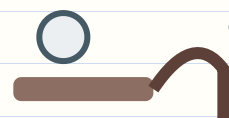


Class 11 · English Elective (001) · Woven Words · Short Story 1

Chapter 1

The Lament



Iona and his horse

Anton Chekhov · NCERT Woven Words, Reprint 2026-27

About the author

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904; the book prints 1810, a misprint) was born into a middle-class family in Russia and studied **medicine** at Moscow University. His first story appeared in 1880; in the next seven years he wrote over **six hundred** stories. Plays: *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*. His main theme is **life's pathos caused by the inability of human beings to respond to, or communicate with, one another**.

The short story (NCERT introduction)

A short story is a brief work of prose fiction with a plot (comic, tragic, romantic or satiric). A "story of incident" focuses on events (Sherlock Holmes); a "story of character" on the mind. **The Lament focuses on form**: nothing seems to happen except an encounter and conversations, yet the story becomes **a revelation of deep sorrow**.

What is inside

1. Story in brief, themes, characters, devices, key lines
2. NCERT exercises, fully solved
3. Exam-pattern questions (CBSE 001 Class 11 design), solved
4. Practice set A–G, 20 MCQs, 6 A–R, summary

Exam pattern for Woven Words (Class 11)

Q	Type	Marks
7	Reference to context: one prose extract (of two) + one poetry extract (of two)	5 + 5
8	2 of 3 short answers, 30–40 words	2 × 2
9	2 of 3 short answers, 50–60 words	3 × 2

Core idea for every answer: Iona Potapov, an old cab-driver in snowy St Petersburg, has lost his son **Kuzma Ionitch** this week. He tries again and again to tell someone (an officer, three young men, a hall porter, a young cabman) but nobody listens. At last, in the stable, he tells the whole story to his **little horse**. Theme: **loneliness and human indifference**; the horse is the only listener.

★ **Exam tip:** **Title:** a "lament" is a passionate expression of grief. Iona's lament is never heard by humans; it is finally poured out to an animal.

1.1 The story in brief ★★★

1. Twilight in the snow

At twilight thick wet snow twirls round the street lamps and settles on roofs, horses and people. The cab-driver **Iona Potapov** sits on his box, "quite white" and bent double like a **phantom**; he does not move, as if a whole snowdrift would not make him shake it off. His little horse, also white and motionless, looks like a "**gingerbread horse** worth a kopek", plunged in thought: snatched from the plough into this "slough" of lights, noise and hurrying people. They have had **no fare** since before dinner.

2. The officer

An officer calls for a cab to **Viborg Way**. As they drive, people shout at Iona ("werewolf!", "Keep to the right!"); he sits "**as if he were on needles**". He tries to speak: "**My son, Barin, died this week.**" The officer asks, "What did he die of?" "They say high fever. He was three days in the hospital and then died... God's will be done." But the officer says, "Go on... Hurry up a bit!", closes his eyes and is not disposed to listen.

3. Three young men

After an hour or two by a tavern, three noisy young men (two tall and lanky, one short and **humpbacked**) hire him to the **Police Bridge** for two griveniks (an unfair price, but Iona does not care). They quarrel, swear, mock his cap and order him to hurry; the humpback hits him on the neck. Iona giggles ("what gay young gentlemen!"); among people, his loneliness leaves him a little. He says, "My son... died this week." The humpback answers, "**We must all die...** hurry up!" Asked if he is married, Iona says he now has only a wife and "the moist ground... the grave": "**death mistook the door...** instead of coming to me, it went to my son." Before he can tell more, they reach their destination and disappear.

4. Alone again

His grief returns "with greater force". He searches the crowds for one person who will listen; no one notices. His grief is "**immense, illimitable**": if his heart broke and the grief poured out, "it would flow over the whole earth", yet it hides "in such an insignificant shell" that no one sees it. He asks a **hall porter** the time and is told, "Move on." He drives back to the stables.

5. In the yard

By a large dirty stove, among snoring cabmen, he regrets returning early: "I have not even earned my fodder." A **young cabman** wakes for a drink; Iona tells him his son is dead, but the young man falls asleep again. "Just as much as the young one wants to drink, the old man wants to talk." He wants to tell it slowly: the illness, suffering, last words, death, funeral, fetching the clothes from hospital, his daughter **Anissia** in the village. When he is alone he cannot bear to think of his son; he can only talk.

