

A Devoted Son
& Other Stories

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A Devoted Son & Other Stories

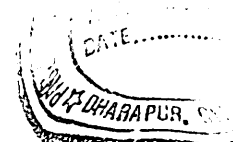


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Preface

Though eclipsed by the novel in popularity, the short-story is, perhaps, the most private of all literary genres. It is practised by the future novelists, by those to whom poetry sounds abstruse and by many of us eager to transform everyday experiences into a narrative art. A seven-story collection represents painful compromises and omissions. Many masters are to be sacrificed, some fair to middling exponents are to be invited. But the purpose of this collection is not to showcase the world's finest stories. It is to anthologize stories thematically close to the sensibility of India's college and university students. These stories strike us all in different ways, and Amrita Pritam and Anita Desai are chosen simply to address two facets of the typical Indian reality—the question of superstition and one of curious father-son bond/bondage.

Each story has been postfaced by the individual writer's life and creed, a note on the particular story and annotations, offered for those who may be eager to look the allusions or references up. A few of the stories may match syllabi of Major and General courses in certain Indian universities. So a few study questions follow annotations to provide a model of questions usually asked. This humble collection is not the final word in short story, but it may well be a first step towards masterpieces of the short-story genre. While the masterpieces are easily available, some 'student-pieces' may be difficult to search out of numerous short-story anthologies. For this alone, the editors deserve a handshake, particularly from those who want initially to 'feel' the art of short-story before plunging into its hidden depths.

Editors, Defence for Literature

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Acknowledgement

For exclusive publishing right of *The Weed* to Amrita Pritam by special arrangement with the author.

To Anita Desai and Roger, Coleridge and White Ltd., London, for permission to use *A Devoted Son*.

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The Weed Amrita Pritam

ANGOORI was the new bride of the old servant of my neighbour's neighbour's neighbour. Every bride is new for that matter. But she was new with a difference. She was the second wife of her twice-married husband, who could not be called new because he had already drunk at the conjugal well. As such the prerogative of being new went to Angoori only. This realization was further accentuated considering the five years that passed before they could consummate the union. Besides, she had been here for a few months only. She still carried a rustic freshness and girlish coyness about her.

About six years ago, Prabhati went home to cremate his first wife. When the cremation was over, Angoori's father approached him and took over his wet towel. He wringed it dry, making a symbolic gesture of wiping away Prabhati's tears of grief, the profusion of which had wet his towel.

There never was a man though who cried enough to wet a yard and a half of calico length. The towel became wet only when he had the after-cremation bath. The simple act of drying the so-called tear-stained towel on the part of a person with an unmarried daughter said, "I give you my daughter to take the place of the one who died. You need not cry now. I have dried even your tear-wet towel."

This was the way Angoori married Prabhati. However, their union was postponed for over five years for two reasons, her age and her mother's paralysis. At last, when Prabhati was invited to take away the bride, it seemed she would have to stay back at the village. His employer was reluctant to add another mouth to his kitchen. But when Prabhati told him that his wife would keep her own house he agreed.

Angoori stayed behind the veil from both men and women in the beginning. The loop of the veil soon started shrinking till it only covered her hair as was becoming of an orthodox Hindu woman. She was a dear one, a delight to the eye and the ear.

There was laughter in the tinkling of her thousand ankle bells and a hundred thousand bells in her laughter.

"What are you wearing, Angoori?" I asked her one day.

"This, lovely one? Anklet, for my foot."

"That, on your finger?"

"*Bichwa* it be."

"And on the arms.?"

"*Pachela*."

"Now tell me the one on your forehead."

"They call it *Aliband*."

"Nothing on your waist today, Angoori?"

Pretty heavy it weighs. Tomorrow, I wear. Today no necklace, see. Joints gone. Tomorrow I go to the city and get a new joint to it, also buy a nose-pin with a ring. My mother-in-law kept it.

Angoori was very proud of her silver jewellery. She was transported by the mere touch of her trinkets. Her whole being seemed to be setting them off to maximum effect.

The weather became close with the turn of the season. Angoori too must have felt it in her hut where she passed the good part of the day. She stayed out more now. There are a few giant neems before my house and an old well under them. The well is not in use, though occasionally the construction worker still draws water from it. The spilt water makes several puddles around the well, which keep the atmosphere cool. Angoori often relaxed by the well.

"What you be reading, *bibi*?" Angoori asked one day, finding me with a book. I had a chair placed under the neem.

"Want to read it?"

"I, no reading."

"Want to learn?"

"Oh, no!"

"Why? What's wrong with that?"

"Sin for women, reading be, see."

"What about men?"

"They, no sin."

"Who told you all this?"

"I know."

"I read. I must be sinning."

"City women, no sin. Village women, all sin"

We both laughed at that. She had not learnt to question what she was told to believe. I thought if she found her peace in her naive convictions, who was I to question them.

Her body redeemed her dark complexion. There was an intense sense of ecstasy radiating all the time from her being; a resilient sweetness in her body. It is said a woman's body is like a lump of dough. Some have the looseness of underdone dough while others have the clinging plasticity of leavened dough. Rarely has a woman a body that can be equated to rightly-done dough that is a baker's pride. Angoori's body belonged to the last category. Her rippling muscles impregnated the metallic resilience of coiled springs. I felt with my eyes her face, arms, breast, legs and experienced a profound languor. I thought of Prabhati, old, short-statured hanging jaw of a man who could be the death of Euclid. Suddenly a funny idea struck me. Angoori was the dough covered by Prabhati. He was the one protecting, not the one participating. I felt a laugh welling up inside me but I checked it lest Angoori be offended. I started talking to her about her village and kinsfolk.

I inquired the way marriages were arranged in her village.

"Girls, When five or six, adore someone's feet. He becomes her husband."

"How do they do it?"

"Her father does it for her, with money and flowers."

"That's not the same as the girl doing it."

"Oh he does it for the girl, so it be the girl."

"But the girl has not seen the man even."

"Girls no see."

"Not a single girl?"

She said "No" hesitating but then added, "Those in love do."

"Do the girls in your village have love affairs?"

"Some have."

"Don't they sin, those who fall in love?"

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"It's a sin, great one it be."

"Are not they afraid of sinning?"

