

English Short Story: The Meaning of Life

LEVEL A2-B2

Adjectives for Describing Life (1)

GOOD
BALANCED
FAIR
PREDICTABLE
FUN
FUNNY
COOL
NICE
NORMAL
HAPPY
QUIET
HEALTHY
CONSCIOUS
PEACEFUL

STUDIOUS
BEAUTIFUL
SMOOTH
WHOLESOME
MEANINGFUL
HARMONIOUS
EASY
INTERESTING
IMPORTANT
SATISFACTORY
SOLID
FULL
COMFORTABLE
UNSELFISH

PRODUCTIVE
FRUITFUL
PURPOSEFUL
HUMBLE
PROSPEROUS
SUCCESSFUL
REWARDING
NOBLE
PLEASANT
GRACEFUL
SUBTLE
ACTIVE
WORTHY
LOVELY

“What’s the meaning of life?”

My grandfather asks us this question every day. We never know the answer. It’s really difficult for us to know. Yet, this doesn’t stop my grandfather from asking us. I’m tired of not knowing so my brother and I have come up with the perfect solution. We are going to find the meaning of life today.

My older brother says we will find the answer when we go to the river. Many people go there. We can ask the old women. They should know the answer.

When we arrive at the river, there are many cheerful old women. They greet us in a friendly way and ask us how our grandparents are. We tell them that they are fine. We also tell them that we have some questions that need to be answered. We finally ask them what the meaning of life is.

The old women laugh aloud and say that they do not know the answer. “We are old but we don’t know why we are here. We come to the river every day to draw water and wash our clothes. We have always done this since we were young like you boys. That’s life for us. We try to enjoy it every day even though it can be hard. We try to make the most our time and make sure that our homes are thriving. The meaning of life boys? Maybe ask the old men. They should know. They should know better than us.”

We leave the old women. They can see the disappointment on our faces. We don’t want to stop our quest though. There are many old men in the village. In fact there are more old people than young people in our village. The young people work in town. The old people look after the fields. It is their job.

The old men always sit under the ancient baobab tree that is near the Trading Centre. They do this after they come back from the fields. They should be there now. We decide to go and see them. They will surely answer our questions.

When we arrive at the baobab tree, the old men are indeed there. We are happy. They are chatting and playing *bawo*. They see us and ask us why we have come to disturb their peace. Can't we see that they are busy with life?

"We have an important question for you *agogo*. What is the meaning of life?"

The old men laugh, revealing their mouths where some teeth have disappeared. "Kids, what's wrong with you? Why are you asking us such a question? We don't know the answer to your strange question. We know that we have been here for quite some time and we have experienced life more than you. That doesn't mean that we know why we are here!"

We are still puzzled. We want them to explain more.

"It's true children. We try to do our best to live this life but we don't know why we are here. We wake up very early in the morning, work in the fields and come to rest here after all that. That's all we can do. The meaning of life? This is a question that the Village Headman can definitely answer. He is wiser than all of us here. He is our chief. He will know."

We are more disappointed than the last time we spoke to the women at the river. We really hoped that the men would have the answer to our question. However, we finally decide to follow the old men's advice anyway. We take the decision to go to the chief's house.

The chief lives in the outskirts of our village just below the mountain. His fields are always luscious with green vegetation and he owns many cattle. Almost everybody in the village has some cattle but the chief has the largest herd. He also owns a lot of chickens and ducks. He is very rich. Such a wealthy man should know the answer to our question.

When we arrive at the chief's house, he is sitting on the veranda with his wife. They are chatting and drinking *thobwa*. The chief's wife offers us some. We gladly accept.

"What brings you here my dear children?"

"We want to know the meaning of life."

The chief and his wife start laughing and tell us that this is the strangest question they have ever had to answer anyone. The meaning of life? Ha, ha, ha. They don't know!

"I'm a chief and I'm supposed to be wise but I don't have the answer to your question. All I know is that I try to fulfill my duties as a chief to the best of my ability. When people come here with complaints, I help them so that they go back home with peace of mind."

