

POINCARÉ / PUANKARE (2014)

Abduqayum Yo'ldosh (1962-)

OVERVIEW

Author Abduqayum Yo'ldosh represents a generation of Uzbek writers who emerged in the years leading up to and following Uzbekistan's independence – a period marked by innovative storytelling and a closer rapprochement with world literature. His prose is distinguished by realism, subtle psychologism, and elements of postmodernism. Abduqayum Yo'ldosh was born on February 29, 1962, in the Qo'shrabot District of the Samarkand Region. In 1985, he graduated from the Tashkent Polytechnic Institute (now the Technical University). His first book, *Qaro ko'zim. Shayx ur-ra'is* (*Black Eye. Sheikh ur-Rais*), was published in 1990. It was followed by such works as *Sunbulaning ilk shanbasi* (*First Saturday of August*, 1998), *Timsohning ko'z yoshlari* (*Crocodile's Tears*, 2003), *Parvoz* (*Flight*, 2004), *Bir tun va bir umr* (*One Night and a Whole Life*, 2007), and "Puankare" ("Poincaré", 2014). He was awarded the "Shukhrat" Medal in 1999, a state award recognizing significant contributions to society and culture in Uzbekistan.

The short story "Poincaré" is written as a short story, though its 52-page length places it at the upper end of the genre. It tells the story of a struggling mathematician who, initially full of hope and ambition, dreams of making a great discovery. However, under the pressure of life's difficulties and daily responsibilities, he is unable to realize his dream. Through the story of this disillusioned man, the author raises deeper questions about the meaning of life, its often contradictory nature, its transience, and its irreversibility. Published in 2014, the story was later adapted into a film.

Background The short story is named after the renowned French mathematician Henri Poincaré. The events of the novel are connected to his conjecture, a well-known problem in geometric topology that asks whether a certain type of three-dimensional figure – a closed, simply connected three-dimensional manifold – is topologically equivalent to a three-dimensional sphere. As is well known, the Russian mathematician Grigori Perelman proved this conjecture in 2002–2003 using methods based on Richard Hamilton's Ricci flow theory. The conjecture and its proof are reflected in the novel, as the protagonist passionately dreams of finding a solution to it.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator A mathematician and senior lecturer at a university

The Wife The narrator's wife and a housewife

The Student A second-year student at the Faculty of Mathematics

SYNOPSIS

The narrative unfolds over 35 years of the protagonist's life. As a young and gifted university mathematics student, he becomes fascinated by the Poincaré conjecture, a famous problem proposed by the renowned French mathematician Henri Poincaré. Before graduating, he dreams of pursuing a PhD on the subject. However, his thesis advisor considers the idea unrealistic and persuades him to pursue a different topic in physics and mathematics instead, assuring him that he can earn his degree within two years. Although he agrees, he never abandons his original dream. Meanwhile, his parents, who live in a village, pressure him to marry. As the eldest of seven children, he reluctantly submits to social expectations and agrees to the marriage. After marriage, he hopes to return to his studies, but his wife insists on living in the city. Unable to refuse her, he moves into a dormitory with her. Later, his mother-in-law begins dreaming of owning a home for her daughter. The protagonist takes out loans from relatives, friends, and acquaintances to buy an apartment. However, his wife soon finds the apartment unsuitable, especially after she becomes pregnant. Once again, he cannot refuse her wishes. Since his university salary is insufficient, he is forced to take on various part-time jobs. At the same time, he must support his parents and siblings in the village while also repaying his debts. By this point, he has two children and is no longer young. He works as a senior

lecturer at the university, never having completed his PhD, while also juggling two additional jobs. Nevertheless, he continues clinging to his lifelong dream. Thirty years later, he attempts to solve the problem together with one of his students, but the student eventually abandons the project. Left alone, he continues his work and comes close to a breakthrough, only to receive the devastating news that another mathematician has already solved the Poincaré conjecture.

SCENES

A Briefcase for the Future The narrator recalls how, 35 years earlier (1968–70), he bought an expensive briefcase in Moscow for 150 rubles (about \$1,276 in today's money), and the seller told him it would last 100 years. His friends thought he was crazy, since the briefcase was far too expensive for a simple student. Nevertheless, the protagonist bought it, believing that if he kept his manuscripts in the case, it would bring him good fortune. However, the future turned out very differently from what he had imagined.