"They are. It's not them that do it. It's men make them do it!"

"How do the men make them do it?"

"With the weed, a wild one. One who eats it loves the man who gave it!"

"Does she know when eating the weed?"

"Oh no, they do it without her knowing. Give her in sweet or betel. Once she has eaten the weed, nothing satisfies her but to be with her man."

"True!"

"I know. I have seen with my own eyes. She is my friend, older than me."

"What happened?"

"Why, she went crazy. Ran away with him to the city."

"How do you know it was the weed?"

"What else? Why should she leave her parents? He brought her many things from the city, clothes trinkets, sweets."

"Love can also be otherwise?"

"No otherwise. When parents object, why does she like that?"

"Have you seen the weed?"

"No, It grows in a far land. My mother warned me not to accept a betel or sweets from a man lest it contain the weed."

"You were wise. How come Your friend ate it?"

"She suffered," she said sadly, "No comb to her hair. Sang at night. She talked to herself."

"What did she sing?"

"Don't know. They all sing them who eat the weed. Weep also."

The talk becoming emotional, I retired.

I found her sitting under the neem one day in a profoundly abstract mood, Usually one could hear Angoori's arrival at the well much before she reached it. Her anklets carried the tidings. But they were dumb that day.

"What's the matter, Angoori?"

She gave me a blank look and then, recovering, said,

"Teach me reading, *bibi*."

"What happened. Angoori?"

"Teach me writing my name."

"Whom will you write?"

She did not answer. Once again she was lost.

"Won't you be sinning?" I said to draw her. She would not talk. I retired for the afternoon siesta.

When I came out in the evening, she was still sitting there, crooning to herself a sob of a song. Hearing my footfalls, she turned round and swallowed her song. She sat with hunched shoulders, perhaps because of the chill in the evening breeze.

"You sing well, Angoori", I watched her make a heroic effort to turn back the brimming tears and sketch a simple across her mouth.

"I know not singing."

"You do, Angoori."

"This was a..."

"Song that your friend sang," I completed her sentence.

"Heard it from her."

"Won't you sing it for me?"

"Oh, it's just about the change of seasons, four months winter, four months summer, four months rain."

"Not like that. Sing."

She did not sing though she did tell the wording. It went : Four months winter reigns, my heart shivers, my love ; four months summer it be, wind shimmers in the Sun; four months come rains, clouds tremble, my love.

"Angoori?"

She looked up as if from a trance. I felt like shaking her by the shoulders and asking if she had eaten the weed. I did put an arm around her shoulders. I asked if she had lunch. She cooked for herself since Prabhati ate at his masters.

"Did you cook today?"

"Not yet."

"Did you have tea in the morning?"

"Tea! No milk today."

"Why wasn't there any milk today.?"

"I not get milk. Ram Tara..."

"Fetched milk?"

She nodded.

Ram Tara was the street night-watchman. When Angoori was not there he used to get a cup of tea at our place at the end of his watch before retiring with a cot to the well. After Angoori's arrival he prepared his tea at her hearth. He, Angoori and Prabhathi all had tea together before the hearth. Three days ago, Ram Tara went home on leave.

"You did not have tea for three days."

She shook her head.

"Haven't eaten, too?"

She did not answer. Apparently, if she did, it was not more than a morsel.

I remember Ram Tara, good looking, quick-limbed, full of mirth. He had a way of talking with laughter hovering at the corner of his lips.

"Angoori?"

"Yes, Bibi."

"Is it the weed?"

Tears flowed down her face and gathered at the tip on either side of her mouth.

"May I be accursed, "she started in a voice atremble with the load of tears, "If I ever ate sweets from him. Not a betel even. If It be tea...? "She could not finish, choked, by her sobs.

Amrita Pritam (b. 1919), a revered name in Punjabi literature, was greatly moved by the tragedy of partition, a fact evidenced in her remarkable poem *An Ode to Waris Shah* and novel, *The Cage*. Probably the greatest woman writer in the 20th century Indian literary scene, Pritam has written in Hindi with *elan* as her work *Smaran Gatha* shows. If her poetry registers angst of a generation pursuing some unknown truth or separated by historical contingency, her prose symbolizes a lyrical quality as in her autobiographical works *Black Rose* and *Revenue Stamps*. Pritam has earned almost all honours any Indian writer can ask for—the *Sahitya Akademi* award, the *Padma Sri* and the *Jnanpith* award. She is one writer with a leaven of both 'feminine' sensibility and probings into general human questions. Now an occasional writer, she has shown paths to numerous women writers—paths often overgrowing a typically "sexist" consciousness or aesthetics.

The Weed : Amrita Pritam's delightful short story, originally written in Punjabi, here translated into English by Raj Gill, is based on power of the age-old superstition in the 'weed' and its power to stimulate love. Angoori is not to accompany her husband to force an additional burden on the employer. Often staying apart from husband offers her a leeway to bare her natural self. She adorns herself in silver ornaments, takes outdoor air, airs her naive, natural views on love and marriage, village and city mores etc.

The writer describes her well-crafted body ("rightly done dough") in contrast to her husband's short stature. Angoori's rustic background colours her views on love, esp. the love intoxicated by the 'weed' used by a love-sick man for a woman's love. Angoori on her part is charmed by Ram Tara, the watchman; his 'weed' gets hold of her, of her love.

Amrita Pritam does not tell much through the story. But she suggests, with a plumb, how the village women, like Angoori, are slaves to parents' and husbands' wishes, and more so to superstitions. The 'weed' which charms Angoori, the writer hints, is a symbol of male dominance over simple village women—a symbol growing in strength and will continue to grow till men cease to cash in on rustic simplism and simplicity of the tribe of Angoori.

Notes :

drunk in the conjugal well : Prabhati was once married, so his marriage to Angoori offers him no taste of a 'new' experience of marriage.

consummate : complete marriage through sexual relationship.

Bichwa/Pachela/Aliband : A Punjabi girl's customary ornamental wears.

rightly done dough : Angoori's body is equated with these words to imply her taut or tight muscles. Pritam visualizes her having an attractive body.

trinkets : small ornaments having little value.

If it be tea : Angoori realizes that Ram Tara charmed her with weed mixed in tea.

