This novel takes the reader on a journey round the world with an odd couple, a retired short-sighted bank manager and his temperamental Aunt Augusta.

I met my Aunt Augusta for the first time in more than half a century at my mother’s funeral. My mother was approaching eighty-six when she died, and my aunt was some eleven or twelve years younger. I had retired from the bank two years before with an adequate pension and a silver handshake. There had been a take-over by the Westminster and my branch was considered redundant. Everyone thought me lucky, but I found it difficult to occupy my time. I have never married, I have always lived quietly, and, apart from my interest in dahlias, I have no hobby. For those reasons I found myself agreeably excited by my mother’s funeral.

My father had been dead for more than forty years. He was a building contractor of a lethargic disposition who used to take afternoon naps in all sorts of curious places. This irritated my mother, who was an energetic woman, and she used to seek him out to disturb him. As a child I remember going to the bathroom – we lived in Highgate then – and finding my father asleep in the bath in his clothes. I am rather short-sighted and I thought that my mother had been cleaning an overcoat, until I heard my father whisper, “Bolt the door on the inside when you go out”. He was too lazy to get out of the bath and too sleepy, I suppose, to realize that his order was quite impossible to carry out. At another time, when he was responsible for a new block of flats in Lewisham, he would take his catnap in the cabin of the giant crane, and construction would be halted until he woke. My mother, who had a good head for heights, would climb ladders to the highest scaffolding in the hope of discovering him, when as like as not he would have found a corner in what was to be the underground garage. I had always thought of them as reasonably happy together: their twin roles of the hunter and the hunted probably suited them, for my mother by the time I first remembered her had developed an alert poise of the head and a wary trotting pace which reminded me of a gun-dog. I must be forgiven these memories of the past: at a funeral they are apt to come unbidden, there is so much waiting about.

Not many people attended the service, which took place at a famous crematorium, but there was that slight stirring of excited expectation which is never experienced at a graveside. Will the oven doors open? Will the coffin stick on the way to the flames? I heard a voice behind me saying in very clear old accents, “I was present once at a premature cremation”. It was, as I recognized, with some difficulty, from a photograph in the family album, my Aunt Augusta, who had arrived late, dressed rather as the late Queen Mary of beloved memory might have dressed if she had still been with us and had adapted herself a little bit towards the present mode. I was surprised by her brilliant red hair, monumentally piled, and her two big front teeth which gave her a vital Neanderthal air. Somebody said, “Hush”, and a clergyman began a prayer which I believe he must have composed himself. I had never heard it at any other funeral service, and I have attended a great number in my time. A bank manager is expected to pay his last respects to every old client who is not as we say “in the red”, and in any case I have a weakness for funerals. People are generally seen at their best on these occasions, serious and sober, and optimistic on the subject of personal immortality.

I. VERSION : Traduire le passage entre crochet.

II. QUESTIONS :

1. Study the way in which the two characters – the narrator and his aunt – are introduced and described.

2. How does the writer manage to arouse the reader’s interest and expectation?
I. VERSION : traduction commentée

My father had been dead for more than forty years.
Mon père était mort depuis plus de quarante ans.
Cela faisait plus de quarante ans que mon père était mort.

Attention au temps : « had been » + for → imparfait (et non plus-que-parfait)

He was a building contractor of a lethargic disposition who used to take afternoon naps in all sorts of curious places.
Il était entrepreneur dans le bâtiment et, d’un naturel léthargique, il avait l’habitude, en début d’après-midi, de faire des sommives/siestes dans les endroits les plus insolites.

This irritated my mother, who was an energetic woman, and she used to seek him out to disturb him.
Cela irritait/agaçait ma mère, qui était une femme énergique/dynamique, et elle partait toujours à sa recherche, dans le but de troubler son repos.

As a child I remember going to the bathroom – we lived in Highgate then – and finding my father asleep in the bath in his clothes.
Petit/Enfant, je me souviens d’être allé à la salle de bains (nous habitions Highgate à cette/l’époque) et d’y avoir trouvé mon père endormi dans la baignoire, tout habillé.

Rappel / ponctuation : ne pas conserver le tiret. Il s’agit là d’une précision qui n’est pas de première importance, d’où l’utilisation de parenthèses.

I am rather short-sighted and I thought that my mother had been cleaning an overcoat, jusqu’au moment où j’entendis mon père murmurer: « Donne-moi un tour de clé à l’intérieur quand tu sortiras. »

until I heard my father whisper, “Bolt the door on the inside when you go out”.

He was too lazy to get out of the bath and too sleepy, I suppose, to realize that his order was quite impossible to carry out.
Il était trop paresseux pour sortir/s’extirper de la baignoire, et trop endormi/assoupi/ensommeillé/pas assez réveillé, je suppose, pour se rendre compte qu’il m’était impossible de lui obéir.

At another time, when he was responsible for a new block of flats in Lewisham, he would take his catnap in the cabin of the giant crane, and construction would be halted until he woke.