6. The horse listens

He goes to the stable: "Are you tucking in?... we've not earned our corn, we can eat hay. Yes, I am too old to drive; my son could have... He was a first-rate cabdriver." He tells the horse: "There's no more **Kuzma Ionitch**"; if you had a foal and it died, "it would be sad, wouldn't it?" The horse munches, listens and breathes over his hand. "**Iona's feelings are too much for him and he tells the little horse the whole story.**"

★ **Exam tip:** **Setting:** St Petersburg (Viborg Way, Police Bridge), winter twilight to night; Russian words: Barin (sir), kopek, griveniks, rouble.

1.2 Themes, character and devices ★★★

Themes

- **Loneliness and alienation** in a crowded city.
- **Human indifference**: everyone is busy with their own concerns; no one listens.
- **Need to share grief**: talking is Iona's only relief; thinking alone is unbearable.
- **Communication failure**: Chekhov's central theme (life's pathos).
- **Animal companionship**: the horse is more sympathetic than humans.
- **Poverty and the lot of the working poor**: no fares, not even fodder earned.

Iona Potapov: character

Trait	Evidence
Grief-stricken, lonely	repeatedly tries to tell of his son's death
Humble, meek	accepts insults, an unfair fare, blows; calls rude youths "gay young gentlemen"
Patient, enduring	sits motionless in snow for hours
Simple, pious	"God's will be done"
Poor and old	"I am too old to drive"; no fodder earned
Loving father	remembers every detail; proud: "first-rate cabdriver"
Kind to his horse	talks to it as a friend

The passengers

Officer: asks one polite question, then hurries him and closes his eyes. **Three young men**: drunk, quarrelsome, abusive; the humpback dismisses grief with "We must all die". **Hall porter**: "Move on." **Young cabman**: wants water, falls asleep.

Devices and technique

Device	Example
Present tense narration	"It is twilight... Iona jumps...": immediacy, timelessness
Setting as mood	snow, twilight, lamps, hubbub: coldness, isolation
Simile	"looks like a phantom"; "like a gingerbread horse"; "as if he were on needles"; "stretches out his neck like a swan"
Hyperbole	grief "would flow over the whole earth"
Irony	Iona praises the youths who abuse him; the horse, not humans, listens
Repetition	"My son... died this week" (four attempts)
Symbolism	white snow = coldness, isolation, death, numbness
Circular structure	begins and ends with Iona and his horse

Associations of white (Language Work 3)

Ans. White snow covers Iona and his horse, making them look like phantoms: it suggests **coldness** (of the city and its people), **death** (his son, a shroud), **numbness and immobility** (his frozen grief) and **invisibility** (no one notices him).

Key lines explained

Ans. "death mistook the door... Instead of coming to me, it went to my son": the old feel they should die first; Iona's bitterness at fate.

"It has managed to conceal itself in such an insignificant shell that no one can see it": huge grief hidden in a poor old cabman.

"Just as much as the young one wants to drink, the old man wants to talk." Talking is a basic need like thirst.

"he tells the little horse the whole story": ironic, pathetic ending.

NCERT exercises, fully solved

Understanding the Text

1. Comment on the indifference that meets Iona's attempts to share his grief.

Ans. Everyone is absorbed in himself. The officer asks one question and then tells him to hurry and shuts his eyes. The three young men are busy with their drinking and quarrels; the humpback says "We must all die" and orders him on. The hall porter tells him to move on, and the young cabman falls asleep. Crowds pass without noticing. This indifference shows the coldness of city life and deepens Iona's loneliness, so that finally only his horse hears him.

2. What impression of Iona do you get?

Ans. A poor, old, humble and patient cab-driver, deeply grieving for his son, simple and pious ("God's will be done"), meek even when insulted, eager to talk about his loss, and gentle and affectionate towards his horse. He is a figure of great pathos.

3. How does the horse serve as a true friend and companion?

Ans. It shares his hardship: they stand together in the snow without fares. In the stable Iona talks to it lovingly; it "munches, listens and breathes over its master's hand". It never interrupts or dismisses him, so it becomes the only listener to whom he can pour out his whole story.

Talking about the Text (points)

Ans. 1. Yes: busy urban life, technology and self-absorption reduce empathy; people feel alienated in crowds. Yet empathy can be cultivated: listening, volunteering. 2. Drivers, vendors, guards, domestic workers have personal stories of joy and suffering; a few kind words can mean much.