Fortune, Faith, and Regret He also recalls a friend from his village who deliberately tracked down and killed a she-wolf, then brought him her womb, which, according to superstition, was believed to bring good luck. At the time, the narrator refused the gift, gently and rationally explaining his reasons. However, after years of struggling with the misfortunes that had befallen him, he came to regret his decision; perhaps he should have accepted this “shameful gift” after all. After all, every faith deserves respect. Meanwhile, his friend seemed remarkably fortunate – he became the head of the forest guard, prosperous, and content with his life.

The Briefcase as a Symbol of a Life The protagonist returns once again to his briefcase, reflecting on how, like himself, it has grown old with time. The worn briefcase becomes a recognizable symbol of his identity, almost an extension of himself. He recalls how, one day, he was struck by a car. As people gathered around him, he pleaded with them to pick up the manuscripts that had spilled from the briefcase. They assumed he was delirious or had suffered a head injury. Yet at that moment, he was less concerned about his injured leg than about the papers filled with mathematical formulas. The loss of those manuscripts caused him even greater pain.

The Man Behind the Rumors He picked up his old briefcase again, tying his papers together with string. His absent-minded appearance, worn briefcase, stutter, and eccentric behavior became the basis for countless stories invented by students. According to one rumor, a close friend had stolen his manuscripts and used them to defend a doctoral dissertation. Supposedly, his hair turned gray overnight and then began to fall out. To make matters worse, the psychological trauma was said to have affected both his mind and speech, leaving him with a stutter. None of these stories, however, were true. Although he did not own a computer at the time, his memory surpassed any machine's, and he could easily have reconstructed the lost manuscripts and recreated his favorite formulas. In reality, though, events unfolded very differently.

A Dream Beyond the Dissertation Here is how it all begins: as the narrator finishes university, he becomes fascinated by a conjecture proposed by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré. Determined to solve it, he shares his ambition with his professor, who responds skeptically and suggests that he pursue more practical research topics instead, assuring him that he can complete his dissertation within two years. Although he reluctantly agrees, he never abandons his dream of solving the conjecture.

A New Passion for Mathematics Guy begins researching the geometry of Galilean space. He becomes deeply interested in the subject, though he has never forgotten the Poincaré conjecture, which remains like a first love to him. He throws himself into his work with great enthusiasm. At times, he has no time to eat or sleep and becomes extremely exhausted, yet he continues moving forward step by step, finding happiness in his work.

Marriage as Commitment When the narrator visits his parents in the village, they inform him that they want him to marry the daughter of his father's close friend. The arrangement had been made when the children were still young. The narrator hesitates, preoccupied with his attempt to solve Poincaré's riddle. However, his parents insist, reminding him that he is the eldest of seven children. His two younger brothers are already ready to marry and are waiting for him to do so first. If he refuses, the villagers may begin to gossip and assume that something is wrong with him, especially since his younger brothers are preparing for marriage while he remains single. Under the pressure of family expectations and social stigma, the narrator is ultimately forced into marriage.

Out of Touch with Reality The young man's salary is meager, while the expenses of marriage are overwhelming. His parents and siblings search desperately for people from whom they can borrow money. He feels increasingly uneasy. Constantly absorbed in scientific research, he has become detached from everyday realities, as his brother remarks. Only then does he begin to realize how costly marriage truly is.

Promises at the Beginning of Marriage The wedding ceremony is in full swing. The narrator feels somewhat overwhelmed, barely noticing how quickly everything has happened. Finally, he is alone with his young wife. They have scarcely known each other, and he feels no particular affection for her. Yet he is guided by the conviction that human beings are among nature's greatest creations and therefore deserve love and respect. Though embarrassed by the physical intimacy, he is touched by her tenderness; his heart fills with joy, and, overwhelmed with emotion, he promises that they will be happy together. At the time, he truly believed those words. However, reality turned out differently, and he never spoke them again.

A Misunderstanding on the Morning After The next day, the mother-in-law arrives and sits down. Her daughter's young husband wants to speak with her. When she asks, "How is my daughter?" the delighted young man becomes flustered and accidentally replies, "She's bad!" What he truly means is that she is wonderful. He is thinking more about his tone than his actual words, and so the wrong expression slips out. Offended, the mother-in-law grows angry and sarcastically replies that if her daughter is so bad, he should find himself a better wife. She then slams the door and leaves, while the young man remains bewildered and confused.

The Mother-in-Law's Influence Then the mother-in-law calls her daughter aside, and the two spend a long time talking in private. It seems she is conducting a kind of "disciplinary lecture". Without saying goodbye, she leaves the house. The narrator never learns exactly what was said between them, but his wife changes completely afterward. She enters his room pale and furious, accusing him of not loving her, of humiliating her for lacking a college education, and of keeping mistresses in the city. She even declares that, had she not married him, no one else would have.

