



Comprehension activity

THE DRAGON-FLY AND THE WATER-LILY

By Carl Ewald

In among the green bushes and trees ran the brook. Tall, straight-growing rushes stood along its banks, and whispered to the wind. Out in the middle of the water floated the Water-Lily, with its white flower and its broad green leaves.

Generally it was quite calm on the brook. But when, now and again, it chanced that the wind took a little turn over it, there was a rustle in the rushes, and the Water-Lily sometimes ducked completely under the waves. Then its leaves were lifted up in the air and stood on their edges, so that the thick green stalks that came up from the very bottom of the stream found that it was all they could do to hold fast.

All day long the Larva of the Dragon-Fly was crawling up and down the Water-Lily's stalk. "Dear me, how stupid it must be to be a Water-Lily!" it said, and peeped up at the flower.

"You chatter as a person of your small mind might be expected to do," answered the Water-Lily. "It is just the very nicest thing there is."

"I don't understand that," said the Larva. "I should like at this moment to tear myself away, and fly about in the air like the big, beautiful Dragon-Flies."

"Pooh!" said the Water-Lily. "That would be a funny kind of pleasure. No; to lie still on the water and dream, to bask in the sun, and now and then to be rocked up and down by the waves—there's some sense in that!"

The Larva sat thinking for a minute or two. "I have a longing for something greater," it said at last. "If I had my will, I would be a Dragon-Fly. I would fly on strong, stiff wings along the stream, kiss your white flower, rest a moment on your leaves, and then fly on."

"You are ambitious," answered the Water-Lily, "and that is stupid of you. One knows what one has, but one does not know what one may get. May I, by the way, make so bold as to ask you how you would set about becoming a Dragon-Fly? You don't look as if that was what you were born for. In any case you will have to grow a little prettier, you gray, ugly thing,"

"Yes, that is the worst part of it," the Larva answered sadly. "I don't know myself how it will come about, but I hope it will come about some time or other. That is why I crawl about down here and eat all the little creatures I can get hold of."

"Then you think you can attain to something great by feeding!" the Water-Lily said, with a laugh. "That would be a funny way of getting up in the world."

"Yes; but I believe it is the right way for me!" cried the Dragon-Fly Grub earnestly. "All day long I go on eating till I get fat and big; and one fine day, as I think, all my fat will turn into wings with gold on them, and everything else that belongs to a proper Dragon-Fly!"

The Water-Lily shook its clever white head, "Put away your silly thoughts," it said, "and be content with your lot. You can knock about undisturbed down here among my leaves, and crawl up and down the stalk to your heart's desire. You have everything that you need, and no cares or worries—what more do you want?"

"You are of a low nature," answered the Larva, "and therefore you have no sense of higher things. In spite of what you say, I wish to become a Dragon Fly." And then it crawled right down to the bottom of the water to catch more creatures and stuff itself still bigger.

But the Water-Lily lay quietly on the water and thought things over. "I can't understand these animals," it said to itself. "They knock about from morning till night, chase one another and eat one another, and are never at peace. We flowers have more sense. Peacefully and quietly we grow up side by side, bask in the sunshine, and drink the rain,



and take everything as it comes. And I am the luckiest of them all. Many a time have I been floating happily out here on the water, while the other flowers there on dry land were tormented with drought. The flowers' lot is the best; but naturally the stupid animals can't see it."

When the sun went down the Dragon-Fly Larva was sitting on the stalk, saying nothing, with its legs drawn up under it. It had eaten ever so many little creatures, and was so big that it had a feeling as if it would burst. But all the same it was not altogether happy. It was speculating on what the Water-Lily had said, and it could hardly get to sleep the whole night long on account of its unquiet thoughts. All this speculating gave it a headache, for it was work which it was not used to. It had a back-ache too, and a stomach-ache. It felt just as though it was going to break in pieces, and die on the spot.

When the sky began to grow gray in the early morning it could hold out no longer. "I can't make it out," it said in despair. "I am tormented and worried, and I don't know what will be the end of it. Perhaps the Water-Lily is right, and I shall never be anything else but a poor, miserable Larva. But that is a fearful thing to think of. I did so long to become a Dragon-Fly and fly about in the sun. Oh, my back! my back! I do believe I am dying!"

It had a feeling as if its back was splitting, and it shrieked with pain. At that moment there was a rustle among the rushes on the bank of the stream.

"That's the morning breeze," thought the Larva; "I shall at least see the sun when I die." And with great trouble it crawled up one of the leaves of the Water-Lily, stretched out its legs, and made ready to die.

But when the sun rose, like a red ball, in the east, suddenly it felt a hole in the middle of its back. It had a creepy, tickling feeling, and then a feeling of tightness and oppression. Oh, it was torture without end! Being bewildered, it closed its eyes; but it still felt as though it were being squeezed and crushed. At last it suddenly noticed that it was free; and when it opened its eyes it was floating through the air on stiff, shining wings, a beautiful Dragon-Fly. Down on the leaf of the Water-Lily lay its ugly gray Larva case.

"Hurrah!" cried the new Dragon-Fly. "So I have got my darling wish fulfilled!" and it started off at once through the air at such a rate that you would think it had to fly to the ends of the earth.

