

# **THE LAST LESSON**

**-Alphonse Daudet  
(1840-1897)**



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# THE LAST LESSON

## **-Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897)**

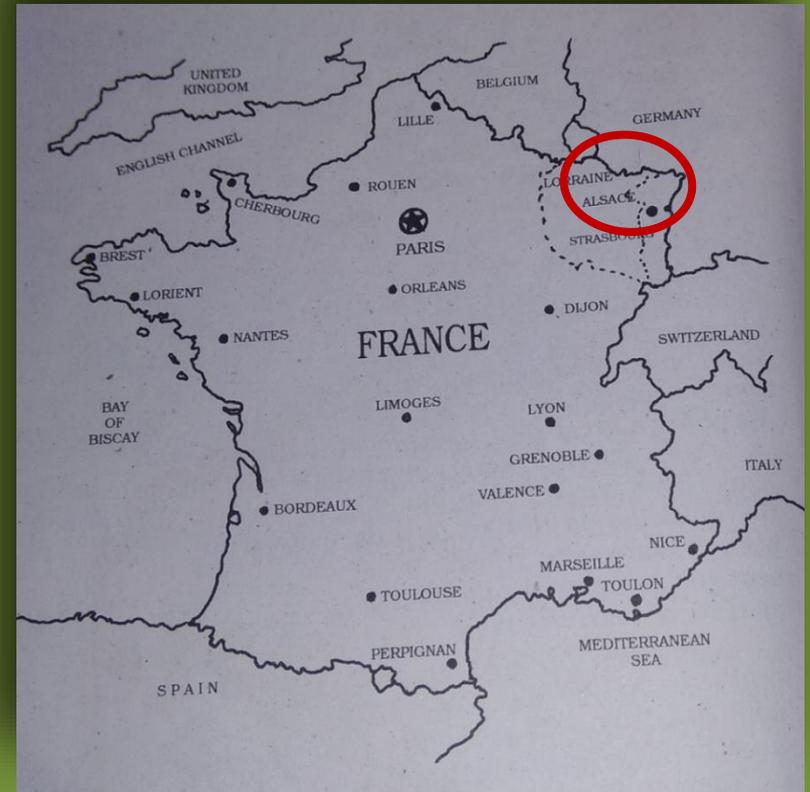


**About the Author :** Alphonse Daudet was born on 13 May 1840 in Nimes in France to Vincent Daudet, a silk manufacturer. He began his career as a school teacher but later took to writing. Daudet is remembered chiefly as a short-story writer and novelist of sentimental tales of provincial life in France.

# THE LAST LESSON

## Background of the story :

The story is set at the backdrop of the Fraco-Prussian War (1870-71) in which France was defeated by Prussia led by Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), the first Chancellor of Germany. Prussia then consisted of what now are the nations of Germany, Poland and parts of Austria. In this story the French districts of Alsace and Lorraine have passed into Prussian hands.



# **THE LAST LESSON**

**Theme** – The pain that is inflicted on the people of a territory by its conquerors by taking away the right to study or speak their language

**Sub-Theme** – Students' and teachers' attitude to learning and teaching respectively

**Plot** – The order from Berlin – The Last Lesson delivered by M Hamel – Its Impact

**The story also highlights colonial hegemony, linguistic chauvinism and consequences of procrastination**

# THE LAST LESSON

## CHARACTERS :

- ❑ **Franz** – the narrator (a school boy, truant)
- ❑ **Monsieur Hamel** – a teacher (a strict disciplinarian)
- ❑ Villagers – old Hauser, former Mayor, former Postmaster and several others
- ❑ Wachter – the blacksmith

# THE LAST LESSON

## SUMMARY

'The Last Lesson' written by Alphonse Daudet narrates about the year 1870 when the Prussian forces under Bismarck attacked and captured France. The French districts of Alsace and Lorraine went into Prussian hands. The new Prussian rulers discontinued the teaching of French in the schools of these two districts The French teachers were asked to leave. Now M. Hamel could no longer stay in his school. Still he taught his students with utmost devotion and sincerity as ever. One such student of M. Hamel, Franz who dreaded French class and M. Hamel's iron rod, came to the school that day thinking he would be punished as he had not learnt his lesson on participles. But on reaching school he found Hamel dressed in his fine Sunday clothes and the old people of the village sitting quietly on the back benches. It was due to an order from Berlin. That was the first day when he realised for the first time how important French was for him, but it was his last lesson in French. The story depicts the pathos of the whole situation about how people feel when they don't learn their own language. It tells us about the significance of one's language in one's life for the very existence of a race and how important it is to safeguard it.

