Chapter 2: The Blood Tax

"Beyond the blood law. He almost let out a sigh. What must life be like in such families? How did they get up in the mornings? It all seemed so incredible, as remote perhaps as the life of birds."

Gjorg travels across the rrash, the High Albanian plateau, towards the Kulla of Orosh in order to pay his blood tax, a payment killers are obliged to pay to the Prince upon the death of their victims. Anticipating paying the tax upon his arrival and returning back to his village the next day, he is surprised to discover several young men, all wearing the symbolic black armband of the gjaks (ritual killers) waiting to make their own payments.

A flashback of Gjorg’s great grandfather and a stranger chronicles how the blood feud started: seventy years before, a stranger had knocked at the door of the killer's grandfather and asked for shelter. After a night's rest, a man from the other family had killed the unknown guest because of a supposed slight in a cafe. Under the code, though, when a guest is killed before your eyes, you are bound to avenge him; so the cycle of revenge had begun.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. A **trousseau bullet** is the bullet…?
   (a) With which Gjorg killed Zef.
   (b) Which Gjorg imagines will kill him.
   (c) A man is allowed to use to kill his bride.
   (d) An ordinary bullet.

2. Complete this phrase from the kanun: ‘When the bride enters a house…’
   (a) A dead person leaves.
   (b) A wedding day is never postponed.
   (c) A wedding party sets out.
   (d) No one enters the house.

3. Who does not participate in the blood feuds?
   (a) Husbands.
   (b) Farmers.
   (c) Soldiers.
   (d) Priests.

4. How long has the feud between the Berishas and the Kryeqyqes been active?
   (a) Seven years.
   (b) Seventeen years.
   (c) Seventy years.
   (d) Ninety-nine years.

5. What does Gjorg see in the sky as he walks?
   (a) A raven.
   (b) A falcon.
   (c) An airplane.
   (d) A UFO.

6. What does Gjorg eat at the inn?
   (a) Beef stew.
   (b) Beans and coffee.
   (c) Caesar salad.
   (d) Nothing.

7. How much was the fine for only wounding Zef on the previous occasion Gjorg tried to shoot him?
   (a) A quarter groschen.
   (b) Ten groschen.
   (c) A purse of groschen.
   (d) Three purses of groschen.

8. What do those who come to pay the blood tax all wear?
   (a) Black armbands.
   (b) Red badges.
   (c) Green socks.
   (d) White sashes.
Understanding and Interpretation

Skim and scan Chapter 2 to find the necessary information to answer these questions:

1. Where is Gjorg heading in chapter 2? Why must he go there?

2. What do you discover about the cause of the blood feud between Gjorg’s family and Zef’s family in this chapter?

3. Gjorg remembers an opportunity to stop the blood feud. What happened?

4. What do you discover about the landscape and villages beyond Gjorg’s village in this chapter?

5. While stopping at an inn, Gjorg encounters a party of three people. Who are they? What are they doing?

6. What does the reader discover at the end of chapter 2? What is the effect of this discovery?
Novel Study: setting

One aspect of prose texts which is often foregrounded in the first chapters – or even the first paragraphs of the first chapter – is setting. Simply defined as ‘the place where the story happens,’ the imaginary world of the novel is often much more than this.

Consider the following dimensions of the setting:

- A backdrop to the action;
- The physical environment, whether it is mountainous, oceanic, desert and so on;
- Is it set in a real geographical location, or an imaginary world?
- Setting includes time periods: present, past or future?
- Specific times of day or night;
- Seasons, and the weather, are an element of setting;
- Setting has size and dimensions – is it large, like an entire nation, or small, for example, a single household?
- Setting is a major way of establishing mood and atmosphere. Think for instance of a crowded setting vs an isolated one;
- Sometimes, the setting is symbolic of ideas the author wishes to explore;
- It can be representative of a particular culture or set of values;
- Two ways of creating conflict involve setting: conflict with society and conflict with the environment;
- The setting may have a role to play in the narrative – for example, if the weather changes or disaster strikes;
- Descriptions of setting can reflect the thoughts of the narrator or protagonist, particularly through personification;
- Setting can also reflect the emotions of the narrator or protagonist through the pathetic fallacy.

Activity

Draw a map of the rrafsh, as seen so far in the novel. Annotate your map with notes and quotes about the setting, and how the importance of certain aspects of setting that you have discovered in your study:
Discussion Point: peer pressure

On page 44, Gjorg thinks about the possibility of punishment that he might incur from his family, and describes these thoughts as a torture.

How is the kanun embedded in the lives and thoughts of the people of the plateau? To what extent is the kanun a law that must be followed? How is the kanun enforced? What are the punishments for failing to follow the tenets of the kanun? What is the role of Gjorg’s family and the other villagers? Discuss your understanding of these matters at this point in the story.

Important Theme: the kanun

Throughout chapters 1 and 2, Gjorg thinks continually about the Kanun, a code of customary law that dictates the behaviour of people in his community.

What do we learn about the Kanun in the first two chapters? What are some of its laws and tenets? Does it have its own vocabulary? How is it structured or organized? Who enforces the customary laws?

Activity

Create a graphic organizer, such as an ideas wheel, to collect your ideas. You could ask your teacher for a template, or make one yourself in your notebook. Here are ideas of what a graphic organizer might look like: