

The Portrait of a Lady - Khushwant Singh

Term	Explanation
wrinkled	Having many lines or folds on the skin, especially as a result of old age. Here it emphasises that the grandmother had appeared very old for as long as the narrator could remember. Example: “She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her.”
mantelpiece	A shelf above a fireplace, often used for displaying photographs or ornaments. Here the grandfather’s portrait was displayed on it. Example: “My grandfather’s portrait hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing room.”
loose-fitting	Made to hang loosely on the body rather than fit closely. The expression helps create the traditional appearance of the narrator’s grandfather. Example: “He wore a big turban and loose-fitting clothes.”
the thought was almost revolting	The idea was extremely unpleasant or almost impossible to accept. Here the expression humorously conveys the child narrator’s inability to imagine his aged grandmother as once young and pretty. Example: “As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting.”
revolting	Extremely unpleasant, repulsive, or difficult to accept. In context, it describes the narrator’s childish reaction to imagining his grandmother as young and pretty. Example: “As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting.”
absurd and undignified	Ridiculous or unreasonable and at the same time lacking the dignity expected of someone. The narrator could not reconcile his grandmother’s dignified old age with the idea of her playing childhood games. Example: “That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.”
absurd	So unreasonable or strange that it appears ridiculous. Here the narrator finds the grandmother’s childhood almost impossible to imagine. Example: “That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.”
undignified	Not showing the seriousness, respectability, or dignity expected of a person. The narrator felt that playing childish games did not fit his image of his grandmother. Example: “That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.”
fables	Traditional or legendary stories, often containing a moral or religious lesson. The grandmother’s childhood seemed as remote to the narrator as the old stories she told him. Example: “That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the fables of the Prophets she used to tell us.”
a criss-cross of wrinkles	A network of wrinkles crossing one another in different directions. The expression vividly emphasises the grandmother’s extreme old age. Example: “Her face was a criss-cross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere.”
criss-cross	A pattern formed by lines crossing one another in different directions. Example: “Her face was a criss-cross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere.”
hobbled about	Walked slowly and with difficulty, particularly because of age or physical weakness. It describes the grandmother’s movement in her old age. Example: “She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the

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|                                   | beads of her rosary.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| spotless white                    | Completely clean and pure white. In context, the grandmother’s white clothing contributes to the impression of purity and serenity surrounding her. <b>Example:</b> “She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary.”   |
| stoop                             | A posture in which the upper body is bent forward, here as a consequence of old age. <b>Example:</b> “She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary.”                                                                  |
| telling the beads of her rosary   | Counting or moving rosary beads while reciting prayers. The expression establishes prayer as a constant feature of the grandmother’s life. <b>Example:</b> “She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary.”            |
| rosary                            | A string of beads used for counting prayers. It becomes a recurring symbol of the grandmother’s religious devotion. <b>Example:</b> “She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary.”                                   |
| silver locks                      | Grey or white strands of hair. “Silver” gives the grandmother’s white hair a graceful and dignified quality. <b>Example:</b> “Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer.”                                                                     |
| puckered                          | Drawn into small folds or wrinkles. Here it describes the grandmother’s aged face. <b>Example:</b> “Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer.”                                                                                               |
| inaudible prayer                  | Prayer spoken so softly that it cannot be heard. The expression emphasises the grandmother’s continuous and deeply personal devotion. <b>Example:</b> “Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer.”                                            |
| inaudible                         | Too quiet to be heard. <b>Example:</b> “Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale, puckered face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer.”                                                                                                                                                           |
| an expanse of pure white serenity | A poetic expression presenting the grandmother as an embodiment of purity, tranquillity, and peace. Her white hair and clothes make her resemble a vast, peaceful winter landscape. <b>Example:</b> “She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.” |
| expanse                           | A wide and continuous area or stretch. In the comparison, it suggests something broad, unbroken, and peaceful. <b>Example:</b> “She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.”                                                                      |
| serenity                          | Complete calmness, tranquillity, and freedom from disturbance. Here it expresses the grandmother’s inner peace as reflected in her appearance. <b>Example:</b> “She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.”                                      |
| contentment                       | A peaceful feeling of satisfaction with one’s circumstances. It suggests the grandmother’s inner fulfilment and acceptance of life. <b>Example:</b> “She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.”                                                 |
| monotonous sing-song              | A repetitive, regularly rising and falling manner of speaking or reciting. Here it describes the steady rhythm of the grandmother’s morning prayer. <b>Example:</b> “She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-                                                                                                       |

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|                          | song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart; I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it.”                                                                                                                                                                   |
| monotonous               | Repetitive and unvarying in sound or manner. <b>Example:</b> “She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart; I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it.”                                                    |
| by heart                 | Completely from memory, so that something can be repeated without looking at a text. <b>Example:</b> “She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart; I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it.”            |
| plastered                | Covered or coated with a layer of a substance. Here the wooden slate had been coated with yellow chalk in preparation for writing. <b>Example:</b> “Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink-pot and a red pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me.” |
| earthen                  | Made of clay. Here it describes the traditional ink-pot carried to school. <b>Example:</b> “Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink-pot and a red pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me.”                                                         |
| stale                    | No longer fresh because it has been kept for some time. <b>Example:</b> “After a breakfast of a thick, stale chapatti with a little butter and sugar spread on it, we went to school.”                                                                                                                                                    |
| scriptures               | Sacred writings regarded as authoritative within a religion. <b>Example:</b> “While the children sat in rows on either side of the verandah singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures.”                                                                                            |
| in a chorus              | Together as a group, with everyone speaking or singing at the same time. <b>Example:</b> “While the children sat in rows on either side of the verandah singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures.”                                                                                |
| growling                 | Making a low, rough, threatening sound, particularly by an animal. <b>Example:</b> “They followed us to our home growling and fighting with each other for the chapattis we threw to them.”                                                                                                                                               |
| a turning-point          | A moment or event marking an important change in a situation or relationship. Moving to the city altered the close companionship between the narrator and his grandmother. <b>Example:</b> “That was a turning-point in our friendship.”                                                                                                  |
| took to feeding sparrows | Began feeding sparrows regularly as a new habit. In the city, feeding sparrows replaced the grandmother’s earlier practice of feeding village dogs. <b>Example:</b> “There were no dogs in the streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.”                                                              |
| took to                  | Began doing something regularly or habitually. <b>Example:</b> “There were no dogs in the streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.”                                                                                                                                                                   |
| as the years rolled by   | As the years gradually passed. The expression suggests the gradual passage of time and the increasing distance between the narrator and his grandmother. <b>Example:</b> “As the years rolled by we saw less of each other.”                                                                                                              |
| distressed               | Deeply worried, troubled, or unhappy. The grandmother was disturbed because the narrator’s English education contained no religious instruction. <b>Example:</b> “She did not believe in the things they taught at                                                                                                                        |