# **THE LAST LESSON – KEY POINTS**

## **Franz's scare while going to school 1**

- started for school very late
- dreaded a scolding from his teacher
- had not learnt his lesson on participles
- thought of running away from school
- wanted to spend the day out of doors
- attracted by the chirping of the birds outside
- tempted to watch the Prussian soldiers drilling
- resisted all temptations and hurried off to school

## **Scene at the Town Hall**

- a crowd in front of the bulletin-board
- conveyed all bad news like the lost battles, the draft, the orders of the commanding officer
- Franz worried at the gathering of the people
- thought what the matter could be
- astonished when the blacksmith remarked that there was plenty of time to reach the school

## **Usual bustle at school 2**

- noise of the opening and closing of desks
- lessons repeated loudly in unison
- sound of the teacher's ruler rapping on the table

## **Usual bustle missing at school that day**

- everything still and quiet
- looked like a Sunday morning
- all classmates already in their places
- M. Hamel, the teacher, walking up and down with his terrible iron ruler under his arm
- Franz frightened to enter the classroom

## **Franz surprised at M. Hamel's kindness**

- M. Hamel very kind to Franz
- asked him kindly to occupy his seat
- M. Hamel in his beautiful green coat, frilled shirt, and the little black silk cap which he wore on inspection days and prize days
- the whole school looked strange and solemn
- Franz surprised to see the back benches being occupied by the village people

# THE LAST LESSON – KEY POINTS

## **M. Hamel's surprising remarks**

3

- M. Hamel announced in a grave and gentle tone that it was their last lesson in French
- order had come from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine
- new teacher to join the school the next day

## **Franz realises the grim situation**

- felt sorry for not learning his lessons
- regretted for wasting time and wandering hither and thither
- regretted that he considered his books of grammar and history a nuisance
- now regarded his books as his friends
- sad at the idea that M. Hamel was going away
- forgot all about M. Hamel's ruler and his cranky nature
- realised that M. Hamel had put on his fine Sunday clothes in honour of the last lesson

## **An affectionate tribute by the villagers**

- villagers present in the classroom
- regretted for not going to school very often
- came to thank M. Hamel for his forty years of faithful service
- as a mark of respect for the country that was theirs no more

## **Franz's failure to learn the rules for participles**

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- could not recite rule for participles
- wished that he could recite the rules without even one mistake
- mixed up everything
- felt sorry and dared not to look up

## **M. Hamel's reaction**

- M. Hamel did not scold Franz
- commented upon man's nature of putting off things to tomorrow
- remarked that it was sad that they were Frenchmen and yet could neither speak nor write French

## **M. Hamel's general view about learning**

- parents not anxious for their children to learn
- preferred to put their children to work on a farm or at the mills
- wanted them to earn money
- also blamed himself for sending them to do his errands
- regretted that he gave them a holiday when he wanted to go fishing

# THE LAST LESSON- KEY POINTS

## M Hamel' views about French language

- French language the most beautiful language in the world
- called it the clearest and the most logical language
- exhorted them to guard it and never forget it
- gave a lesson in grammar **5**
- explained it in an easy way
- Franz understood it easily
- seemed that he wanted to teach them at one stroke
- then he gave a lesson in writing
- that day M. Hamel gave new copies to them with 'France Alsace' written in a beautiful round hand on them

## Students displayed rare attention

- everyone was quiet and did his work
- there was complete silence
- the only sound heard was the scratching of the pens over the paper
- the little ones were busy tracing their fish-hooks
- nobody paid attention to beetles who flew in