A Broken Heart The narrator is deeply upset. He cannot even defend himself, and his eyes fill with tears. He remembers a girl from his department, a laboratory technician named Munisa. He once felt attracted to her but tried to suppress those feelings and began avoiding the department altogether. Now, however, thoughts of her return to him involuntarily. He is devastated that his wife, who had spent the previous night with him, is now treating him so harshly and accusing him of things he neither did nor even thought about. His heart is broken. On this second night, the newlyweds sleep with their backs turned to each other.

Higher Mathematics and an Unexpected Interruption The next day, the young man is reading Piskunov's *Higher Mathematics*. His wife approaches, stands behind him, and watches him for a while before asking, "Is this book about love?" He simply replies, "Yes." She takes a sheet of paper from her pocket and hands it to him, saying, "Read this first; you can read your book when you return to Tashkent".

Social Obligations and the Cost of Marriage The poorly written note lists the social obligations they must attend: a birthday celebration, a wedding, and various family gatherings. They are expected to bring expensive gifts because she is the new daughter-in-law, and people, she says, will judge both her and her husband by the value of their presents. The young man tries to object, explaining that he does not have that kind of money and cannot ask his family again after the expense of the wedding. His wife then begins lamenting her marriage, recalling the other men who once courted her.

Between Duty and Desire According to local village customs, after the wedding he lives with his parents for about forty days. Then, with their permission, he and his wife move to the city, where they settle in a dormitory. The young man is eager to begin his research. However, his wife does not want to live in a dormitory; she longs for a home of her own. The narrator tries to explain that he does not have enough money to buy a house. This time, she does not protest, but instead falls into quiet despair and whispers, "What should I do now?" The narrator is left feeling guilty.

Against Time: A Young Man's Struggle for Purpose and Mathematics A young man, unable to solve life's problems, does not know what to do. He borrows money from colleagues, friends, and relatives. Eventually, he manages to scrape together enough to buy a one-room apartment on the fifth floor. Determined to begin work on his doctoral dissertation and the Poincaré conjecture, he rushes ahead, feeling that time is slipping away.

A Difficult Request Suddenly, the wife announces that she no longer wants to live in the house; instead, she wants a two- or three-bedroom apartment on the second or third floor. Embarrassed, the narrator initially refuses, but she explains that she is pregnant and struggles to climb to the fifth floor. Reproachfully, she asks whether he truly wants a family and a child. Left with no choice, the narrator finally gives in.

A Risky Investment He starts looking for money again. A friend has suggested he go into business. Everything is set. The money should come from the narrator, the idea from him, and the profits will be split equally. Double profits guaranteed. The narrator agrees.

Under the Scorching Sun They begin work on a farm in the middle of the desert. The yard is filled with onions. The two friends, along with about thirty hired workers, labor nonstop from morning until night. The work is unusual: they cut off the tip of each onion, immediately sear the spot with an electric stove, and then toss it into a pile. This process is meant to keep the onions fresh for a longer time. They plan to transport the goods to Russia by *KamAZ* truck (a Soviet/Russian heavy-duty vehicle), where onions are selling at very high prices. By their calculations, the profits should be enormous. But the work is exhausting. They toil beneath the scorching sun, surrounded by the suffocating smell of onions. The food is sparse and carries the same sharp odor, while their fingers burn and sting from the endless labor.

Return to Mathematics Finally, they complete the job. Onion is sent to Novosibirsk on a *KamAZ* truck, while the narrator returns home. He resumes the research he had missed so passionately. His wife watches him doubtfully but remains silent. He takes great pleasure in his work: his PhD dissertation is nearly finished, and at the same time, he immerses himself in the Poincaré conjecture.

The Rotting Cargo The wife returns from the street in a panic. She says she has seen his friend, but the narrator does not believe her. Insisting that she truly saw him, she urges him to go and check. The narrator goes to his friend's house. His friend's pale-faced wife opens the door, and inside he finds his friend lying on a bed, his head bandaged. It turns out that all the onions spoiled and rotted along the way. "If you don't believe me, ask the drivers", his friend says bitterly. "But please don't tell them where I am. I still have to pay their fare, so I'm hiding at home. Four *KamAZ* trucks of onions rotted away and flowed like my tears.