Study Questions :

1. Give the appropriateness of the title of Amrita Pritam's story.
2. Give a character-sketch of Angoori as you find her in the story.
3. What light does the story throw on the superstition ruling the village mind in India? Is there any suggestion in the story about illiteracy driving our Angooris into superstitious beliefs? Write briefly.
4. Describe, after Pritam, the effects of the 'weed' on Angoori.

A Devoted Son Anita Desai

WHEN the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them, barefoot and in his pyjamas, at the garden gate, then went up the steps to the veranda where his father sat sipping his morning tea and bowed down to touch his feet.

'A first division, son?' his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.

'At the top of the list, Papa,' Rakesh murmured, as if awed. 'First in the country.'

Bedlam broke loose then. The family whooped and danced. The whole day long visitors streamed into the small yellow house at the end of the road to congratulate the parents of this *Wunderkind*, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colour of a festival. There were garlands and *halwa*, party clothes and gifts (enough fountain pens to last years, even a watch or two), nerves and temper and joy, all in a multicoloured whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened : Rakesh was the first son in the family to receive an education, so much had been sacrificed in order to send him to school and then medical college, and at last the fruits of their sacrifice had arrived, golden and glorious.

To everyone who came to him to say, '*Mubarak*, Varmaji, your son has brought you glory,' the father said, 'Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet.' This moved many of the women in the crowd so much that they were seen to raise the ends of their saris and dab at their tears while the men reached out for the betel leaves and sweetmeats that were offered around on trays and shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary filial behaviour. 'One does not often see such behaviour in sons any more,' they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps. Leaving the house, some of the women said, sniffing, 'At least on such an occasion they might have served pure *ghee* sweets' and some of the men said, 'Don't

you think old Varma was giving himself airs? He needn't think we don't remember that he comes from the vegetable market himself, his father used to sell vegetables and he has never seen the inside of a school.' But there was more envy than rancour in their voices and it was, of course, inevitable—not every son in that shabby little colony at the edge of the city was destined to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?

And that was only the beginning, the first step in a great, sweeping ascent to the radiant heights of fame and fortune. The thesis he wrote for his M.D. brought Rakesh still greater glory, if only in select medical circles. He won a scholarship. He went to the U.S.A. (that was what his father learnt to call it and taught the whole family to say—not America, which was what the ignorant neighbours called it, but, with a grand familiarity, 'the U.S.A.') where he pursued his career in the most prestigious of all hospitals and won encomiums from his American colleagues which were relayed to his admiring and glowing family. What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony, right at the end of the road where the rubbish vans tipped out their stinking contents for pigs to nose in and rag-pickers to build their shacks on, all steaming and smoking just outside the neat wire fences and well-tended gardens. To this Rakesh returned and the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father's feet.

As for his mother, she gloated chiefly over the strange fact that he had not married in America, had not brought home a foreign wife as all her neighbours had warned her he would, for wasn't that what all Indian boys went abroad for? Instead he agreed almost without argument, to marry a girl she had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled in like a charm, seemingly too lazy and too good-natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done. What was more, she was

pretty—really pretty, in a plump, pudding way that only gave way to fat—soft, spreading fat, like warm wax—after the birth of their first baby, a son, and then what did it matter?

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital quickly rising to the top of the administrative organization, and was made a director before he left to set up his own clinic. He took his parents in his car—a new, sky-blue Ambassador with a rear window full of strickers and charms revolving on strings—to see the clinic when it was built, and the large sign-board over the door on which his name was printed in letters of red, with a row of degrees and qualifications to follow it like so many little black slaves of the regent. Thereafter his fame seemed to grow just a little dimmer—or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown accustomed to it at last—but it was also the beginning of his fortune for he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this was not accomplished in the wink of an eye. Naturally not. It was the achievement of a lifetime and it took up Rakesh's whole life. At the time he set up his clinic his father had grown into an old man and retired from his post at the kerosene dealer's depot at which he had worked for forty years, and his mother died soon after, giving up the ghost with a sigh that sounded positively happy, for it was her own son who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne.

For it had to be admitted—and the most unsuccessful and most rancorous of neighbours eventually did so—that Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humour his wife and so concern equally for his children and his patients, but there was actually a brain inside this beautifully polished and formed body of good manners and kind nature and, in between ministering to his family and playing host to many friends and coaxing them all into feeling happy and grateful and content, he had actually trained his hands as well and emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon. How one man—and a man born to illiterate parents, his father having worked for a kerosene dealer and

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his mother having spent her life in a kitchen—had achieved, combined and conducted such a medley of virtues, no one could fathom, but all acknowledged his talent and skill.

It was a strange fact, however that talent and skill, if displayed for too long, cease to dazzle. It came to pass that the most admiring of all eyes eventually faded and no longer blinked at his glory. Having retired from work and having lost his wife, the old father very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim. He sat huddled on his string bed most of the day and developed an exasperating habit of stretching out suddenly and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to fly around him in a flap, wailing and weeping and then suddenly sitting up, stiff and gaunt, and spitting out a big gob of betel juice as if to mock their behaviour.

He did this once too often : there had been a big party in the house, a birthday party for the youngest son, and the celebrations had to be suddenly hushed, covered up and hustled out of the way when the daughter-in-law discovered, or thought she discovered, that the old man, stretched out from end of his string bed, had lost his pulse ; the party broke up, dissolved, even turned into a band of mourners, when the old man sat up and the distraught daughter-in-law received a gob of red spittle right on the hem of her new organza *sari*. After that no one much cared if he sat up cross-legged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned grey as a corpse. Except, of course, for that pearl amongst pearls, his son Rakesh.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea, not in one of the china cups from which the rest of the family drank, but in the old man's favourite brass tumbler, and sat at the edge of his bed comfortable and relaxed with the string of his *pyjamas* dangling out from under his fine lawn night-shirt and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from spitting. It was Rakesh, too, who, on returning from the clinic in the

evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, as bare and desolate as a cell, and take the evening air out in the garden, beautifully arranging the pillows and bolsters on the divan in the corner of the open veranda. On summer nights he saw to it that the servants carried out the old man's bed onto the lawn and himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, soothing him and settling him down for a night under the stars.