## Franz's remarks about Hamel as a dedicated teacher

- M. Hamel had served the school for forty years
- nothing had changed **6**
- the garden outside the window and his class remained the same
- but the desks and benches had worn smooth
- the walnut trees in the garden became taller; the hopvine that he had planted twined about the windows to the roof

## M. Hamel displayed his courage

- heard every lesson to the last
- delivered his last lesson in history
- everyone present in the class became emotional
- they even shed tears

## M. Hamel grew emotional and patriotic

- the church-clock struck twelve; the trumpets of the Prussians sounded under the windows
- grew emotional
- took a piece of chalk and wrote 'Vive La France' on the blackboard
- made a gesture to them with his hand and said, "School is dismissed - you may go".

# THE LAST LESSON

## Vocabulary

<i>dread</i>	= fear
<i>scolding</i>	= rebuke
<i>out of doors</i>	= in the open
<i>chirping</i>	= short sounds (of birds)
<i>strength to resist</i>	= power to resist temptation
<i>bulletin-board</i>	= notice board

<i>draft</i>	= conscription ( the practice of ordering people by law to serve in the armed forces)
<i>apprentice</i>	= a young person who works for an employer for a fixed period of time in order to learn the particular skill
<i>bustle</i>	= noise
<i>in unison</i>	= doing at the same time
<i>rapping</i>	= hitting against something
<i>counted on</i>	= depended upon
<i>commotion</i>	= sudden noisy confusion
<i>blush</i>	= to become red in the face because of embarrassment or shame
<i>frilled</i>	= decorated with folds
<i>solemn</i>	= serious
<i>thumbed at the edges</i>	= (of pages) have crumpled edges

<i>mounted his chair</i>	= seated himself on chair
<i>grave</i>	= serious
<i>thunderclap</i>	= a loud crash made by thunder
<i>wretches</i>	= evil persons
<i>nuisance</i>	= something annoying
<i>cranky</i>	= strange, eccentric
<i>put off</i>	= postpone
<i>a great deal</i>	= a lot
<i>dreadful</i>	= terrible
<i>reproach</i>	= criticise, blame
<i>logical</i>	= reasonable
<i>enslave</i>	= to make slave
<i>amazed</i>	= surprised
<i>at one stroke</i>	= by a single action
<i>motionless</i>	= still
<i>gazing</i>	= to look steadily, staring
<i>twined</i>	= encircled
<i>choked</i>	= to be unable to speak normally especially because of strong emotion.
<i>Vive La France</i>	= Long live France

## Important vocab -

Procrastination, to hold fast to  
Crank, to count on, lucid,  
hegemony, chauvinism,  
introspect

# **THE LAST LESSON**

## **REFERENCE TO THE CONTEXT**

- It was all much more tempting than the rule for participles
- What can be the matter now?
- Don't go so fast, bub; you'll get to your school in plenty of time!
- ...as quiet as Sunday morning
- I had counted on the commotion to get to my desk without being seen
- What a thunderclap these words were to me!
- ...that had seemed such a nuisance a while ago...that I couldn't give up.
- What would I not have given to be able to say that dreadful rule ...But I got mixed up on the first words
- We've all a great deal to reproach ourselves with.
- ...when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison.
- ...put it all into our heads at one stroke.
- Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?

# THE LAST LESSON

## ASSIGNMENT : QUESTIONS TO TEST COMPREHENSION

### Short Answer Questions (30-40 words)

1. What did Franz notice that was unusual about the school that day?
2. What changes did the order from Berlin cause in the school that day?
3. How did Franz's feelings about M. Hamel and school change?
4. Why was Franz tempted to miss the school that day?
5. How did Franz decide to enter the classroom?
6. How did M. Hamel react when Franz arrived late in the school?
7. "We have a great deal to reproach ourselves with." Comment.
8. "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?". Comment.

### Long Answer Questions (100-125 words) :

9. "As long as you hold fast to your language, you have the key to prison". Comment.
10. How did M. Hamel deliver his last lesson and what was its impact on the students and the villagers?
11. The people in the story suddenly realize how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?
12. Draw a character sketch of M. Hamel?