Burdened by Life The narrator finds himself in a desperate situation. Deeply in debt after investing all his money in a failed business, he is also expected to provide financial support for the weddings of his two younger brothers. His wife is furious, reproaching him, calling him a "doormat," and even threatening to quarrel with his friend in tears. At that moment, his frowning mother-in-law arrives. Neither she nor his wife believes a word he says. The narrator feels an overwhelming desire to abandon everything and leave, but his wife is pregnant, and his conscience will not allow him to leave her in such a condition.

Like a Squirrel on a Wheel He feels like a squirrel on a wheel, endlessly running back and forth. Everything has become a blur. The only things he remembers are going from one person to another asking for money, being turned down time and again, and leaving humiliated, as if he had been kicked. With a chill, he recalls how he even asked Munisa, the lab assistant in the department, for money. The next day, pale and anxious, she brought him not only the money but also her gold ring. He was never able to repay that debt, because she soon quit her job and moved away. Now he can no longer ask his friend for help. He understands his friend's situation, and besides, his friend has moved elsewhere.

Rumors and Breaking Point One day, his wife returns home and tells him she saw his friend driving an expensive new car. She immediately turns on him with reproaches and accusations. The narrator painfully listens as his pregnant wife – carrying his child – scolds him with deep hatred and irritation. His nerves can no longer withstand the pressure; he has begun to age prematurely, his hair turning gray, he starts stuttering, and his head shakes slightly. And contrary to the stories circulating among students, no one stole his PhD manuscript – he simply could not complete it. The legend built around him is nothing more than rumor. This is what truly happened.

Between Loans and Dreams The following memories are chaotic. First, he worked two jobs, then three. He lectured at the university in the mornings, then went to a construction site, worked as a security guard at night, and as a laborer on weekends. It was constant work – nothing but work. Each time he repaid a loan, he would think, "Soon I will return to my research. This is my topic – it will wait for me. After all, it has been waiting for so many years. I will find the time".

The Weight of Time Meanwhile, he finally buys a two-room apartment, and two children are born. The Clay Mathematics Institute publishes a list of the most important mathematical problems of the new millennium, including the Poincaré conjecture. At the same time, Saidov – his former colleague who began his research at the same time – defends his PhD (doctoral dissertation) at 27 and completes his Doctor of Science (DSc) in Mathematics at 30. The narrator, however, at 60, remains a senior lecturer.

The Photograph and the Pain of Memory He attends an acquaintance's dissertation defense at the institute where Saidov is now the head of the institute. Saidov looks young and cheerful and does not recognize him. As the narrator leaves the hall, Saidov glances at his weathered briefcase, as if something distant has briefly stirred in his memory. In the hallway, on the wall beneath the sign "Pride of the University," he notices a photograph of Munisa – now a Doctor of Science in Mathematics, who in those years lectured at the University of Tennessee. She has hardly changed. He feels a sharp pain in his soul.

The Invisible Wall He had hoped his children would continue his work. But they grew up under the influence of their mother, who constantly told them that their father was unlucky, had achieved nothing, had spent his entire life being stingy, was incapable of living well like other people, and was a worthless man. An invisible wall gradually rose between him and his children – a wall he could not overcome. Still, he tried. Yet before long, he realized that, with their "abilities," they would never become great mathematicians.

Searching for a Successor The narrator does not lose hope. He searches constantly for especially talented students. At the beginning of his first lecture, he always asks a difficult question – one that usually remains unanswered. Again and again, he rereads his old manuscripts, and somewhere deep within him faint sparks begin to flicker once more. He believes that one day he will continue his work and finally find a solution. And so, he keeps searching for a collaborator.

A Moment of Inspiration He is giving a lecture to second-year students when, while explaining mathematical formulas, he is suddenly overcome with inspiration. He becomes fascinated by the mathematical precision and perfection of the universe. Addressing the audience, he says, "Listen, if the negative branch of the Gaussian distribution is mapped onto a curved manifold, the problem takes on a completely different form". The thought astonishes him. His excitement provokes laughter from some of the students, but he ignores it and continues speaking. He begins to stutter. He glances at the audience yet does not see the admiring gaze he had hoped for.

The Unanswered Question Now consider Lemma 2.2.1. As is well known, one branch of a Gaussian distribution cannot be uniquely determined by the cofactor structure of a quadratic form. This suggests that if we take $\mathbf{v}$ to be constant on the surface, what does the lemma imply? If $\mathbf{v}$ remains constant on the surface, what happens to the discriminant D in formula (1)? He tries to explain again and looks at the audience, but the students avoid his gaze.