All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was that he even undertook to supervise his father's diet. One day when the father was really sick, having ordered his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of *soojie halwa* and eaten it with a saucerful of cream, Rakesh marched into the room not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor, and declared, 'No more *halwa* for you, Papa. we must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little *kheer*, that's light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can't have this happening again.'

The old man who had been lying stretched out on his bed, weak and feeble after a day's illness, gave a start at the very sound the tone of these words. He opened his eyes—rather, they fell open with shock—and he stared at his son with disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? No, it was unheard of, it was incredible, but Rakesh had turned his back to him and was cleaning up the litter of bottles and packets on the medicine shelf and did not notice while Veena slipped silently out of the room with a little smirk that only the old man saw, and hated.

Halwa was only the first item to be crossed off the old man's diet. One delicacy after the other went—everything fried to begin with, then everything sweet, and eventually everything, everything that the old man enjoyed. The meals that arrived for him on the shining stainless steel tray twice a day were frugal to say the least—dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables and, if there were a bit of chicken or fish, that was boiled too. If he called for another helping—in a cracked voice that quavered theatrically—Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and

shake his head, saying, 'Now, Papa, we must be careful, we can't risk another illness, you know,' and although the daughter-in-law kept tactfully out of the way, the old man could just see her smirk sliding merrily through the air. He tried to bribe his grandchildren into buying him sweets (and how he missed his wife now, that generous, indulgent and illiterate cook), whispering, 'Here's fifty *paise*' as he stuffed the coins into a tight, hot fist. 'Run down to the shop at the crossroads and buy me thirty *paise* worth of *jalebis*, and you can spend the remaining twenty *paise* on yourself. Eh? Understand? Will you do that?' He got away with it once or twice but then was found out, the conspirator was scolded by his father and smacked by his mother and Rakesh came storming into the room, almost tearing his hair as he shouted through compressed lips, 'Now Papa, are you trying to turn my little son into a liar? Quite apart from spoiling your own stomach, you are spoiling him as well—you are encouraging him to lie to his own parents. You should have heard the lies he told his mother when she saw him bringing back those *jalebis* wrapped up in filthy newspaper. I don't allow anyone in my house to buy sweets in the *bazaar*, Papa, surely you know that. There's cholera in the city, typhoid, gastroenteritis—I see these cases daily in the hospital, how can I allow my own family to run such risks?' The old man sighed and lay down in the corpse position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left the old man now (his son's early morning visits and readings from the newspaper could no longer be called that) and those were visits from elderly neighbours. These were not frequent as his contemporaries were mostly as decrepit and helpless as he and few could walk the length of the road to visit him any more. Old Bhatia, next door, however, who was still spry enough to refuse, adamantly, to bathe in the tiled bathroom indoors and to insist on carrying out his brass mug and towel, in all seasons and usually at impossible hours, into the yard and bathe noisily under the garden tap, would look over the hedge to see if Varma were out on his veranda and would call to him and talk while he wrapped his *dhoti* about him and dried the spars hair on his head, shivering with enjoyable ex-

aggeration. Of course these conversations, bawled across the hedge by two rather deaf old men conscious of having their entire households overhearing them, were not very satisfactory but Bhatia occasionally came out of his yard, walked down the bit of road and came in at Varma's gate to collapse onto the stone plinth built under the temple tree. If Rakesh were at home he would help his father down the steps into the garden and arrange him on his night bed under the tree and leave the two old men to chew betel leaves and discuss the ills of their individual bodies with combined passion.

'At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you,' sighed Bhatia, having vividly described his martyrdom to piles.

'Look after me?' cried Varma, his voice cracking like an ancient clay jar. 'He-he does not even give me enough to eat.'

'What?' said Bhatia, the white hairs in his ears twitching. 'Doesn't give you enough to eat? Your own son?'

'My own Son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says no, Papa, I weighed out the *ata* myself and I can't allow you to have more than two hundred grammes of cereal a day. He weighs the food he gives me, Bhatia—he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to.'

'Never,' murmured Bhatia in disbelief. 'Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?'

'Let me tell you,' Varma whispered eagerly. 'Today the family was having fried fish—I could smell it. I called to my daughter-in-law to bring me a piece. She came to the door and said No...'

'Said No?' It was Bhatia's voice that cracked. A *drongo* shot out of the tree and sped away. 'No?'

'No, she said no, Rakesh has ordered her to give me nothing fried. No butter, he says, no oil—'

'No butter? No oil? How does he expect his father to live?'

Old Varma nodded with melancholy triumph. 'That is how he treats me—after I have brought him up, given him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors treat their fathers, Bhatia,' for the son's sterling personality and character now underwent a curious sea change. Outwardly all might be the same but the interpretation had altered: his

masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.

There was cold comfort in complaining to neighbours and, on such a miserable diet, Varma found himself slipping, weakening and soon becoming a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills and mixtures were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach but became a regular part of his diet—became his diet, complained Varma, supplanting the natural foods he craved. There were pills to regulate his bowel movements, pills to bring down his blood pressure, pills to deal with his arthritis and, eventually, pills to keep his heart beating. In between there were panicky rushes to the hospital, some humiliating experiences with the stomach pump and enema, which left him frightened and helpless. He cried easily, shrivelling up on his bed, but if he complained of a pain or even a vague, grey fear in the night, Rakesh would simply open another bottle of pills and force him to take one. 'I have my duty to you, Papa,' he said when his father begged to be let off.

'Let me be,' Varma begged, turning his face away from the pills on the outstretched hand. 'Let me die. It would be better. I do not want to live only to eat your medicines.'

'Papa, be reasonable.'

'I leave that to you,' the father cried with sudden spirit. 'Let me alone, let me die now. I cannot live like this.'

'Lying all day on his pillows, fed every few hours by his daughter-in-law's own hands, visited by every member of his family daily—and then he says he does not want to live "like this"', Rakesh was heard to say, laughing, to someone outside the door.

'Deprived of food,' screamed the old man on the bed, 'his wishes ignored, taunted by his daughter-in-law, laughed at by his grandchildren—that is how I live.' But he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain. Only once, when old Bhatia had come to see him and they sat together under the temple tree, they heard him cry, 'God is calling me—and they won't let me go.'