Ici, « would » n’est pas un conditionnel, mais une forme fréquentative, que l’on traduit par l’imparfait. L’utilisation de « used to » dans une phrase précédente vous éclaire sur le sens de « would », car il est fréquent, dans une évocation nostalgique du passé, de trouver comme
formes verbales d’abord « used to », puis « would » (moins accentué que « used to »), et enfin, simplement, des verbes au prétérit.
La différence entre « used to » et « would » réside dans la rupture avec le présent : « used to » indique une habitude ou un état passé qui n’est plus de mise (ex. they used to have a dog = le chien est mort) ; « would », en revanche, n’insiste pas sur le fait que ce n’est plus le cas dans le présent.

II. QUESTIONS : suggestions pour les réponses

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham Greene was born in Hertfordshire in 1904. He went to Balliol College, Oxford. After working as a journalist, he became a freelance writer and critic. In 1926, he converted to Roman Catholicism but he did not like being labelled a Roman Catholic writer. Throughout his life, Greene was obsessed with travelling far from England, to what he called the “wild and remote” places of the world. He went to Mexico, to West Africa and to Indochina.

He was a prolific writer, and his large production can be divided into two groups of novels. The first, which he called “entertainments”, is made up of literary thrillers (including such works as Stamboul Train (1932) and The Third Man (1950)) which deal with spying and betrayal. The second group of works is inspired by Greene’s Catholicism and explores moral dilemmas, good and evil. The Power and the Glory is the story of a priest who, though a drunkard and a sinner eventually acquires a heroic dimension.

TRAVELS WITH MY AUNT

Travels with my Aunt (1969) belongs to Greene’s first category of novels. The writer once said: “Travels with my Aunt is the only book I have written for the fun of it”. The novel follows the travels of a retired bank manager, and his septuagenarian aunt, as they go across Europe and over continents.

Summary

Henry Pulling meets his Aunt Augusta at his mother’s funeral after many years without seeing her. Though they have little in common, he finds himself drawn into her world. The book is the account of how she inexorably takes him into her strange, hedonistic lifestyle. In her company, he travels to Brighton and Paris, then from Paris to Istanbul on the Orient Express, becoming involved with drugs and currency smugglers and, as the journey unfolds, so do the stories of Aunt Augusta and her many past lives, made of adventures and romance.

In Aunt Augusta, Greene has created one of the great eccentric characters of modern British fiction.

1. Study the way in which the two characters – the narrator and his aunt – are introduced and described

This passage represents the opening chapter of the book. It gives us an account of the meeting of two characters – the narrator and his aunt – who are about to embark on a series of adventures. The occasion of this peculiar encounter is the narrator’s mother’s funeral, and it is obvious that this event has not been chosen at random.

The narrator appears as a discreet, reserved, unassuming man. He is presented in negative terms (“never married”, “no hobby”). Like his father, he seems to be of a “lethargic
disposition”, little used to meeting people. He is “rather short-sighted”, only interested “in dahlias”, and apparently very harmless. He seems to be leading a very ordinary life (“always lived quietly”). This is the reason why he feels so “excited” by her mother’s funeral. Yet, although the occasion can be considered as a break in his daily routine, this surprising taste (“a weakness for funerals”) makes him rather odd. We also learn that he is well off (“an adequate pension”), with nothing much to do (“I found it difficult to occupy my time”). We may thus conclude that he is free and ready for whatever opportunity might arise.

Aunt Augusta stands in sharp contrast with her nephew. What strikes us first is her association with emperors and queens. She is qualified by her imperial name (“Augusta”). She is then compared to “the late Queen Mary of beloved memory”, thus acquiring a royal dimension. Her majestic appearance is enhanced by her “monumentally piled” hair. She is full of energy and vitality, as shown by her “two big front teeth” and “vital Neanderthal air” which turn her into some sort of antique monster. Contrary to her indolent, routine - minded nephew, everything about her is unconventional (she “had arrived late”), unusual (“I was present once at a premature cremation”) and eccentric (“brilliant red hair”).

Even her speech is extraordinary with its “clear old accents”. We immediately guess that the meeting of these two individuals – an exceptional old lady and an insignificant yet strange middle-aged man – on an occasion when people “are generally seen at their best”, is going to be of interest.

2. How does the writer manage to arouse the reader’s interest and expectation?

Throughout the text we are given indications which help the author to create and maintain an element of suspense: “for the first time”, “I had never heard it”. We have a feeling that we are going to witness something unusual, puzzling. The fact that the narrator finds himself “agreeably excited”, the “slight stirring of excited expectation” – all these emotions are shared by the reader. Even the mention of the character’s parents (“I had always thought of them as reasonably happy together”), by implying that this may not have been so, creates some pleasurable anticipation.

The tempo of the passage is very important, too. The first paragraph is informative: with much economy Greene gives us a clue about the narrator’s age (over fifty) and the occasion of the meeting. The following paragraph, however, is more diffuse. It is a long flashback, evoking the “memories of the past”, conjuring up anecdotes and places (“Highgate”, “Lewisham”) that belong to the narrator’s childhood, in a subdued tone. Now we are ready for the last part, which begins in a more sustained of key and concludes on the climactic description of Aunt Augusta. With the final “hush” – a sort of humorous turning-point – the tone quietens down again.

This passage clearly shows Graham Greene’s narrative technique. He brilliantly introduces and delineates the characters, while keeping some mystery in his narrative, thus paving the way for what is to follow with humour and consummate art.