"The creature has got its desire at any rate," thought the Water-Lily. "Let us see if it will be any the happier for it."

Two days later the Dragon-Fly came flying back, and seated itself on the flower of the Water-Lily.

"Oh, good-morning," said the Water-Lily. "Do I see you once more? I thought you had grown too fine to greet your old friends."

"Good-day," said the Dragon-Fly. "Where shall I lay my eggs?"

"Oh, you are sure to find some place," answered the flower. "Sit down for a bit, and tell me if you are any happier now than when you were crawling up and down my stalk, a little ugly Larva."

"Where shall I lay my eggs? Where shall I lay my eggs?" screamed the Dragon-Fly, and flew humming around from place to place, laid one here and one there, and finally seated itself, tired and weary, on one of the leaves.

"Well?" said the Water-Lily.

"Oh, it was better in the old days—much better," sighed the Dragon-Fly. "The sunshine is really delightful, and it is a real pleasure to fly over the water; but I have no time to enjoy it. I have been so terribly busy, I tell you. In the old days I had nothing to think about; now I have to fly about all day long to get my silly eggs disposed of. I haven't a moment free. I have scarcely time to eat."

"Didn't I tell you so?" cried the Water-Lily in triumph. "Didn't I prophesy that your happiness would be hollow?"

"Good-bye," sighed the Dragon-Fly. "I have not time to listen to your disagreeable remarks. I must lay some more eggs." But just as it was about to fly off the Starling came.



"What a pretty little Dragon-Fly!" it said; "it will be a delightful tit-bit for my little ones." Snap! it killed the Dragon-Fly with its bill, and flew off with it.

"What a shocking thing!" cried the Water-Lily, as its leaves shook with terror. "Those animals! those animals! They are funny creatures. I do indeed value my quiet, peaceful life. I harm nobody, and nobody wants to pick a quarrel with me. I am very luck—"

It did not finish what it was saying, for at that instant a boat came gliding close by. "What a pretty little Water-Lily!" cried Ellen, who sat in the boat. "I will have it!" She leant over the gunwale and wrenched off the flower. When she had got home she put it in a glass of water, and there it stood for three days among a whole company of other flowers.

"I can't make it out," it said on the morning of the fourth day. "I have not come off a bit better than that miserable Dragon-Fly."

"The flowers are now withered," said Ellen, and she threw them out of the window. So there lay the Water-Lily with its fine white petals on the dirty ground.

1. Describe the setting where the story takes place.

2. What is the Water-Lily's perspective on its own life?

3. How does the Dragon-Fly Larva express its discontent with its current state?



4. What advice does the Water-Lily give to the Dragon-Fly Larva?

5. Describe the Dragon-Fly Larva's transformation process.

6. How does the Dragon-Fly feel after its transformation?

7. Identify and discuss the literary technique used when the Water-Lily says, "I harm nobody, and nobody wants to pick a quarrel with me." What effect does this statement have on the overall tone of the passage?



8. How does the Water-Lily respond to the Dragon-Fly's fate?

9. Examine the passage where the Dragon-Fly Larva undergoes its transformation. How does the author use vivid and sensory language to depict the Larva's physical sensations during this process?

10. In the dialogue between the Water-Lily and the Dragon-Fly Larva, how does the author use irony to convey a deeper meaning about the nature of contentment?



Answers:

1. The story is set among green bushes and trees, with a brook running through it. Tall rushes grow along the banks of the brook, and a Water-Lily floats in the middle of the water.
2. The Water-Lily views its life as peaceful and advantageous. It contrasts its serene existence with the seemingly chaotic lives of animals, particularly the Dragon-Fly Larva.
3. The Dragon-Fly Larva expresses its discontent by expressing a longing to become a Dragon-Fly. It wishes to fly in the air, kiss the Water-Lily's flower, and rest on its leaves.
4. The Water-Lily advises the Dragon-Fly Larva to be content with its current state, emphasizing the pleasures of lying still on the water, basking in the sun, and occasionally being rocked by the waves.
5. The Dragon-Fly Larva experiences a feeling of tightness and oppression, as if its back is splitting. Eventually, it realizes it is free, opens its eyes, and finds itself floating through the air on stiff, shining wings, having transformed into a beautiful Dragon-Fly.
6. Initially, the Dragon-Fly is ecstatic about fulfilling its desire. However, later, it expresses dissatisfaction, feeling too busy, tired, and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of laying eggs.
7. The literary technique used here is personification, as the Water-Lily is attributed with human-like qualities, such as the ability to avoid conflicts. This personification contributes to the calm and self-assured tone of the Water-Lily's character.
8. The Water-Lily, witnessing the Dragon-Fly's demise, expresses a sense of triumph and reiterates its belief in the peaceful and contented life of a flower.
9. The author employs imagery to vividly describe the Larva's physical sensations during its transformation, using phrases like "creepy, tickling feeling," "feeling of tightness and oppression," and "as though it were being squeezed and crushed." These descriptions engage the reader's senses, creating a more immersive experience.
10. The author uses irony when the Water-Lily, content with its peaceful life, says to the Dragon-Fly Larva, "Let us see if it will be any the happier for it." The irony lies in the fact that both the Dragon-Fly and the Water-Lily face unexpected and negative outcomes, challenging the notion of true contentment in their respective existences.