A Student Worth Finding Suddenly, one of the students sitting in the middle raised his hand. The narrator looked at him in disbelief. The student replied, "If we take $\mathbf{v}$ as a constant on the surface, then D in formula (1) equals zero". The narrator could hardly believe his ears. Where had this student come from? Did he really think like this? He asked him to write it down and present it on the board. The student did as he was told. Then the narrator asked him to continue, and he did so without hesitation. The narrator had finally found what he had been looking for, and he was satisfied.

A Gifted Student and the Poincaré Conjecture After class, he calls the student into his office and speaks with him, convinced that he is a naturally gifted mathematician. To encourage his interest, he invites him to participate in a student competition and recommends several books for further reading. A week later, he tests the student, and the results exceed his expectations. After the third test, he cautiously introduces him to the Poincaré Conjecture and casually mentions the promised reward of \$100,000 for the mathematician who solves it. The student is intrigued by the reward but doubts that he could solve such a problem. When the teacher (the narrator) reveals that he himself once attempted to solve it, the student becomes even more confused, since the teacher appears to be a failure.

Agreement The narrator takes several manuscripts from his briefcase and first explains the Poincaré Conjecture, then outlines his own ideas for solving it. After three hours of discussion, the student not only understands the conjecture but is also inspired by the narrator's ideas. He agrees to

join the study, and they decide to meet the next day to continue their joint work on the Poincaré Conjecture, which the narrator had begun.

A Renewed Dream The narrator is happy. He does not go to his second and third part-time jobs. He stuffs cotton wool into his ears to block out the reaper's grumbling. He spends the entire night rereading his manuscripts and seriously reconsidering his 30-year dream. He thinks that if he manages to win the Poincaré Prize, he will give the entire prize to the student, not just half of it. For him, only the decision matters.

A Change of Priorities The next day, he arrives at the university in high spirits and brings several books with him. The student arrives on time, which the narrator regards as a good habit for a mathematician. He begins to inspire the student, explaining the significance of their work and the success that awaits them once they solve the problem. However, the student appears somewhat perplexed. He takes out a wedding invitation and explains that, as the eldest child in the family, he must marry soon or risk missing his chance at happiness.

A Disappointing Turn The narrator is deeply disappointed. He begins to warn the student not to repeat his own past mistake, but seeing the student's excitement, he stops. Instead, he gives him money as a wedding gift. When the student accepts it and promises that he will definitely begin working after the wedding, the narrator does not feel reassured. Since it was only the money that made the student happy, he sees no real sign of regret. Overcome with deep sadness and tears, the narrator asks God to take him back thirty years.

The Weight of Time and Responsibility The narrator's life undergoes significant changes. He feigns illness and skips work. For ten days, he works nonstop on his hypothesis, secretly from his family. He is in a hurry; time seems to be running out. Then he returns to work. He is sixty and about to retire. Since he does not have a doctorate, he could easily be forced into retirement. He takes on additional work again and returns home at midnight, exhausted, only to sit down and continue working on his hypothesis. Sometimes he becomes extremely sleepy and falls asleep at his desk, his head resting on his manuscripts. In the morning, he awakens to his wife's complaints: "How will I live now?" "What will I do?" Meanwhile, she worries about how to marry off their son and daughter.

Missed Opportunity The narrator continues to work on his hypothesis. He waits for the student, but the student does not return. One day, he reads online that the Russian researcher Grigori Perelman has solved the Poincaré Conjecture. Perelman is awarded the Fields Medal. The narrator is deeply disappointed, as he had hoped to be the one to solve it, and in the exact sciences, winning is of great importance. For him, life loses its meaning.

The Final Realization When Perelman's papers on the solution are published, he becomes even more distressed, as the solution turns out to be correct and almost 99% consistent with his own. He realizes he was only about a week late; had he worked with the student, he would have solved it much earlier. The narrator curses himself and asks God to take him back thirty years. And here his manuscript ends.

In the Doctor's Office A student sits in a doctor's office at a psychiatric hospital and places a stack of papers on the table. He says he doesn't know what to say. The doctor replies that he understands. The student then asks about his professor's condition, and the doctor says he often looks at a photograph of a bearded man. The student explains that it's Perelman. The doctor asks if this is the scientist who turned down millions of dollars. He adds that this man must be his patient – in other words, mentally ill. The student tries to object, but the doctor continues: "What sane person these days would turn down a million dollars?" He adds, "And on top of that, he probably has delusions of grandeur, like your teacher".