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|                                           | the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| lewd associations                         | Connections with behaviour regarded as indecent or morally improper. The phrase reflects the grandmother’s traditional view of music and its social associations. <b>Example:</b> “To her music had lewd associations.”                                                                                                                                                               |
| the monopoly of harlots and beggars       | Something regarded as belonging exclusively to prostitutes and beggars. The expression conveys the grandmother’s traditional belief that music was associated with socially disreputable groups. <b>Example:</b> “It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk.”                                                                                           |
| monopoly                                  | Exclusive possession, control, or use of something by a particular person or group. Here it is used figuratively. <b>Example:</b> “It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk.”                                                                                                                                                                          |
| harlots                                   | An old and derogatory word for prostitutes. <b>Example:</b> “It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| gentlefolk                                | People considered respectable, well-bred, and of good social standing. <b>Example:</b> “It was the monopoly of harlots and beggars and not meant for gentlefolk.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| disapproval                               | A feeling that something is wrong, unsuitable, or unacceptable. The grandmother expressed her objection through silence rather than argument. <b>Example:</b> “She said nothing but her silence meant disapproval.”                                                                                                                                                                   |
| the common link of friendship was snapped | The remaining connection that kept their close companionship alive came to an end. “Snapped” metaphorically presents their shared bond as a link that has broken. <b>Example:</b> “The common link of friendship was snapped.”                                                                                                                                                        |
| common link                               | A shared activity or circumstance that keeps two people connected. <b>Example:</b> “The common link of friendship was snapped.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| snapped                                   | Broke suddenly or completely. Here it is used metaphorically for the weakening of their companionship. <b>Example:</b> “The common link of friendship was snapped.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| accepted her seclusion with resignation   | Calmly accepted her increasingly isolated life without complaint or resistance. The expression highlights the grandmother’s patience, emotional strength, and acceptance of circumstances. <b>Example:</b> “My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation.”                                                                                                                  |
| seclusion                                 | The state of being separated or withdrawn from other people. Here it refers to the grandmother’s increasingly solitary life. <b>Example:</b> “My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation.”                                                                                                                                                                                |
| resignation                               | Calm acceptance of an unpleasant or unavoidable situation. <b>Example:</b> “My grandmother accepted her seclusion with resignation.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| spinning-wheel                            | A traditional device used for spinning fibre into thread. It became one of the grandmother’s principal occupations in her secluded life. <b>Example:</b> “She rarely left her spinning-wheel to talk to anyone.”                                                                                                                                                                      |
| reciting                                  | Repeating aloud something learned or memorised. Here it refers to her continual recitation of prayers. <b>Example:</b> “From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers.”                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| a veritable bedlam of chirrupings         | A genuine scene of tremendous noise created by the simultaneous chirping of hundreds of sparrows. The expression vividly conveys the lively excitement surrounding the grandmother during feeding time. <b>Example:</b> “While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings.” |

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| veritable                            | Used for emphasis to mean truly or genuinely deserving the description given. <b>Example:</b> “While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings.”                                                  |
| bedlam                               | A scene of great noise, confusion, or disorder. <b>Example:</b> “While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings.”                                                                                |
| chirrupings                          | Short, repeated sounds made by small birds. <b>Example:</b> “While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings.”                                                                                    |
| perched                              | Sat or rested on something, especially as a bird does. Their willingness to perch on her shows how accustomed the sparrows were to her presence. <b>Example:</b> “Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders.”                                                                               |
| shooed                               | Drove away by making a sound or gesture. The grandmother never drove the sparrows away despite their physical closeness. <b>Example:</b> “She smiled but never shooed them away.”                                                                                                                            |
| the happiest half-hour of the day    | The part of the day that gave the grandmother the greatest happiness and pleasure—her time spent feeding the sparrows. <b>Example:</b> “It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.”                                                                                                            |
| sentimental                          | Openly displaying tender or emotional feelings. The grandmother did not outwardly show distress even when the narrator was leaving for five years. <b>Example:</b> “She was not even sentimental.”                                                                                                           |
| cherished the moist imprint          | Treasured the moist mark left by the grandmother’s kiss because the narrator feared that it might be their last physical contact. <b>Example:</b> “Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.”                  |
| cherished                            | Treasured or held something dear with affection. <b>Example:</b> “Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.”                                                                                                   |
| imprint                              | A mark or impression left by contact. Here it is the moist mark of the grandmother’s kiss. <b>Example:</b> “Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.”                                                         |
| clasped                              | Held someone closely and firmly, especially in the arms. <b>Example:</b> “She still had no time for words, and while she clasped me in her arms I could hear her reciting her prayers.”                                                                                                                      |
| frivolous rebukes                    | Playful and affectionate scoldings that are not seriously intended as criticism. They show the grandmother’s affectionate relationship with the sparrows. <b>Example:</b> “Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.” |
| frivolous                            | Light-hearted, playful, or lacking seriousness. <b>Example:</b> “Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.”                                                                                                           |
| rebukes                              | Expressions of criticism or scolding. Here they are playful rather than severe. <b>Example:</b> “Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.”                                                                           |
| the sagging skins of the dilapidated | The loose, drooping surfaces of an old drum that had fallen into poor condition. The vivid expression emphasises both the drum’s age and the grandmother’s unusual energy in beating it. <b>Example:</b> “For several                                                                                        |

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| drum                    | hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| thumped                 | Struck heavily and repeatedly, producing a dull sound. <b>Example:</b> “For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors.”                                                                                                                                                                 |
| sagging                 | Hanging or sinking downward because of looseness, weakness, or age. <b>Example:</b> “For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors.”                                                                                                                                                    |
| dilapidated             | Old and in a badly damaged, worn-out, or neglected condition. <b>Example:</b> “For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors.”                                                                                                                                                          |
| home-coming of warriors | The return home of fighters or soldiers after being away. The grandmother’s traditional song celebrates a return, paralleling the narrator’s own homecoming after five years. <b>Example:</b> “For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the home-coming of warriors.”                                          |
| overstraining           | Exerting oneself physically or mentally beyond a safe or reasonable limit. The family feared that hours of singing and drumming would exhaust the elderly grandmother. <b>Example:</b> “We had to persuade her to stop to avoid overstraining.”                                                                                                           |
| omitted                 | Left something undone or failed to do something normally performed. For the grandmother, missing her prayers was a serious departure from her lifelong routine. <b>Example:</b> “She said that, since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us.” |
| lifeless                | Without life; dead. The word marks the moment when the family realises that the grandmother has died. <b>Example:</b> “Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers.”                                                                                                                              |
| a peaceful pallor       | A calm paleness spreading over the face at death. The expression reinforces the serenity that characterised the grandmother throughout her life and presents her death as peaceful. <b>Example:</b> “A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.”                                                                                 |
| pallor                  | Unusual paleness of the face or skin, often associated with illness or death. <b>Example:</b> “A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.”                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| customary               | Usual or traditionally practised according to an established custom. Here it refers to the practice followed after death. <b>Example:</b> “We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud.”                                                                                                     |
| shroud                  | A cloth used to cover or wrap a dead body before burial or cremation. <b>Example:</b> “We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud.”                                                                                                                                                         |
| mourning                | The state or expression of grief following someone’s death. <b>Example:</b> “After a few hours of mourning we left her alone to make arrangements for her funeral.”                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| funeral                 | The ceremonies and arrangements connected with the burial or cremation of a dead person. <b>Example:</b> “After a few hours of mourning we left her alone to make arrangements for her funeral.”                                                                                                                                                          |
| crude stretcher         | A simple, roughly made stretcher without refinement. It was used to carry the grandmother’s body for cremation. <b>Example:</b> “In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated.”                                                                                                                                   |

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| cremated                | Having a dead body burned as part of funeral rites. <b>Example:</b> “In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated.”                                                                                                      |
| a blaze of golden light | A strong and brilliant spread of golden light. Here the setting sun illuminates the room and verandah, giving the final scene a striking visual quality. <b>Example:</b> “The sun was setting and had lit her room and verandah with a blaze of golden light.”   |
| dead and stiff          | Dead and physically rigid. “Stiff” refers to the rigidity of the body after death. <b>Example:</b> “All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor.” |
| crumbs                  | Very small pieces or fragments of bread or other food. <b>Example:</b> “She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them.”                                                                                                  |
| took no notice of       | Paid no attention to; ignored completely. The sparrows’ refusal to eat contrasts with their usual eagerness for the grandmother’s bread. <b>Example:</b> “The sparrows took no notice of the bread.”                                                             |
| corpse                  | The dead body of a human being. Here it refers to the grandmother’s body being carried away for the final rites. <b>Example:</b> “When we carried my grandmother’s corpse off, they flew away quietly.”                                                          |
| flew away quietly       | Departed silently instead of making their usual chirruping sounds. In context, the sparrows’ silence forms a striking contrast with the earlier “bedlam of chirrupings.” <b>Example:</b> “When we carried my grandmother’s corpse off, they flew away quietly.”  |

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