The quantities of vitamins and tonics he was made to take were not altogether useless. They kept him alive and even gave

him a kind of strength that made him hang on long after he ceased to wish to hang on. It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break, it was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying.

In the evening, that summer, the servants would come into his cell, grip his bed, one at each end, and carry it out to the veranda, there setting it down with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. In answer to his agonized complaints they said the Doctor *Sahib* had told them he must take the evening air and the evening air they would make him take—thump. Then Veena, that smiling, hypocritical pudding in a rustling *sari*, would appear and pile up the pillows under his head till he was propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache. 'Let me lie down,' he begged. 'I can't sit up any more.'

'Try, Papa. Rakesh said you can if you try,' she said, and drifted away to the other end of the veranda where her transistor radio vibrated to the lovesick tunes from the cinema that she listened to all day.

So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket, in danger of getting one of their hard-spun balls in his eye, and at the gate that opened onto the dusty and rubbish-heaped lane but still bore, proudly, a newly touched-up signboard that bore his son's name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago.

At last the sky-blue Ambassador arrived, the cricket game broke up in haste, the car drove in smartly and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag from him, others to escort him up the steps. 'Will you have tea?' his wife called, turning down the transistor set, 'or a Coca-Cola? Shall I fry you some *samosas*?' But he did not reply or even glance in her direction. Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken, at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son. But he stopped gobbling air with his uncontrolled lips and set his jaw as hard as a sick and very old man could set it.

'Papa,' his son said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.

Old Varma tucked his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the yellow air of the summer evening.

'Papa, I'm home.'

Varma's hand jerked suddenly, in a sharp, derisive movement, but he did not speak.

'How are you feeling, Papa?'

Then Varma turned and looked at his son. His face was so out of control and all in pieces, that the multitude of expressions that crossed it could not make up a whole and convey to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him, his skill, his art.

'I'm dying,' he croaked. 'Let me die, I tell you.'

'Papa, you're joking,' his son smiled at him, lovingly. 'I've brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, Papa.'

Varma's mouth worked as hard as thought he still had a gob of betel in it (his supply of betel had been cut off years ago). Then he spat out some words, as sharp and bitter as poison, into his son's face. 'Keep your tonic—I want none—I want none—I won't take any more of—of your medicines. None. Never,' and he swept the bottle out of his son's hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective.

His son jumped, for the bottle was smashed and thick brown syrup had splashed up, staining his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running. All around the old man was hubbub once again, noise, attention.

He gave one push to the pillows at his back and dislodged them so he could sink down on his back, quite flat again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling, like some dire prophet, groaning, 'God is calling me—now let me go.'

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One of the most prolific writers of Indian Writing in English, Anita Desai's (b. 1937) work has won much critical acclaim. She has some ten novels to her credit, apart from a short novella for children—*The Village by the Sea* for which she won the *Guardian Children's Fiction Award* in 1982. Amongst her novels, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting Feasting* were shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the years 1980, 1984 and 1999 respectively. Winner of the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1978, she has also been awarded the *Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize*, the *Federation of Indian Publishers and Authors' Guild of India Award for Excellence in Writing* in 1979 as well as the *Neil Gunn International Fellowship* in 1994. Her other works include two volumes of short stories, *Games at Twilight* and *Diamond Dust*, two more children's books as well as essays, articles and reviews.

Anita Desai is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York and of Girton College at the University of Cambridge. Her novel *In Custody* was also filmed by Merchant Ivory Productions. The distinctive features of Anita Desai's writing is her exploration of the psychological sphere of the characters, her consistent attention to craftsmanship and her use of highly felicitous language. In many of her novels, we get a subjective interpretation of the 20th century history.

A Devoted Son: The story has been taken from the volume *Games at Twilight*. The story is a revelation of human psychology, one of old age when a person's perspectives and attitudes may change. The filial behaviour of Rakesh had always pleased his father. However, when the son's loving care acquires a rational and practical aspect through his strict supervision of his father's diet in an attempt to prolong his life, old Varma feels himself to be a prisoner constantly under strict scrutiny. Consequently, his perspective of and his attitude towards his son changes. Varma feels that his son's earlier devotion has now been substituted by mere obligation.

Notes:

bedlam : a scene of uproar and confusion. Associated with the asylum in Bethlehem.

whooped : gave a loud cry of excitement.

wunderkind : a person who achieves great success while relatively young ; a prodigy.

all in a multicoloured whirl of pride : "multicoloured" because celebrations with sweets, garlands, party clothes and gifts were combined with the stress of celebration. Emotional conditions of joy, nerves and temper followed each other in a confusing succession which was at the same time, indicative of the family pride in Rakesh.

vistas : views ; (here) "shining vistas" implies the bright prospects that have been opened up.

giving himself airs : acting pretentiously or in a self-important and affected manner.

encomiums : formal or high-flown expressions of praise.

shabby : to be in a bad condition, to become faded and worn out.

plump, pudding way : Veena's round and full bodied prettiness resembles a pudding.

regent : a person appointed to administer a State because the monarch is a minor or is absent or incapacitated.

medley : a varied mixture ; (here) "medley of virtues" implies the varied nature or the assortment of virtues possessed by Rakesh.

gob : a clot or lump of slimy matter ; a small amount of sticky liquid.

hawking : clearing the throat noisily.

bolsters : long, thick pillows.

gave a start . . . of these works : Varma winces at the tone of his son's words as this was in contrast to his earlier respectful tone.

smirk : sneer.

lentils : seeds of a leguminous plant used as food with the husk removed.

his martyrdom to piles : his constant long suffering of piles.

drongo : any black bird of the family Dicruridae, native to India, Africa and Australia, having a long forked tail.

the interpretation had altered : what is evident here, is the change in attitude of Varma towards his son. The old man feels that his son's

concern is limited now to that of a doctor's duty. Varma feels that devotion has been replaced by an unfeeling domination.

hubbub : disturbance.

dire prophet : inauspicious prophesier ; prophet of doom.

Study Questions :

1. Do you feel there is a streak of irony in the title, *A Devoted Son*?
2. Is the story a comment on the opposition between 'devotion' and 'liberation'?
3. Write a note on the character of the 'devoted son'. Discuss his character as his father views it.
4. "He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling, like some dire prophet, groaning, 'God is calling me—now let me go.' What are the implications of the speech? Is there a degree of pathos in these lines?