Unanswered Questions The student feels uncomfortable but still cannot explain why Perelman refused the award. He then asks what should be done with the manuscripts containing research on Perelman's hypothesis. The student replies that no one needs them now. As he is about to leave, the doctor asks him to visit the teacher (the narrator), since he had expressed a desire to see him.

The Final Dream He enters the room where he is to meet the teacher, accompanied by two orderlies. Seeing his student, he is overjoyed and quickly begins to outline his new idea. He says it is a breakthrough, even better than the Poincaré Conjecture, and that they will achieve greater glory than Perelman. But the student is in a hurry, as his young wife is waiting outside. The teacher appears slightly confused, but hands him a paper and says that these are the results of the first stage. They

will continue the subsequent stages together. To reassure him, the student agrees. The teacher bows to him and says that everything depends on him and that he should not give up on his dream. From the outside, however, it seems as though he is being pressured, and the orderlies quickly try to lead him away by force. As they drag him back into the ward, he cries in tears: "Oh, my God! Take me back thirty years!"

Echo of a Lost Dream The student stands up and straightens his clothes. He looks at his watch and begins to worry, realizing that he is late. Reaching the door, he suddenly turns around and looks at the sheet of paper the teacher had given him. Covered in formulas, graphs, and notes written in tiny handwriting, it lies on the floor. He pauses for a moment, decides not to be late, and quickly leaves. At the end of the long hallway, the door swings open. The ailing teacher is led into the room. His cry – a desperate plea to God to take him back thirty years – echoes down the hallway. Finally, his voice fades away.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

THE NARRATOR

The narrator is a talented mathematician who fails to realize his enormous potential and grand dreams. Through his tragic fate, the author shows how the heavy burdens of life can break a person and alter the course of their destiny.

Obsessive The narrator remains faithful to his dream of solving the Poincare Conjecture. Throughout thirty years devoted to securing his family's well-being, this dream never leaves him for a moment. Despite numerous obstacles and failures, his deep love for mathematics remains unwavering. This love is selfless and pure, seeking no material reward; for him, the euphoria of discovery and victory is paramount.

Kind The narrator is kind by nature. He feels ashamed and sorry when he sees his parents and brothers struggling to find the money to celebrate his wedding. After the wedding night, he is hurt by his wife's reproaches and begins to feel alienated from her. However, when she arrives in the city and learns that he is unable to buy an apartment, she falls into deep despair. Seeing her in such a state, his heart sinks, and he decides that the Poincare Conjecture can wait. He feels sympathy not so much for himself as for his charlatan friend when the latter, with his head bandaged and tears in his eyes, announces the collapse of his business.

Responsible The narrator feels a profound sense of responsibility toward his family. Although he prioritizes his main goal – solving the Poincaré conjecture – and feels neither genuine love for his wife nor a strong emotional attachment to his children, he cannot abandon them. The traditional belief that a man must provide for and care for his family, deeply ingrained in society, prevails over his passionate desire to fulfill his mathematical dream. When his wife demands that he find another home, despite knowing that he is unable to do so, he cannot refuse her because she is pregnant. He considers it his duty to fulfill her wish, no matter the cost.

Cautious The narrator dislikes conflict and therefore never fights for his rights. When his mother-in-law slings mud at him and accuses him of being unworthy of her daughter, he is overwhelmed with resentment, yet he does not utter a word in response. Later, his wife joins in and begins to reproach him for things he has neither done nor even thought about. He remains silent. As her insults and accusations become increasingly harsh, he is at times ready to end the relationship, but once again he gives in and says nothing. Later, when it becomes clear that the friend who drew him into the business has betrayed him, he condemns his actions only in secret, while his anger remains hidden.

THE WIFE

The wife appears in only a few episodes of the story, yet she plays a decisive role in the protagonist's tragic fate. At first glance, she seems to be a simple housewife, but she possesses a hidden power, embodying the human desire for material comfort and possessions – a force capable of turning a person's life upside down.

Conforming She first appears in the short story as a young bride, shy and tender toward her fiancé. However, soon after her mother's "lessons" – a series of accusations and complaints directed at her husband – she changes dramatically. Following her mother's example, she quickly assumes the role of a demanding wife and begins imposing the expectations associated with a "model"

husband. Gradually, her aspirations come to be shaped by the widespread image of a prosperous family within her social circle, while her common sense and empathy lose their significance.

