



THE DONKEY

BACKGROUND

There are many versions of this story throughout history and across the world. It may go back as far as the Greeks in one form or another. The first version we have is from the 13th C poet scholar Ibn Said.

The story was picked up and circulated by Europeans over the centuries. All the different versions involve a man (and usually his son) who rides his donkey, walks next to it, and carries it. The order that he does these things varies a little, and so do the endings. In some, the donkey falls into the river and is drowned; in some the man beats the donkey to death. But one thing that remains constant is that the man is listening to the opinions of passers-by, all of whom are telling him to do something different. After trying to please all of them he ends up a laughing stock, and loses the donkey. The moral seems to be 'Don't try to please everyone who offers their opinion' and that is certainly the gloss that most tellers of the story put on it.

But be careful to hold 'the moral' back from the children. Find out what they take to be the moral and dive deeper into it. It be exactly what you expected and it may not. This is a good opportunity to use the PARDES procedure mentioned in the introduction. This should help the class to home in on the themes and morals of the tale as they see it. Remember that controversy is the lifeblood of enquiry, so try to sniff it out and exploit it.

One thing that has changed since the story was first told is our relationship with animals. Most of us only deal with animals that are pets, and most of those have been bred carefully over the centuries to behave as pets. Although some people still keep dogs for multiple reasons - to use as trackers, and guard dogs and also companions - it is much less common these days. So perhaps it is easier for us to say what an animal 'is for'. Or perhaps not. It could be that because we are more sentimental about animals and rarely use them to do work, we don't see them in such a functional way as our ancestors.

STIMULUS

A man and his son were walking their donkey to market. They passed by a few old men drinking tea outside a shop who started to laugh at them.

'Look at those fools' the old men said, 'Don't they know a donkey is for riding?'

The father felt embarrassed and lifted his son onto the donkey. A few minutes later they passed another group of men chatting by the side of the road. The men looked over and shook their heads, disapproving.

'Do you see that?' said one man to another, 'That boy has no respect for his father. He rides on the donkey while his father walks.'

So the father told his son to get down, and climbed up onto the donkey himself. Before long, they passed a group of women.

'That man should be ashamed of himself' the women frowned, pointing. 'He takes the donkey for himself and makes the poor boy walk.'

Straight away, the father pulled the boy up on the donkey with him. But just before they reached the market two people fishing in the river called out to them.

'Hey, you two lazy oafs! Can't you see you're overloading that poor donkey? Donkeys aren't big enough to carry two.'

Now the father and son just didn't know what to do. They decided that they had no choice but to pick up the donkey and carry it. They had only gone a few steps when the donkey struggled and they all overbalanced and fell into the river. They managed to get to the bank and pull the donkey out, but arrived at the market soaking wet and with the laughter of the whole town ringing in their ears.

Task Questions

- ✓ What should the man and the boy have done?
- ✓ Is it true that donkeys are for riding?
- ✓ Should parents let their children take it easy?
- ✓ Should children do that for their parents?
- ✓ Should we listen to what other people think? What does it depend on?

LESSON COMMENTS

FURTHER STUDY

Changing a sentence for literacy

Teachers miss controversy because it lies in the extent of truth.

Always listen

Never listen

Sometimes listen (sometimes could mean anything between 1% and 99% of the time)

When to listen and when not.

See how much potential disagreement in the 1-99%