literature like *Arabian Nights*?
- What kind of characters, themes, or morals do you usually encounter in such stories?
- Can you recall a story where a character was punished for their actions?
- What connections can you draw between the concept of punishment in Arabian Nights stories and the title of this story?

Introduction to the Short Story:

Short stories became a popular literary form in the nineteenth century, a period marked by rapid social, cultural, and intellectual change. As literacy rates increased and periodicals flourished, short stories emerged as an accessible and engaging medium for readers. Writers of this era, including George Meredith, used short stories to explore human nature, moral dilemmas, and social values.

"The Punishment of Shahpesh, the Persian, on Khipil, the Builder" is one such tale by George Meredith. Set in a Persian context, this story draws on the tradition of moral storytelling common in Middle Eastern literature, while reflecting the nineteenth-century interest in exploring complex human behaviour and moral consequences.

They relate that Shahpesh, the Persian, commanded the building of a palace, and Khipil was his builder. The work lingered from the first year of the reign of Shahpesh even to his fourth. One day Shahpesh went to the riverside where it stood, to inspect it. Khipil was sitting on a marble slab among the stones and blocks; round him stretched lazily the **masons** and stonecutters and slaves of burden; and they with the curve of humorous enjoyment on their lips, for he was reciting to them adventures, **interspersed** with **anecdotes** and recitations and poetic instances, as was his wont. They were like pleased flocks whom the shepherd **hath** led to a pasture freshened with brooks, there to feed indolently; he, the shepherd, in the midst.

Now, the King said to him, "O Khipil, show me my palace where it standeth, for I desire to gratify my sight with its fairness."

Khipil abased himself before Shahpesh, and answered, "'Tis even here, O King of the age, where thou delightest the earth with thy foot and the ear of thy slave with sweetness. Surely a site of vantage, one that **dominateth** earth, air, and water, which is the builder's first and chief requisition for a noble palace, a palace to fill foreign kings and sultans with the distraction of envy; and it is, O Sovereign of the time, a site, this site I have chosen, to occupy the tongues of travellers and awaken the flights of poets!"

Shahpesh smiled and said, "The site is good! I laud the site! Likewise I laud the wisdom of Ebn Busrac, where he exclaims:

"Be sure, where Virtue faileth to appear,
For her a gorgeous mansion men will rear;
And day and night her praises will be heard,
Where never yet she spake a single word."

Then said he, "O Khipil, my builder, there was once a farm servant that, having neglected in the seedtime to sow, took to singing the richness of his soil when it was harvest, in proof of which he displayed the abundance of weeds that coloured the land everywhere. Discover to me now the completeness of my halls and apartments, I pray thee, O Khipil, and be the excellence of thy construction made visible to me!"

While-reading

What is Shahpesh comparing Khipil to in his story about the farm servant?

Quoth Khipil, "To hear is to obey."

He conducted Shahpesh among the unfinished saloons and imperfect courts and roofless rooms, and by half erected **obelisks**, and columns pierced and chipped, of the palace of his building. And he was bewildered at the words spoken by Shahpesh; but now the King exalted him, and admired the perfection of his craft, the greatness of his labour, the speediness of his construction, his assiduity; feigning not to behold his negligence.

Presently they went up winding balusters to a marble terrace, and the King said, "Such is

thy devotion and constancy in toil, Khipil, that thou shalt walk before me here."

He then commanded Khipil to precede him, and Khipil was heightened with the honour. When Khipil had paraded a short space he stopped quickly, and said to Shahpesh, "Here is, as it chanceth, a gap, O King! and we can go no further this way."

Shahpesh said, "All is perfect, and it is my will thou delay not to advance."

Khipil cried, "The gap is wide, O mighty King, and manifest, and it is an incomplete part of thy palace."

Then said Shahpesh, "O Khipil, I see no distinction between one part and another; excellent are all parts in beauty and proportion, and there can be no part incomplete in this palace that occupieth the builder four years in its building: so advance, do my bidding."

Khipil yet hesitated, for the gap was of many strides, and at the bottom of the gap was a deep water, and he one that knew not the motion of swimming. But Shahpesh ordered his guard to point their arrows in the direction of Khipil, and Khipil stepped forward hurriedly, and fell in the gap, and was swallowed by the water below.

While-reading

Why does Khipil hesitate to step forward into the gap? What does this hesitation reveal about his character?

When he rose the second time, succour reached him, and he was drawn to land trembling, his teeth chattering. And Shahpesh praised him, and said, "This is an apt contrivance for a bath, Khipil O my builder! well conceived; one that taketh by surprise; and it shall be thy reward daily when much talking hath fatigued thee."

Then he bade Khipil lead him to the hall of state. And when they were there Shahpesh said, "For a privilege, and as a mark of my approbation, I give thee permission to sit in the marble chair of yonder throne, even in my presence, O Khipil."

Khipil said, "Surely, O King, the chair is not yet executed."

And Shahpesh exclaimed, "If this be so, thou art but the length of thy measure on the ground, O talkative one!"

Khipil said, "Nay, 'tis not so, O King of splendours! blind that I am! yonder's indeed the chair."

And Khipil feared the King, and went to the place where the chair should be, and bent his body in a sitting **posture**, eyeing the King, and made pretence to sit in the chair of Shahpesh, as in conspiracy to amuse his master.

Then said Shahpesh, "For a token that I approve thy execution of the chair, thou shalt be honoured by remaining seated in it up to the hour of noon; but move thou to the right or to the left, showing thy soul insensible of the honour done thee, **transfixed** thou shalt be with twenty arrows and five."

The King then left him with a guard of twenty-five of his bodyguard; and they stood around him with bent bows, so that Khipil dared not move from his sitting posture. And

the masons and the people crowded to see Khipil sitting on his master's chair, for it became rumoured about. When they beheld him sitting upon nothing, and he trembling to stir for fear of the loosening of the arrows, they laughed so that they rolled upon the floor of the hall, and the echoes of laughter were a thousandfold. Surely the arrows of the guards swayed with the laughter that shook them.

Now, when the time had expired for his sitting in the chair, Shahpesh returned to him, and he was cramped, pitiable to see; and Shahpesh said, "Thou hast been exalted above men, O Khipil! for that thou didst execute for thy master has been found fitting for thee." Then he bade Khipil lead the way to the noble gardens of dalliance and pleasure that he had planted and **contrived**. And Khipil went in that state described by the poet, when we go draggingly, with remonstrating members,

"Knowing a dreadful strength behind,
And a dark fate before."

They came to the gardens, and behold, these were full of weeds and nettles, the fountains dry, no tree to be seen—a desert. And Shahpesh cried, "This is indeed of admirable design, O Khipil! Feelest thou not the coolness of the fountains?—their refreshingness? Truly I am grateful to thee! And these flowers, pluck me now a handful, and tell me of their perfume."

Khipil plucked a handful of the nettles that were there in the place of flowers, and put his nose to them before Shahpesh, till his nose was reddened; and desire to rub it waxed in him, and possessed him, and became a passion, so that he could scarce refrain from rubbing it even in the King's presence. And the King encouraged him to sniff and enjoy their fragrance, repeating the poet's words:

"Methinks I am a lover and a child,
A little child and happy lover, both!
When by the breath of flowers I am beguiled
From sense of pain, and lulled in odorous sloth.
So I adore them, that no mistress sweet
Seems worthier of the love which they awake:
In innocence and beauty more complete,
Was never maiden cheek in Morning Lake.
Oh, while I live, surround me with fresh flowers!
Oh, when I die, then bury me in their bowers!"

And the King said, "What sayest thou, O my builder? that is a fair quotation, applicable to thy feelings, one that expresseth them?"

While-reading

What is the significance of Shahpesh leaving Khipil surrounded by his bodyguards? What does this say about Shahpesh's control over Khipil?

Khipil answered, " 'Tis eloquent, O great King! Comprehensiveness would be its portion, but that it alludeth not to the delight of chafing."

Then Shahpesh laughed, and cried, "Chafe not! It is an ill thing and a hideous! This **nosegay**, O Khipil, it is for thee to present to thy mistress. Truly she will receive thee well after its presentation! I will have it now sent in thy name, with word that thou followest quickly. And for thy nettled nose, surely if the whim seize thee that thou desirest its chafing, to thy neighbour is permitted what to thy hand is refused."

The King set a guard upon Khipil to see that his orders were executed, and appointed a time for him to return to the gardens.

At the hour indicated Khipil stood before Shahpesh again. He was pale, saddened; his tongue drooped like the tongue of a heavy bell, that when it soundeth giveth forth mournful sounds only: he had also the look of one battered with many beatings. So the King said, "How of the presentation of the flowers of thy culture, O Khipil?"

He answered, "Surely, O King, she received me with wrath, and I am shamed by her."

And the King said, "How of my clemency in the matter of the chafing?"