Persistent Despite her conformist nature, she remains persistent in achieving her goals. She places material wealth above all else and remains faithful to this pursuit. To achieve her aims, she uses all her “skills” – tears, complaints, comparisons with the luxurious lives of others, and appeals to her husband’s emotions. Throughout the story, she often succeeds. Only at the end, when the hero rises in silent rebellion, does she find herself powerless. However, even then, she continues to play the role of the keeper of the hearth, visiting her husband twice a day in tears and evoking the doctors’ pity.

THE STUDENT

This character embodies the new generation and reflects its values, aspirations, and state of mind. He appears only at the end of the story, bringing both hope and disappointment to the protagonist.

Talented The student possesses a rare mathematical talent that sets him apart from others. He easily understands and grasps his teacher’s ideas, quickly comprehending the essence of complex mathematical problems. He impresses others with the precision and speed of his solutions and possesses all the qualities of a potentially outstanding mathematician.

A Pragmatist Unfortunately, despite his rare abilities, the student lives without high ideals or ambitions. Unlike his teacher, he lacks strong passions, firm convictions, and lofty dreams; instead, he drifts through life with a detached, analytical passivity. When his teacher shares the idea of solving the Poincaré Conjecture, he becomes interested only after hearing about the substantial financial reward. He quickly abandons the project at the first obstacle of reality – marriage. By the end of the story, he chooses to satisfy the immediate wishes of his young wife, who is waiting outside, rather than engage further with the obsessive teacher’s invitation to participate in a supposed great mathematical discovery.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Science Science plays a significant role in the story. Through the perspective of the narrator, a mathematician, the author describes the Poincaré Conjecture in detail. For the author, science is a way of understanding the world and human existence. In a society where material wealth is valued above all else, scientific achievements – which form the foundation of material progress – are pushed into the background. Through the tragic fate of the scientist protagonist, the author reveals the harsh realities that stand in the way of great discoveries.

Illustrative Moment: A student arrives at the psychiatric clinic where his professor is being treated. The doctor speaks with him. When the student asks about the professor’s condition, the doctor says that he constantly looks at a photograph of a bearded man. The student explains that it is Perelman. The doctor says he has heard of him and considers him insane for refusing a million-dollar reward. When the student tries to explain, the doctor mocks Perelman’s reasoning: “I can control universes, so why would I chase a million dollars?” He then calls him “super-schizophrenic”. The doctor asks what to do with the professor’s manuscripts. When the student replies that they are no longer needed, since Perelman has already announced his decision, the doctor says they will be recycled. He adds with an awkward laugh, “At least the toilet paper will serve society”. The student feels uneasy.

RELATIONSHIP

Marriage In this story, marriage is portrayed not as a source of happiness and joy, but as a burden filled with problems, difficult obligations, and disappointments. The protagonist marries at his parents’ request, believing that his kindness and love for his wife will be enough to ensure happiness. However, being completely unprepared for the realities of life, he becomes overwhelmed by its harsh demands and by the heavy responsibilities of family life, within which he feels lonely and alienated.

Illustrative Moment: It is the second day of the wedding celebrations. “The narrator sits reading *Higher Mathematics* by the mathematician Piskunov. His wife approaches, glances at the book, and asks, “Is it a romance novel?” “Yes”, he replies simply. She tells him he can continue reading it once they return to the city, but for now he should focus on this instead. She hands him a list. He begins reading what looks like spelling corrections, only to realize it is actually a schedule of upcoming events at her relatives’ homes – events for which they are expected to bring expensive gifts. He tries to object.

“Money is tight right now”. His wife immediately frowns. “I didn’t force myself on you. You married me, so you should provide for me”. He attempts to explain. “Where am I supposed to get money if I don’t have any? And it would be awkward to ask my family – they already paid for the wedding”. His wife grows more irritated. “Don’t tell me the wedding was lavish. My mother was embarrassed by how modest it was. Just think about what you’d be expected to give my aunt for her birthday”. Then she begins complaining bitterly: “Do you know what kinds of men from respectable families courted me? And who did I end up marrying?”

PSYCHOLOGY

Platonic Love In the story, the narrator is drawn to a girl named Munisa. He thinks of her often, and she awakens warm feelings in him. However, he consistently conceals these emotions, even from himself. In his youth, as a student, merely seeing her made his heart flutter, and he began avoiding the department out of fear of his own feelings. He repeatedly insists that he does not feel any attraction to her, yet at moments of deep disappointment with his wife and family, he involuntarily thinks of her – only to push those thoughts away. At the same time, he cannot and does not wish to imagine her as a wife, since his feelings for her go beyond physical attraction, and he is unwilling to diminish or corrupt them in that way.