"What else do you do chief?" my elder brother asks.

"I settle disputes mostly related to land. Moreover, I try to make sure that everybody in the village is satisfied with the way things are going. My job is a difficult one but I try to do my best. However I don't ask myself the meaning of life. That is a question that the Reverend can know. He is the one who has all these answers."

Then the chief lets us finish our *thobwa* and ushers us out of his compound. He also sends some greetings to our grandparents.

My God! What are we going to do now? No one knows the answer to our question and people keep sending us to other people. We are exhausted! Maybe we don't want to know anymore. Maybe we can just go back home and forget. Maybe grandfather will stop asking us this question, finally.

However, we decide to continue our quest. It would be a pity to stop now! It's almost noon and we are starting to get hungry. Yet we decide to go to church. The church is a small white building with corrugated iron sheets. The Reverend lives behind the church. He lives in a small house with a thatched roof. He lives there alone.

We find him sitting on a reed mat. He has a few books beside him, including the Bible. We greet him and ask him if he has some time for us. He nods yes and smiles. We sit a few metres away from him and ask him boldly: "What is the meaning of life?"

The Reverend laughs and shakes his head. No children have ever asked him such a question. He doesn't know what to say even though it is his job to know more about such matters.

"Well children, I don't have a straight answer to your question but all I know is that I try to fulfill the Lord's duty as much as I can. I preach love and forgiveness. I try to make people change their ways so that they can lead a more truthful life. However I don't have direct access to God. I wish I could ask God the meaning of life. Sometimes I ask myself why there is so much suffering in the world. Why can't God put a stop to that?"

We agree with the Reverend. There is too much suffering in the world. What's the point of doing good when bad people constantly get rewarded for their behaviour? We let the Reverend continue speaking.

"These are the times when I question my faith and wish I could know other truths. Yet I keep on fulfilling my duty because I know that it is only through doing the best I can every day that people in my congregation can suffer less. The meaning of life? Maybe your grandfather can answer that question. Even God can answer that question. "Pray to God and he will answer your prayers."

We leave the Reverend's house and we really want to stop our quest now. It's fruitless! Besides, grandfather and grandmother are waiting for us back home. We realise that we will never get the right answer to our question.

However, suddenly, we have a brilliant idea. It's superb! Why not ask the witchdoctor? He knows a lot more about the mysteries of life. He must know more about the meaning of life. We hesitate though because we don't have any money to pay him. He is also scary and we are afraid that he might bewitch us. Nevertheless we decide to try our luck anyway.

When we arrive at the witchdoctor's house, we are trembling. Our teeth chatter and we are really afraid. We are afraid of what he might do to us if our question displeases him. We decide to go forward anyway despite the charms we see on our way. We tell ourselves that we haven't done anything wrong. All we want is knowledge. We want to know the meaning of life.

The witchdoctor greets us first and tells us he has never had such young customers. What's wrong with us? Are we sick? Has somebody bewitched us? What type of help do we need?

We tell him that we just want to know the meaning of life. When he hears our question, the doctor starts to laugh. His laugh is infectious and we also start to laugh with him. He beats his chest and wipes sweat from his brow while laughing. We are now used to the laughing but we are impatient to know the answer to our question. What's the meaning of life? What's the meaning of this life witchdoctor?

The witchdoctor says that no one has ever asked him that question. “Ah, I knew something was wrong with you kids. How can you ask me such a question?” he queries, shaking his head worriedly. “Well, let me tell you the truth boys. The sad truth is I don’t know the answer to your question. People think that I have a lot of knowledge and that’s true but that question is beyond my powers. Have you asked the Reverend?”

We tell him that we did! The Reverend didn’t know the answer to our question either!

“Well kids, I agree with the Reverend. This is a very difficult question. As for me, I try to do my best to help my customers every day. When I wake up in the morning, I know that someone will come to me and ask me for help. I want to alleviate that someone’s suffering. It doesn’t matter if it’s a man or a woman. It’s in my nature to help people. The meaning of life? I never ask myself such a question.”