Khipil answered, "O King of splendours! I made petition to my neighbours whom I met, accosting them civilly and with imploring, for I ached to chafe, and it was the very raging thirst of desire to chafe that was mine, devouring eagerness for solace of chafing. And they chafed me, O King; yet not in those parts which throbbed for the chafing, but in those which abhorred it."

Then Shahpesh smiled and said, " 'Tis certain that the magnanimity of monarchs is as the rain that falleth, the sun that shineth: and in this spot it fertilizeth richness; in that encourageth rankness. So art thou but a weed, O Khipil! and my grace is thy chastisement."

Now, the King ceased not persecuting Khipil, under pretence of doing him honour and heaping favours on him. Three days and three nights was Khipil gasping without water, compelled to drink of the drought of the fountain, as an honour at the hands of the King. And he was seven days and seven nights made to stand with stretched arms, as they were the branches of a tree, in each hand a pomegranate. And Shahpesh brought the people of his court to regard the wondrous pomegranate shoot planted by Khipil, very wondrous, and a new sort, worthy the gardens of a King. So the wisdom of the King was applauded, and men wotted he knew how to punish offences in coin, by the punishment inflicted on Khipil the builder. Before that time his affairs had languished, and the currents of business instead of flowing had become stagnant pools. It was the fashion to do as did Khipil, and fancy the tongue a constructor rather than a commentator; and there is a doom upon that people and that man which runneth to seed in **gabble**, as the poet says in his wisdom:

"If thou wouldst be famous, and rich in splendid fruits,
Leave to bloom the flower of things, and dig among the roots."

Truly after Khipil's punishment there were few in the dominions of Shahpesh who sought to win the honours bestowed by him on gabblers and idlers: as again the poet:

"When to **loquacious** fools with patience rarel listen,
I have thoughts of Khipil's chair:
His bath, his nosegay, and his fount I see—
Himself stretch'd out as a pomegranate-tree.
And that I am not Shahpesh I regret,
So to inmesh the babbler in his net.
Well is that wisdom worthy to be sung,
Which raised the Palace of the Wagging Tongue!"

And whoso is punished after the fashion of Shahpesh, the Persian, on Khipil, the Builder, is said to be one "in the Palace of the Wagging Tongue" to this time.

About the Author – George Meredith

George Meredith (1828–1909) was an English novelist and poet known for his witty, insightful, and often ironic style. His works frequently explore human nature, morality, and social norms. Meredith's stories often use vivid characters and dramatic situations to highlight complex moral lessons, making his writing both thought-provoking and engaging.

Theme

The story is a timeless satire on the foolishness of valuing words over deeds. It serves as a humorous yet sharp warning that mere speech without responsibility and results can lead to disgrace – a lesson as relevant in ancient Persia as it is in the present day and will remain so in the future. The story canters around the character of Khipil, a loquacious builder who uses eloquence and flattery to hide his negligence and laziness in completing the grand palace of Shahpesh, the Persian king. Though his words are impressive, his actions betray a lack of true productivity and commitment. Shahpesh, through irony and mock-honour, punishes Khipil for his pretentious idleness, exposing the danger of mistaking talk for action.

Glossary:

Words

Meanings

| | |
|-----------|---|
| anecdote | a short, interesting or funny story about a real person or event |
| contrived | planned in advance and not natural or what somebody claims it is; written or arranged in a way that is not natural or realistic |

| Words | Meanings |
|-------------|--|
| dominateth | to have control, influence, or power over something or someone It is used in older or poetic texts, often in a more formal or elevated context. For example, "He dominateth the land," means "He dominates the land." |
| gabble | to talk quickly so that people cannot hear you clearly or understand you |
| hath | has (old use) |
| intersperse | to put something in something else or among or between other things |
| loquacious | talking a lot |
| mason | a person who builds using stone, or works with stone |
| nosegay | a small bunch of flowers |
| obelisk | a tall pointed stone column with four sides, put up in memory of a person or an event |
| posture | the position in which you hold your body when standing or sitting |
| transfix | to make somebody unable to move because they are afraid, surprised, etc. |

Reading and Critical Thinking

A. Answer the following questions:

1. What is the central message conveyed through the fate of Khipil and how is it relevant to people who rely more on words than actions?
2. How does Shahpesh use sarcasm and irony in his treatment of Khipil, and what does this reveal about his leadership style?
3. How does Khipil's character evolve from the start of the story to the end? Does he become more fearful, defiant, or resigned? Provide examples.
4. How does the setting of an unfinished palace function symbolically to reflect Khipil's incompetence and the consequences of idle talk?
5. Shahpesh uses a metaphor about the farm servant who failed to sow seeds. What does this metaphor reveal about his perspective on Khipil's work?