Illustrative Moment: The narrator’s wife tells him that if she had not married him, he would have been left without a wife and forced to resort to prostitutes. “My God! What is she even saying?” he thinks. She is insulting his manhood. His eyes fill with tears. At that moment, the image of the girl from the department involuntarily appears before his eyes – her pure and innocent gaze. Lately, whenever he saw her, his heart fluttered and a shudder passed through him. That is why he stopped visiting the department. No, no – he did it consciously. He expected neither reward nor praise. He does not want to remember it.

Quest / Desire In the story, desire is directed not toward a person, but toward an idea. Experiencing a deep inner longing, the protagonist strives to unravel the mystery of the Poincaré Conjecture, which appears to him in the form of a beautiful woman. This desire haunts him, at times filling his heart with the joy of approaching the longed-for union, and at other times bringing mental anguish through frustration and unfulfillment.

Illustrative moment: The Poincaré Conjecture appears simple enough for experts to grasp, yet it is extraordinarily difficult to solve. The narrator is fascinated by its deceptive simplicity. He imagines the conjecture as a beautiful *peri* (beautiful mythical being) and paints the following picture: One morning, while swimming in a crystal-clear pool, he encounters a *peri*. She is neither frightened nor shy; on the contrary, she playfully flirts with him, her gaze alluring and mesmerizing. His heart pounds with excitement, and, overcome with desire, he rushes toward her. But as he approaches, she laughs merrily and rises into the sky. She is a *peri* – a mythical creature who dwells above the earth and delights in teasing mortals, knowing they can never truly reach her. No one can. And yet, the Poincaré Conjecture seems to promise exactly such a possibility. All he has to do is solve it, prove it, cast the noose, seize the *peri* – the solution – by her graceful legs, and gently draw her toward him. And then she is there, in his arms. What could be more beautiful than that?

Conflict In this story, the conflict is not between individuals or groups, but between a great dream and the demands of everyday life. The author raises an eternal question: the struggle between the spiritual and the material. The narrator cannot resist the mundane realities, the desires and expectations of the ordinary people to whom he belongs, nor his own ideas of being a good husband, a caring father, and a responsible provider. He spins like a squirrel in a wheel to meet these standards, sacrificing his talent and purpose in the process, and is ultimately left with deep regret over what he has lost.

Illustrative Moment: After the failure of his onion business, his memories become chaotic. During these years, he resembles a toy robot, condemned to endless toil. At first, he works two jobs, then three. In the mornings, he rushes to lectures with his briefcase; in the afternoons, he works on a construction site; and in the evenings, he works as a security guard. On Saturdays and Sundays, he works as a hired hand. Work, work, work. Money, money, money – his only source of anxiety. Each time he pays off a debt, he tells himself: “I will pay off the next debt, and then I will devote myself entirely to research. The Poincaré Conjecture will be waiting for me. It is not my fault; I did not choose this freely. I was forced into it. Time is running out”.

Regret The main theme of the short story is regret; the protagonist is constantly haunted by the missed opportunity to make a great discovery. Unable to cope with the burdens of everyday life, he repeatedly promises himself that once he overcomes them, he will return to his research – but he never truly does. Now old and helpless, he is unable to solve the Poincare Conjecture, having been beaten to it by another mathematician. His vanity is deeply wounded, and he is tormented by profound regret for the time and youth he has lost.

Illustrative Moment The protagonist eagerly awaits his student. The student arrives on time, and the protagonist is delighted. However, the student suddenly announces that he can no longer work with him on the hypothesis because he is getting married, and he invites him to the wedding ceremony. The protagonist is deeply confused. To reassure him, the student says that they will begin working after the wedding, but for now, the hypothesis must wait. The narrator looks at him and says that history is repeating itself. He, too, said the same thing to himself thirty years ago and believed that the Poincare Conjecture would wait. Yes, it waited – but he... here his speech breaks off. He then gives the student money as a wedding gift. The student rejoices, thanks him, and leaves. The narrator, devastated, sits motionless for a moment, then suddenly bursts into tears, begging God and repeating: “Oh, God! Take me back thirty years...”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you assess the protagonist's responsibility to his family? Was it worth giving up an important goal for the sake of his family's well-being?
2. Why does the narrator avoid meeting the young lab assistant in the department, despite his strong attraction to her and his apparent concern for her?
3. Who is primarily responsible for the protagonist's tragic fate?
4. What can you say about such details in the story as the briefcase and the wolf's womb “bringing good luck”?