The Snow Child *Angela Carter*

MIDWINTER—invincible, immaculate. The Count and his wife go riding, he on a grey mare and she on a black one, she wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes; and she wore high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs. Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white. "I wish I had a girl as red as blood." So they ride on again; here is a raven, perched on a bare bough. "I wish I had a girl as black as that bird's feather."

As soon as he completed her description, there she stood, beside the road, white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked; she was the child of his desire and the Countess hated her. The Count lifted her up and sat her in front of him on his saddle but the countess had only one thought: how shall I be rid of her?

The Countess dropped her glove in the snow and told the girl to get down to look for it; she meant to gallop off and leave her there but the Count said: "I'll buy you new gloves." At that, the furs sprang off the Countess's shoulders and twined round the naked girl. Then the Countess threw her diamond brooch through the ice of a frozen pond: "Dive in and fetch it for me," she said; she thought the girl would drown. But the Count said: "Is she a fish, to swim in such cold weather?" Then her boots leapt off the Countess's feet and on to the girl's legs. Now the Countess was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted; the Count felt sorry for his wife. They came to a bush of roses, all in flower. "Pick me one," said the Countess to the girl. "I can't deny you that," said the Count.

So the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls.

Weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished.

Then the girl began to melt. Soon there was nothing left of her but a feather a bird might have dropped; a bloodstain, like the trace of a fox's kill on the snow; and the rose she had pulled off the bush. Now the Countess had all her clothes on again. With her long hand, she stroked her furs. The Count picked up the rose, bowed and handed it to his wife; when she touched it, she dropped it.

"It bites!" she said.

Angela Carter (1940-92), the English novelist and short story writer, showed a wide cultural and historical awareness of the polyglot artistic tradition within which she wrote. Her early novels, *Shadow Dance* and *Love*, draw on the magic realism of the Latin American variety. But Carter was versatile enough to probe different themespaces. For example, her *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve* are set in sci-fi landscapes, while *Nights at the Circus* and the comic *Wise Children* are more rooted in mundanity.

As a short fiction or story writer, Carter displays unusual talent, combining artistry with transformative imaginations. Her pioneering collections of stories resound elements from French (*conte cruel*) and Japanese tales. Carter defies any true assessment. She may be a major writer or a very original minor writer. But her influence on

The Snow Child: This is an important story of Angela Carter's volume, *The Bloody Chamber*. It is a transformation of a fairy tale; and it assumes an identity of a typical 'adult tale' by virtue of Carter's uncanny power to blend the fabulosity with a plangency of realism. The Count and his wife are trapped in a phantasmal world where desires and counter-desires vie with each other, creating a space for the subliminal forces of real-life human life, a space distinct from the dream-like surface of the story. The Count's desire to possess a snow-white, red or a raven girl is his dark desire, a desire pitted against the Countess's natural desire to be the desired "girl" of the Count. Inability of the Count to see his "girl" in human terms, costs him the girl. The Countess in her turn, in her supreme sense of possessiveness, is committed to thwarting the phantasmal bliss of the Count. But this bliss, not rooted in a conscious hold

contemporary fiction writers such as Marina Warner and Jeanette Winterson is well marked. If she is bracketed with Rushdie for having forced away British fiction from soapish flavour, it is probably not exaggerated. Those wanting to know more about her married *Flesh and the Mirror* (edited by Lorna Sage). She deserves to be read not only as a fiction writer, but as a feminist and a thinker probing history to renew it.

of reality, is fated to a shocking end. It is no surprise that the hang-over of a dream-driven, intense spell of drama seizes the Countess as well, "It bites"—just as the girl bit the wife's identity when alive. Angela Carter through the story fictionalizes the space each human determines for him(her)self. But, at times, this space is shadowed by dreamscapes or subconscious longings reality does not address.

Notes :

the Count : a foreign noble corresponding to an earl.

spurs : a device with a small spike on a rider's heel for urging a horse forward.

virile member : penis. Here the Countess's dark desire to sexually own the girl is emphasized.

furs : a garment made of or trimmed or lined with short fine soft hair of animals.

Study Questions :

1. Consider the story as a fantasy/fairy tale.
2. Write a note on the blending of fantasy and reality in the story.
3. What is the symbolic meaning of the Count's "Snow Child"?

The Nightingale and the Rose Oscar Wilde

"SHE said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses," cried the young student, "but in all my garden there is no red rose."

From her nest in the holm-oak tree the Nightingale heard him, and she looked out through the leaves and wondered.

"No red rose in all my garden!" he cried, his beautiful eyes filled with tears. "Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched."

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not : night after night have I told his story to the stars and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom, and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

"The Prince gives a ball to-morrow night," murmured the young Student, "and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose, she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red-rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break."

"Here, indeed, is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers: what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the market-place. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold."

"The musicians will sit in their gallery," said the young Student, "and play upon their stringed instruments, and my love will dance so lightly that her feet will not touch the floor, and the

courtiers in their gay dresses will throng around her. But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her," and he flung himself down on the grass, and buried his face in his hands, and wept.

"Why is he weeping?" asked a little Green Lizard, as he ran past him with his tail in the air.

"Why, indeed?" said a Butterfly, who was fluttering about after a sunbeam.

"Why, indeed?" whispered a Daisy to his neighbour, in a soft, low voice.

"He is weeping for a red rose," said the Nightingale.

"For a red rose?" they cried; "how very ridiculous! and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

But the Nightingale understood the secret of the Student's sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love.

Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She passed through the grove like a shadow and like a shadow she sailed across the garden.

In the centre of the grass-plot was standing a beautiful Rose-tree, and when she saw it she flew over to it, and lit upon a spray.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are white," it answered; "as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain. But go to my brother who grows round the old sun-dial, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing round the old sun-dial.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are yellow," it answered; "as yellow as the hair of the mermaid who sits upon an amber throne, and yellower than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow before the mower comes

with his scythe. But go to my brother who grows beneath the student's window, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing beneath the Student's window.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are red," it answered, "as red as the feet of the dove, and redder than the great fans of coral that wave and wave in the ocean-cavern. But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches, and I shall have no roses at all this year."