Appreciation

1. How does the opening setting serve as a prelude?

Ans. The twilight, thick wet snow, motionless white driver and horse, and the noisy, hurrying city create a mood of cold, gloom and isolation. They prepare us for a story of a man frozen in grief and ignored by a busy world.

2. Graphic detail of the passengers.

Ans. The officer in a greatcoat with his hood over his head; the three young men with squeaking galoshes, two "tall and lanky", one "short and humpbacked" with a cracked, twanging voice, coughing and swearing elaborate six-foot oaths. Such vivid details make them real and contrast their noisy self-concern with Iona's silent grief.

3. The story revolves around a single event.

Ans. The death of Iona's son is the centre: every encounter is an attempt to speak of it; every rebuff deepens the sorrow; the climax is telling it to the horse. All incidents are woven around this fact.

4. Begins and ends with Iona and his horse: significance.

Ans. It frames the story: at first both stand silent and motionless; at the end they are together in the stable, and the horse becomes the listener. The circle shows that only his humble companion shares his life and grief.

Language Work

- Ans.** 1. snuffle, snort, snuffle, snore: all begin with **sn-** and are sounds made through the **nose**.
 2. A snigger: titter, giggle, chuckle, chortle, guffaw · B wriggle: sidle, scramble, straggle, plod, sneak · C squeak: squawk, shriek, croak · D jeer: boo · E sigh: pant, gasp.
 3. White: see p. 3.
 4. "As if he were on needles" = very uneasy, restless, anxious; similar: "on tenterhooks", "on pins and needles", "like a cat on hot bricks".

Exam-pattern questions (CBSE 001, Class II design), solved

Q7 type · Prose extract "Iona looks around at the officer and moves his lips. He evidently wants to say something but the only sound that issues is a snuffle. 'What?' asks the officer. Iona twists his mouth into a smile and, with an effort, says hoarsely: 'My son, Barin, died this week.' 'Hm! What did he die of?'" [5 × 1]

- Ans.** (i) Why could Iona only snuffle at first? **Grief and hesitation choked his words.**
 (ii) What does "Barin" mean? **Sir / master (a respectful address).**
 (iii) Why did he "twist his mouth into a smile"? **To hide his pain and appear polite to his fare.**
 (iv) How did the officer respond after the question? **He told Iona to hurry and closed his eyes, not disposed to listen.**
 (v) Word meaning 'in a rough, husky voice': **hoarsely**

Q8 type Why does Iona call the rude young men "gay young gentlemen"? (30-40 words) [2]

Ans. He is so lonely that even their abuse is company; their noise relieves his loneliness. Humble and meek, he also hopes they will listen to him about his son.

Q8 type What does Iona mean by "death mistook the door"? [2]

Ans. He, being old, expected to die first; instead death took his young son. He feels fate has made a cruel mistake.

Q9 type Describe Iona's grief as the narrator presents it. (50-60 words) [3]

Ans. The narrator calls it "immense, illimitable": if his heart broke and the grief poured out, it would flood the whole earth. Yet it is hidden in "an insignificant shell", a poor old cabman whom nobody notices. He cannot bear to think of his son alone; he longs only to tell the story slowly to a sympathetic listener.

Q9 type Why does Iona prefer to talk rather than think about his son? [3]

Ans. Thinking alone and picturing his son is unbearably painful, while talking gives relief and the comfort of sympathy. He wants to describe every detail (illness, death, funeral, fetching the clothes, his daughter Anissia) so that someone might sigh and share his sorrow.

Long answer "The Lament is a story of human indifference." Discuss. (120-150 words) [5]

Ans. Chekhov presents Iona Potapov, an old cab-driver whose son has died, moving through crowded, snowy St Petersburg. He tries four times to share his grief. The officer asks what his son died of, then orders him to hurry and closes his eyes. Three drunken youths abuse and hit him; the humpback dismisses his loss with "We must all die". A hall porter tells him to move on; a young cabman falls asleep in mid-sentence. The crowds pass without noticing. Chekhov's irony is sharp: Iona even calls his tormentors "gay young gentlemen", and the only creature that "listens" is his little horse, to whom he finally tells the whole story. The snow, twilight and noisy city mirror the coldness of human hearts. The story shows that in a busy, self-absorbed world, people fail to respond to each other's suffering: the pathos Chekhov saw at the heart of life.