6. How does the story begin (exposition), and what key information do we learn about Shahpesh and Khipil?
7. Discuss the style of the story. How does the use of elevated, poetic language and classical story-telling techniques e.g. fables, satire, embedded poetry, contribute to the effectiveness of the story?
8. How do humour, wit and satire often serve as methods of story-telling to comment on political and social issues?

B. Complete the sentences using the correct form of the words from the list below.(wrath, humiliate, punish, construct, mock, loyal)

1. Khipil faced the king's _____ after failing to complete the palace.
2. Shahpesh used his authority to _____ Khipil in front of others.
3. The builder tried to remain _____ to his master, despite the unfair treatment.
4. The incomplete palace led to Khipil's severe _____.
5. The guards stood ready to _____ the builder if he tried to escape.
6. Despite his fear, Khipil continued to _____ the palace.

C. Choose the correct option for each question.

1. What was Shahpesh's main reason for punishing Khipil?

- a) Khipil stole from the treasury.
- b) Khipil failed to complete the palace.
- c) Khipil insulted the king publicly.
- d) Khipil disobeyed the king's orders.

2. How did Shahpesh demonstrate his anger towards Khipil?

- a) He banished Khipil from the kingdom.
- b) He ordered the guards to imprison Khipil.
- c) He made Khipil sit surrounded by guards with arrows.
- d) He ordered the destruction of the palace.

3. What was the reaction of the people when they saw Khipil being punished?

- a) They felt sympathy for him.
- b) They helped Khipil escape.
- c) They laughed at his suffering.
- d) They reported it to the king.

4. Khipil was hesitant to step forward because:

- a) He was afraid of heights.
- b) He could not swim.
- c) He was angry at the king.
- d) He did not want to complete the palace.

5. What was Shahpesh's final punishment for Khipil?

- a) Execution in front of the court.
- b) Being thrown into a deep well.
- c) Daily humiliation with the 'bath of surprise'.
- d) Forced exile from the kingdom.

Vocabulary and Grammar

A. Read the sentences below. Use context clues to determine the meaning of the underlined words. Write your answer.

- 1. Shahpesh's wrath was swift, leaving Khipil in fear.
Wrath means: _____
- 2. Khipil's actions were met with humiliation, making him the subject of mockery.
Humiliation means: _____
- 3. The guards stood with their arrows bent, ready to enforce the king's command.
Bent means: _____

B. Construct two complex sentences and one compound-complex sentence using the given prompts.

- 1. Although Khipil was afraid, ...
- 2. Shahpesh gave his command, and ... but ...

C. Rewrite the following sentences to maintain parallel structure.

- 1. Khipil was clever, resourceful, and he had a good memory.
- 2. The punishment was harsh, humiliating, and made Khipil fearful.

D. Complete the following conditional sentences.

- 1. If Khipil finishes the palace on time, ... (Type 1)
- 2. If Khipil were a loyal builder, ... (Type 2)

E. Use the appropriate modal verbs (must, might, should, could) to complete the sentences.

- 1. Khipil _____ have been more careful in his work.
- 2. Shahpesh _____ be testing Khipil's loyalty with this punishment.
- 3. If you want to avoid such humiliation, you _____ follow the given orders carefully.

F. Identify the participles and gerunds in the following sentences.

- 1. Trembling with fear, Khipil stepped forward.
- 2. Building the palace was a challenging task for Khipil.
- 3. Shahpesh enjoyed watching Khipil's struggle.

G. Rewrite the following sentences with the correct punctuation.

1. Khipil knew one thing he could not escape the king's wrath.
2. The punishment was cruel it was a lesson for everyone.
3. Shahpesh ordered his guards to prepare Khipil's bath—a bath of humiliation.

Oral Communication

Role-Play (Pairs or Small Groups)

1. **Choose a Scene:** Select a key moment from the story (e.g., Shahpesh punishing Khipil).
2. **Assign Roles:** (Shahpesh, Khipil, Guards, Onlookers).

Perform: Use dialogue from the text or your own words. Focus on expression and voice.

Writing Skills

- A. Write a narrative from the perspective of a character who has just been betrayed by someone they trusted. Describe the emotional impact of this betrayal and the steps the character takes to either confront the betrayer or rebuild their trust in others. Your story should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Focus on the emotional conflict, the decisions the character makes, and how the betrayal shapes their future relationships.
- B. Select a short news article from an English newspaper. Rewrite the article by editing and proofreading it for grammar, punctuation, and clarity. Then, translate the final version into Urdu, ensuring the meaning and tone are preserved.