



Celebration of the 150th Birth Date of Rabindranath Tagore
Bengali Writer and Nobel Literature Prize Winner in 1913

Working With Tagore's Memoire



Memoir

A memoir is an account of the writer's relationship to important events, people, places, animals, and objects in his/her life ... the experiences that made him who he is. The excerpts that have been chosen for this curriculum package are very short because they have been taken from an old translation, making the language less accessible to elementary students. The excerpts do offer some insight into Tagore's character and some of the people and places that were important to him. (*See Below*)

Analyzing the Features of Memoir



As you read the excerpts to the children discuss some of the following features:

- written in the first person
- written from the writer's point of view
- describes real people, places, events, etc
- reveals the writer's feelings and thoughts about the people, places, events
- describes the experience more than the event
- uses descriptive language to paint pictures with words to make the subject come alive (strong verbs, adjectives, similes, metaphors)
- reveals what the writer has learned from the experience



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Suggested Learning Activities:



Reading a Memoir

- Interpret the text ... comprehension strategies that match memoir reading:
 - activate prior knowledge (what stories have your grandparents, parents and older family friends and relatives told you about their childhood?)
There is a question before each excerpt design to activate prior knowledge.
 - analyze text features
 - visualize (make mental pictures of the writer's words)
 - infer the intended message ... the lessons the writer has learned; the lessons we can learn
- interview a grandparent, parent, older family friend or relative to hear a story from his/her childhood
- compare Tagore's memoir to other texts that include memories of the characters
- write a character sketch of Tagore (i.e. introduce Tagore to someone who does not know him ... what is he like?)
- create a poster, (movie trailer, 'radio' commercial) to generate interest in Tagore or in the Memoir
- compare one person, place or event in your life to Tagore's (use a t-chart or Venn diagram)
- make lists of the important people, places, or events in your life: choose one to describe
- role play an interview with Tagore
- create a visual representation of an excerpt from the memoir, or the lesson the reader can learn (e.g., *tableau*, drawing, collage)
- write a letter to Tagore telling him the importance of what you have learned about him
- write in role as Tagore or one of the other people in the memoir



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Writing a Memoir

If you are going to have students write about their memories, reread the excerpts and have them listen with a writer's ear ... record the tools the writer has used to bring the reader into the text (e.g., catchy beginning, words that paint pictures, words that show the writer cares about the subject, organizing the information around a main idea and supporting details). Use some of the following learning activities to scaffold writing a memory which appeals to a chosen audience:

- create an 'All About Me' poster and tell a partner a story about the poster
- create a neighbourhood map of your childhood and mark in places that were important to you ... tell a partner a story that goes with one of the places
- 'quick writes' about: an early memory, an exciting event, an important person, an important place, an embarrassing moment, a humorous event, a scary event, a wonderful gift ... discuss the story with a partner and explain why the event was important (the cause and effect)
- make lists of sensory language (i.e., what it looks like, sounds like, feels like etc) that go with people, places, objects
- when choosing the final event, person, place to write about, consider the following questions: do I have strong feelings about it; is it an important part of my past; do I have stories about it; will I enjoy writing about it

The excerpts on the following pages are from *My Boyhood Days* originally published in Visva-Bharati Quarterly and translated by Marjorie Sykes. It has been reprinted many times as a book (ISBN- 81-7522-112-7) since then. The page numbers refer to the book. The question which precedes each excerpt, is a suggestion for activating prior knowledge for the excerpt.



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I

Have you ever done anything so you would not have to go to school?

My constitution was so abominably sound that even when the most urgent need arose for avoiding school, I could never make myself ill by fair means or foul. I would get wet through shoes, stockings and all, but I could not catch cold. I would lie on the open roof in the heavy autumn dew; my hair and clothes would be soaked, but I never had the slightest suspicion of a cough. And as for that sign of bad digestion known as a stomachache, my stomach was a complete stranger to it, though my tongue made use of its name with mother in time of need. Mother would smile to herself and not feel the least anxiety; she would merely call the servant and tell him to go and tell my teacher that he should not teach me that evening. Our old-fashioned mothers, used to think no great harm if the boys occasionally took a holiday from study. If we had fallen into the hands of these present-day mothers, we should certainly have been sent to the teacher, and had our ears tweaked in the bargain.

(pg.20)

II

Have you ever found that when an older person talks about the 'old days' s/he thinks that the old days were much better?

The old days were like a king's son who, from time to time on festive occasions, or according to his whim, distributes rich and royal gifts to all within his jurisdiction. Modern days are like a merchant's son, sitting at the cross-roads on some great highway with many kinds of cheap and tawdry goods spread glittering before him, and drawing his customers by highway and byway from every side.

(pg.31)

III

What is your favourite sport or pastime?

I got up while it was still dark and practiced wrestling—on cold days I shivered and trembled with cold. In the city was a celebrated one-eyed wrestler, who gave me practice. On the north side of the outer room was an open space known as the "granary". The name clearly had survived from a time when the city had not yet completely crushed out all rural life, and a few open spaces remained. When the life of the city was still young our



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granary had been filled with the whole year's store of grain, and the *ryots* who held their land on lease from us brought to it their appointed portion. It was here that the lean-to shed for wrestling was built against the compound wall. The ground had been prepared by digging and loosening the earth to a depth of about a cubit and pouring over it a **maund** of mustard oil. It was a mere child's play for the wrestler to try a fall with me there, but I would manage to get well smeared with dust by the end of the lesson, when I put on my shirt and went indoors.
(pg.42-43)

glossary:

ryots farmers

maund a unit of weight

IV

Is there a place you go to get away from everyone and be with your own thoughts?