Practice set: test yourself

A. Fill in the blanks (8)

1. The cab-driver's name is Iona _____.
2. His horse looked like a _____ horse worth a kopek.
3. The officer wanted to go to _____ Way.
4. The young men wanted to go to the _____ Bridge.
5. They offered him two _____.
6. Iona's son was named Kuzma _____.
7. His daughter _____ was in the village.
8. Iona finally told the whole story to his _____.

B. True or False (8)

1. The story is set in summer.
2. Iona's son died of high fever.
3. The officer listened to the whole story.
4. The humpback had to stand in the sleigh.
5. Iona demanded a fair price from the young men.
6. The hall porter told Iona to move on.
7. Iona liked to think about his son when alone.
8. Chekhov studied medicine.

C. Very short answer (10)

1. What time of day does the story open?
2. How long was the son in hospital?
3. What did people call Iona as he drove?
4. How did the humpback mock Iona?
5. What did the humpback say about death?
6. What did Iona ask the hall porter?
7. Where did Iona go after leaving the street?
8. What did the young cabman want?
9. What had Iona not earned?
10. Name one play by Chekhov.

D. Short answer I (2 marks) (8)

1. Describe Iona and his horse at the beginning.
2. Why did Iona accept two griveniks?
3. What did the young men talk about?
4. How did Iona feel among the young men?
5. Why is the grief called "illimitable"?
6. What did Iona want to tell in detail?
7. Why did he think talking to women would help?

8. What did Iona say to his horse about a foal?

E. Short answer II (3 marks) (6)

1. Describe the city atmosphere in the story.
2. Bring out the irony of the ending.
3. How does Chekhov use the snow?
4. Compare the officer and the humpback as listeners.
5. What is the significance of the title?
6. Why is the present tense effective?

F. Long answer (5 marks) (4)

1. Character sketch of Iona Potapov.
2. Discuss the theme of loneliness in the story.
3. How does Chekhov create pathos?
4. "The horse is more human than the humans." Discuss.

G. HOTS (4)

1. How would you respond if a stranger told you of a loss?
2. Write Iona's diary entry for that night.
3. Is the city to blame for indifference?
4. Compare Iona with Margolin ("A Wedding in Brownsville") in their loneliness.

20 MCQs

1. "The Lament" is written by
(A) Tolstoy (B) Gogol (C) Chekhov (D) Pushkin
2. Iona is a
(A) cab-driver (B) soldier (C) porter (D) farmer
3. The weather is
(A) rainy (B) hot (C) foggy (D) thick wet snow
4. Iona looks like a
(A) king (B) phantom (C) child (D) soldier
5. The first passenger is
(A) a woman (B) an officer (C) a priest (D) a student
6. Iona's son died of
(A) an accident (B) war (C) old age (D) high fever
7. The officer's response was
(A) to hurry Iona and close his eyes (B) a gift (C) deep sympathy (D) to weep
8. The young men were going to the
(A) Viborg Way (B) stables (C) Police Bridge (D) hospital
9. The one who stood was the
(A) tallest (B) officer (C) driver (D) humpback
10. The humpback said
(A) "I am sorry" (B) "We must all die" (C) "Tell us more" (D) "God bless you"
11. "death mistook the door" suggests
(A) joy (B) a wrong delivery (C) death took the young instead of the old (D) a ghost story
12. Iona's grief is described as
(A) immense, illimitable (B) false (C) small (D) forgotten
13. The hall porter told him to
(A) sit down (B) move on (C) have tea (D) go home
14. At the stables the air was
(A) cold and fresh (B) scented (C) thick and suffocatingly hot (D) quiet
15. The young cabman wanted
(A) food (B) money (C) a story (D) a drink of water

16. Iona's daughter was named
(A) Anissia (B) Nadejda (C) Vaska (D) Petrovna
17. Iona finds it unbearable to
(A) think of his son alone (B) drive (C) talk (D) eat
18. The story ends with Iona
(A) crying in the street (B) sleeping (C) going to the village (D) telling the horse the whole story
19. Chekhov's main theme is
(A) adventure (B) failure of human communication (C) war (D) wealth
20. "As if he were on needles" means
(A) very comfortable (B) sewing (C) restless and uneasy (D) asleep
- 1 (C) · 2 (A) · 3 (D) · 4 (B) · 5 (B) · 6 (D) · 7 (A) · 8 (C) · 9 (D) · 10 (B) · 11 (C) · 12 (A) · 13 (B) · 14 (C) · 15 (D) · 16 (A) · 17 (A) · 18 (D) · 19 (B) · 20 (C)

Assertion-Reason (6)

(A) Both A and R are true and R is the correct explanation of A. (B) Both A and R are true but R is not the correct explanation of A. (C) A is true but R is false. (D) A is false but R is true.