Adjectives for Describing Life (2)

BAD	EXACTING	IMPOVERISHED
UNFAIR	DEMANDING	SCANDALOUS
UNBALANCED	HARD	UNSATISFACTORY
UNHEALTHY	NEGATIVE	DISMAL
UNPREDICTABLE	COMPLICATED	ROUGH
BORING	COMPLEX	SUBSTANDARD
SHORT	TENSE	DISPLEASING
UNEVENTFUL	BITTER	TOUGH
SHAMELESS	BITTER-SWEET	SHAMEFUL
CLOSED	UNWORTHY	UPSETTING
FRAGILE	TROUBLING	ARDUOUS
BRITTLE	UNSUCCESSFUL	UGLY
FOOLISH	QUESTIONABLE	TASTELESS
UNHAPPY	POOR	MISERABLE
DYSFUNCTIONAL	EMPTY	AMBIGUOUS

“Have you asked one of your school teachers?”

Of course! The teachers! Their History teacher! He would know the answer! He has so much knowledge in his head!

We decide to head to our school. The History teacher lives behind our classroom blocks. He lives with his wife and three children. He is a nice man and he is always willing to answer our questions in class. When we arrive at his house he is eating lunch but he decides to give us some time.

“What’s the meaning of life teacher?”

Our teacher laughs too and says he didn’t expect to hear such a question. “Did you wake up well today kids?”

We tell him yes and he says that he wished he knew the answer to our question.

"You see, I'm just a History teacher. I teach about what happened in the past. I talk about facts, the reality, but I can't know more about the mysteries of this world than anybody else. It's difficult to know. Why are we here? What are we doing? What is our purpose? What are we supposed to be doing every day?"

We keep staring at him because we don't know the answers either. We have come to see him because we know that he is knowledgeable. We let the History teacher continue enlightening us.

"All I know is that I have to do my job as a History teacher in the best way possible. I also have to take care of my family very well. I can do these jobs if I am in a good physical and mental condition. So I also take care of myself. Those are my principal missions in life. I don't expect more from life than it already gives me. I'm grateful and I try to live each single day as well as I can. I appreciate the gift of life with its ups and downs. That's all I can tell you kids. Have you asked your grandfather already?"

It's true that we haven't asked our grandfather yet. He is the original author of this question. He should know the answer. We decide to waste no more time and we go back home. Our grandfather and grandmother are waiting for us. They look worried and ask us where we have been.

"We have been looking for the meaning of life!"

Grandfather laughs and pats our backs.

"I'm glad you did that. Did you find the answer?"

"No, grandfather. No one knew the answer to our question," we reply disappointedly. "In fact, no one knew the answer to **YOUR** question," we add accusingly.

Grandfather smiles and becomes serious all of a sudden.

"Maybe we should talk. We definitely need to talk," he says.

"Let's go and sit down under the mango tree," grandmother suggests kindly. "We will have some nice shade there."

We take out some chairs from the mud house and settle under the mango tree. There is a slight cool breeze there and it's pleasant on our faces. We are eager to know the truth now.

Grandfather starts speaking: "No one knows the meaning of life boys but it is our duty to ask questions."

Our reaction is hurt and stupefaction. To say that we are upset is an understatement. We are furious! We have been asking questions since morning and no one had the answers to our questions. No more questions for us!

"I understand you boys and even I don't know the meaning of life but that doesn't stop me from asking questions. I want to know more about the mysteries of this world. I want to see the world with new eyes and question it and see it with curious eyes, just like a child would. This world is amazing and I want to see it with wonder."

Grandfather stops talking and looks at us intently. He then asks us this last question: "Are you curious children? Are you curious? Do you want to know more about the secrets of our world?"

To tell you the truth we don't know the answers to these questions either. All we know is that we want to open our eyes and see. We want to question our world so that it might reveal its secrets to us. We have a sudden hunger for knowledge. We want to know.



Learn **English**
With Africa