"One red rose is all I want," cried the Nightingale, "only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?"

There is a way," answered the Tree; "but it is so terrible that I dare not tell it to you."

"Tell it to me," said the Nightingale, "I am not afraid."

"If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine."

"Death is a great price to pay for a red rose," cried the Nightingale, "and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?"

So she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She swept over the garden like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed through the grove.

The young Student was still lying on the grass, where she had left him, and the tears were not yet dry in his beautiful eyes.

"Be happy," cried the Nightingale, "be happy; you shall have your red rose. I will build it out of music by moonlight, and stain

it with my own heart's-blood. All that I ask of you in return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy, though he is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense."

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.

But the Oak-tree understood, and felt sad, for he was very fond of little Nightingale who had built her nest in his branches.

"Sing me one last song," he whispered; "I shall feel very lonely when you are gone."

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.

When she had finished her song, the Student got up, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

"She has form," he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove—"that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good!" And he went into his room, and lay down on his little pallet-bed, and began to think of his love; and, after a time, he fell asleep.

And when the Moon shone in the heavens the Nightingale flew to the Rose-tree, and set her breast against the thorn. All night long she sang with her breast against the thorn, and the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened. All night long she sang, and the thorn went deeper and deeper into her breast, and her life-blood ebbed away from her.

She sang first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl. And on the topmost spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvellous rose, petal following petal, as song followed song. Pale was it, at first, as the mist that hangs over the river—pale as

the feet of the morning, and silver as the wings of the dawn. As the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver, as the shadow of a rose in a water-pool, so was the rose that blossomed on the topmost spray of the Tree. But the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid.

And a delicate flush of pink came into the leaves of the rose, like the flush in the face of the bridegroom when he kisses the lips of the bride. But the thorn had not yet reached her heart, so the rose's heart remained white, for only a Nightingale's heart's-blood can crimson the heart of a rose.

And the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.

And the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky. Crimson was the girdle of petals, and crimson as a ruby was the heart.

But the Nightingale's voice grew fainter, and her little wings began to beat, and a film came over her eyes. Fainter and fainter grew her song, and she felt something choking her in her throat.

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea.

"Look, look!" cried the Tree, "the rose is finished now;" but

the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart.

And at noon the Student opened his window and looked out.

"Why, what a wonderful piece of luck!" he cried; "here is a red rose! I have never seen any rose like it all my life. It is so beautiful that I am sure it has a long Latin name;" and he leaned down and plucked it.

Then he put on his hat, and ran up to the Professor's house with the rose in his hand.

The daughter of the Professor was sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog was lying at her feet.

"You said that you would dance with me if I brought you a red rose," cried the Student. "Here is the reddest rose in all the world. You will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love you."

But the girl frowned.

"I am afraid it will not go with my dress," she answered; "and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers."

"Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful," said the Student, angrily: and he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart wheel went over it.

"Ungrateful!" said the girl. "I tell you what, you are very rude; and, after all, who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has;" and she got up from her chair and went into the house.

"What a silly thing Love is!" said the Student as he walked away. "It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything, I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics."

So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), English writer and wit, rolled in Arnold's anti-philistinism, Ruskin's revolt against the ugly and Pater's defence of hedonism to produce 'aesthetic' literature at its best. His versatile genius found several expressive outlets: poetry, short stories, fairy tales, Platonic dialogues, plays and a novel.

Oscar Wilde's memorable contribution was to drama, and to the moralistic English stage he brought a wit reminiscent of the Restoration comedy of manners and a genuine sense of the dramatic. His plays, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband* and *Woman of No Importance* display masterful dialogue, farcical overplay, streaks of social satire and an inimitable playfulness. His eventful career with its hype of an American tour, his notorious trial for homo-sexuality and imprisonment, and his death in poverty in France, makes him one of the most colourful figures in English literary history.

The Nightingale and the Rose:

The story is an intense mix of the fabulosity and the comic modes. It is all about profundity of love on one side, and a devaluation of it, on the other. Love, the most elemental of human emotions, has lost its primeval and time-honoured values. It is something which defies valuation through material objects. True love transcends human experience; it encompasses other creatures as well. For human love embraces the whole gamut of nature in its truest spirit. Oscar Wilde suggests that love should be equal and once it is mis-spent, tragedy is unavoidable. The Nightingale is presented in the story to mock artificiality in love, though it tries to bridge two disparate lovers. Philosophy and Metaphysics which speak highly of love may not address mysteries associated with interpersonal love in the human world. Love which cannot soar in the bower of thought is bound to be removed from its original energy.

Notes:

pale ivory: bloodless and dull.

emerald/opal: precious stones used often in jewellery.

sun-dial: a time reader according to the sun's movement.

mermaid : an imaginary sea creature having the body of a woman but a tail of a fish. Said to make love to men and then kill them.

chamberlain : a monarch's or aristocrat's agent in charge of domestic or ceremonial duties.

Study Questions :

1. What is the symbolic significance of the Rose in the story?
2. Discuss the story as a parable of love.
3. Does Wilde suggest an idea that true love does not exist in human world? Is the Nightingale a symbol of eternal love? Discuss.

The White Stocking D.H. Lawrence

I

'I'm getting up, Teddilinks,' said Mrs. Whiston, and she sprang out of bed briskly.

'What the Hanover's got you?' asked Whiston.

'Nothing. Can't I get up?' she replied animatedly.

It was about seven o'clock, scarcely light yet in the cold bedroom. Whiston lay still and looked at his wife. She was a pretty little thing, with her fleecy, short black hair all tousled. He watched her as she dressed quickly, flicking her 'small, delightful limbs, throwing her clothes about her. Her slovenliness and untidiness did not trouble him. When she picked up the edge of her petticoat, ripped off a torn string of white lace, and flung it on the dressing-table, her careless abandon made his spirit glow. She stood before the mirror and roughly scrambled together her profuse little mane of hair. He watched the quickness and softness of her young shoulders, calmly, like a husband, and appreciatively.

'Rise up,' she cried, turning to him with a quick wave of her arm—'and shine forth.'