I would go up secretly to this roof, usually midday. The midday hours have always held a fascination for me. They are like the night of the daytime, the time when the *sannyassi* spirit in every boy makes him long to quit his familiar surroundings. I put my hand through the shutter and drew the bolt of the door. Right opposite the door was a sofa, and I sat there in perfect bliss of solitude. The servants who acted as my warders had eaten their fill and become drowsy, and yawning and stretching had betaken themselves to sleep on their mats. The afternoon sunlight deepened into gold, and the kite rose screaming into the sky. The bangle-seller went crying his wares down the opposite lane. His sudden cry would penetrate to where the housewife lay with her loosened hair falling over her pillow, a maid-servant would bring him in, and the old bangle-seller dexterously kneaded the tender fingers as he fitted on the glass bangles that took her fancy....The roof was like what I imagined the deserts in my books to be, a sheer expanse of quivering haze.

(pg.53-54)

glossary:

sannyasi spirit the wish to escape to a simpler life



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V

Tagore started an alternative school when he became an adult. Can you find evidence in this passage to explain his interest in alternative education?

In this way the days passed monotonously on. School grabbed the best part of the day and only fragments of time in the morning and evening slipped through its clutching fingers. As soon as I entered the classroom, the benches and tables forced themselves rudely on my attention, elbowing and jostling their way into my mind. They were always the same—stiff, cramping, and dead. In the evening I went home, and the oil lamp in our study-room, like a stern signal, summoned me for the preparation of the next day's lessons. There is a kind of grasshopper which takes the colour of the withered leaves among which it lurks unobserved. In like manner my spirit also shrank and faded among those faded, drab-coloured days.

(pg.56)

VI

What kinds of games do you play at recess?

Now and again there came to our courtyard a man with a dancing bear, or a snake-charmer playing with his snakes. Now and again the visit of a juggler provided some little novelty. Today the drums of the juggler and snake-charmer no longer beat in our Chitpore Road. From afar they have salaamed to the cinema, and fled before it from the city. Games were few and of very ordinary kinds. We had marbles, we had what is called "bat-ball", a very poor distant relation of cricket, and there were also top-spinning and kite-flying.

(pg.56)

VII

Can you think of a time when someone 'judged a book by its cover' ... i.e., s/he looked at someone's clothes and made a judgment about the person?

A style of dress suitable for going out was still not in vogue among women. It was this sister-in-law who first introduced the manner of wearing the *sari* and blouse which is now customary. Little girls had not then begun to wear frocks or let their hair hang in **plaits**—at least not in our family. The little ones used to wear the tight Rajput **pyjamas** instead of the traditional *sari*. When the Bethune School was first opened my eldest sister was quite young. She was one of the pioneers who made the road for education easy for



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girls. She was very fair, uniquely so for this country. I have heard that once when she was going to school in her **palanquin** the police detained her, thinking her in Rajput dress to be an English girl who had been kidnapped.

(pg.60)

glossary:

plaits braids

palanquin similar to a carriage but without wheels,.. it would be carried by four people using poles attached to the corners of the ‘carriage’

pyjamas loose fitting pants

VIII

What would you do if you disagreed with an adult?

Once Bouthakrun took a fancy for keeping pet squirrels in cages. I said it wasn’t right, and she told me not to set myself up to be her teacher. That could hardly be called a reasoned reply, and consequently, instead of wasting time in bickering I privately set two of the little creatures free. After that too I had to listen to a certain amount of scolding, but I made no retort.

(pg64)

IX

What might it feel like if you were a boy doing what others consider a ‘girl thing’ or a girl doing what others consider a ‘boy thing’?

In those days if a young boy, or still more a young girl, laboriously counted out the fourteen syllables and wrote two lines of verse, the wise critics of the country used to hail it as a unique and unparalleled achievement.

I saw in the papers and magazines the names of these girl-poets, and their verses also were published. Nowadays these carefully constructed metres and crude rhyming platitudes have vanished along with the names of their authors, and the names of countless modern girls have appeared in their stead.



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Boys are less bold and far more self-conscious than girls. I do not remember any young boy-poet writing verse in those days, except myself. My sister's son, who was older than I, explained to me one day that if one poured words into a fourteen-syllable mould, they would condense into verse. I soon tried this magic formula for myself. The lotus of poetry blossomed in no time in this fourteen-syllabled form and even the bees found a foothold on it. The gulf between me and the poets was bridged, and from that time on I have struggled to overtake them.
(pg.67-68)

X

Have you ever boasted about something?

When I was older and stayed on the **river-lands** of *Shelidah*, I once swam across the Padma. This was not as wonderful an achievement as it sounds. The *Padma* was full of alluvial islands which broke the force of its current, so that the feat was not worthy of any great respect. Still, it was certainly a story with which to impress others, and I have used it so many times.
pg 81

glossary

river-lands small islands in the river