1. A: Iona tells his story to his horse. R: No human being was willing to listen to him.
 2. A: Iona accepted an unfair fare. R: To him it was all the same so long as they were fares.
 3. A: The officer listened sympathetically to Iona. R: The officer closed his eyes and was not disposed to listen.
 4. A: Iona enjoyed thinking about his son when alone. R: He could speak about his son to anyone, but thinking of him was unbearably painful.
 5. A: Iona's loneliness eased a little with the young men. R: He listened to their insults and saw people around him.
 6. A: Chekhov wrote more than six hundred stories in seven years. R: Chekhov studied medicine at Moscow University.
- Answers: 1 (A) · 2 (A) · 3 (D) · 4 (D) · 5 (A) · 6 (B)

Extract-based practice (case)

"His grief, which has abated for a short while, returns and rends his heart with greater force. With an anxious and hurried look, he searches among the crowds passing on either side of the street to find whether there may be just one person who will listen to him."

Ans. (i) Why had his grief abated? **The company of the noisy young men eased his loneliness.** (ii) Why did it return with greater force? **He was alone again and no one had listened.** (iii) What does he search for? **One person who will listen.** (iv) Does he find one? **No; the crowds hurry by.** (v) Word meaning 'tears apart': **rends**

Answers

- A.** 1 Potapov 2 gingerbread 3 Viborg 4 Police 5 griveniks 6 Ionitch 7 Anissia 8 horse
- B.** 1 F (winter, snow) 2 T 3 F 4 T 5 F 6 T 7 F 8 T
- C.** 1 Twilight. 2 Three days. 3 Werewolf (old doggie). 4 He said there was not a worse cap in all Petersburg; called him old pest, old furry. 5 "We must all die." 6 The time. 7 To the stables / yard. 8 A drink of water. 9 His fodder (the horse's corn). 10 *The Seagull / Uncle Vanya / The Three Sisters / The Cherry Orchard.*
- D.** 1 Both white with snow, motionless; Iona bent double like a phantom; the horse like a gingerbread horse, lost in thought. 2 He did not care about the price, only wanted fares. 3 Drinking cognac, quarrelling, one Nadejda Petrovna. 4 His loneliness left him a little. 5 It is boundless; it could flood the whole earth. 6 His son's illness, suffering, last words, death, funeral, fetching clothes, his daughter. 7 Two words would make them sob in sympathy. 8 If her foal died she would be sad: he compares his loss to hers.
- E.** 1 Snow, twilight, lamps, noise, hurrying crowds, rude people. 2 A man seeking human sympathy finds it only in an animal. 3 It covers him and the horse, symbolising coldness, isolation, numbness and death. 4 Officer polite at first,

then indifferent; humpback openly rude and dismissive. 5 Lament = expression of grief; it is never heard by humans. 6 Gives immediacy; we watch with Iona.

F (points). 1 See table p. 3. 2 Crowds, rebuffs, stable, horse. 3 Setting, repetition, irony, detail, ending. 4 Horse shares hardship and listens.

G (hints). Personal answers.

Last-night summary

- **Chekhov** (1860–1904), Russian, doctor; 600+ stories; plays; theme: failure of communication.
- **Opening:** twilight, wet snow; Iona and horse white, motionless; no fare.
- **Officer** (Viborg Way): "My son, Barin, died this week"; high fever; "Hurry up".
- **Three young men** (Police Bridge, two griveniks): abuse; humpback: "We must all die"; "death mistook the door".
- **Alone:** grief immense, illimitable; hall porter: "Move on."
- **Yard:** young cabman sleeps; Iona wants to talk; Anissia; Kuzma Ionitch.
- **Horse:** "he tells the little horse the whole story."
- **Devices:** present tense, similes, irony, snow symbolism, circular frame.

★ **Exam tip: Vocabulary:** twilight, phantom, gingerbread, slough, hubbub, assent, equilibrium, snuffle, galoshes, lanky, petulance, wrangling, abated, rends, illimitable, fodder.