They had been married two years. But still, when she had gone out of the room, he felt as if all his light and warmth were taken away, he became aware of the raw, cold morning. So he rose himself, wondering casually what had roused her so early. Usually she lay in bed as late as she could.

Whiston fastened a belt round his loins and went downstairs in shirt and trousers. He heard her singing in her snatchy fashion. The stairs creaked under his weight. He passed down the narrow little passage, which she called a hall, of the seven and sixpenny house which was his first home.

He was a shapely young fellow of about twenty-eight, sleepy now and easy with well-being. He heard the water drumming into the kettle, and she began to whistle. He loved the quick

way she dodged the supper cups under the tap to wash them for breakfast. She looked an untidy minx, but she was quick and handy enough.

'Teddilinks', she cried.

'What?'

'Light a fire, quick'.

She wore an old, sack-like dressing-jacket of black silk pinned across her breast. But one of the sleeves, coming unfastened, showed some delightful pink upper-arm.

'Why don't you sew your sleeve up?' he said, suffering from the sight of the exposed soft flesh.

'Where?' she cried, peering round. 'Nuisance,' she said, seeing the gap, then with light fingers went on drying the cups.

The kitchen was of fair size, but gloomy. Whiston poked out the dead ashes.

Suddenly a thud was heard at the door down the passage.

'I'll go,' cried Mrs. Whiston, and she was gone down the hall.

The postman was a ruddy-faced man who had been a soldier. He smiled broadly, handing her some packages.

'They've not forgot you,' he said impudently.

'No-lucky for them,' she said, with a toss of the head. But she was interested only in her envelopes this morning. The postman waited inquisitively, smiling in an ingratiating fashion. She slowly, abstractedly, as if she did not know anyone was there, closed the door in his face, continuing to look at the addresses on her letters.

She tore open the thin envelope. There was a long, hideous, cartoon valentine. She smiled briefly and dropped it on the floor. Struggling with the string of a packet, she opened a white cardboard box, and there lay a white silk handkerchief packed neatly under the paper lace of the box, and her initial, worked in heliotrope, fully displayed. She smiled pleasantly, and gently put the box aside. The third envelope contained another, white packet—apparently a cotton handkerchief neatly

folded. She shook it out. It was a long white stocking, but there was a little weight in the toe. Quickly, she thrust down her arm, wriggling her fingers into the toe of the stocking, and brought out a small box. She peeped inside the box, then hastily opened a door on her left hand, and went into the little cold sitting-room. She had her lower lip caught earnestly between her teeth.

With a little flash of triumph, she lifted a pair of pearl ear-rings from the small box, and she went to the mirror. There, earnestly, she began to hook them through her ears, looking at herself sideways in the glass. Curiously concentrated and intent she seemed as she fingered the lobes of her ears, her head bent on one side.

Then the pearl ear-rings dangled under her rosy, small ears. She shook her head sharply, to see the swing of the drops, they went chill against her neck, in little, sharp touches. Then she stood still to look at herself, bridling her head in the dignified fashion. Then she simpered at herself. Catching her own eye, she could not help winking at herself and laughing.

She turned to look at the box. There was a scrap of paper with this posy:

'Pearls may be fair, but thou art fairer.

Wear these for me, and I'll love the wearer.'

She made a grimace and a grin. But she was drawn to the mirror again, to look at her ear-rings.

Whiston had made the fire burn, so he came to look for her. When she heard him, she started round quickly, guiltily. She was watching him with intent blue eyes when he appeared.

He did not see much, in his morning-drowsy warmth. He gave her, as ever, a feeling of warmth and slowness. His eyes were very blue, very kind, his manner simple.

'What ha' you got?' he asked.

'Valentines', she said briskly, ostentatiously turning to show him the silk handkerchief. She thrust it under his nose. 'Smell how good,' she said.

'Who's that from?' he replied, without smelling.

'It's a valentine,' she cried. 'How do I know who it's from?'
'I'll bet you know,' he said.

'Ted!—I don't!' she cried, beginning to shake her head, then stopping because of the ear-rings.

He stood still a moment, displeased.

'They've no right to send you valentines now,' he said.

'Ted!—Why not? You're not jealous, are you? I haven't the least idea who it's from. Look—there's my initial'—she pointed with an emphatic finger at the heliotrope embroidery—

'E for Elsie,
Nice little gelsie,'

she sang.

'Get out,' he said. 'You know who it's from'

'Truth, I don't,' she cried.

He looked round, and saw the white stocking lying on a chair.

'Is this another?' he said.

'No, that's a sample,' she said. 'There's only a comic.' And she fetched in the long cartoon.

He stretched it out and looked at it solemnly.

'Fools!' he said, and went out of the room.

She flew upstairs and took off the ear-rings. When she returned, he was crouched before the fire blowing the coals. The skin of his face was flushed, and slightly pitted, as if he had had small-pox. But his neck was white and smooth and goodly. She hung her arms round his neck as he crouched there, and clung to him. He balanced on his toes.

'This fire's a slow-coach,' he said.

'And who else is a slow-coach?' she said.

'One of us two, I know,' he said, and he rose carefully. She remained clinging round his neck, so that she was lifted off her feet.

'Hal— swing me,' she cried.

He lowered his head, and she hung in the air, swinging from his neck, laughing. Then she slipped off.

'The kettle is singing,' she sang, flying for the teapot. He

bent down again to blow the fire. The veins in his neck stood out, his shirt collar seemed too tight.

'Doctor Wyer,
Blow the fire,
Puff ! puff ! puff !'

she sang, laughing.

He smiled at her.

She was so glad because of her pearl ear-rings.

Over breakfast she grew serious. He did not notice. She became portentous in her gravity. Almost it penetrated through his steady good-humour to irritate him.

'Teddy!' she said at last.

'What?' he asked.

'I told you a lie,' she said, humbly tragic.

His soul stirred uneasily.

'Oh aye?' he said casually.

She was not satisfied. He ought to be more moved.

'Yes,' she said.

He cut a piece of bread.

'Was it a good one?' he asked.

She was piqued. Then she considered—was it a good one? Then she laughed.

'No,' she said, 'it wasn't up to much.'

'Ah!' he said easily, but with a steady strength of fondness for her in his tone. 'Get it out then.'

It became a little more difficult.

'You know that white stocking,' she said earnestly. 'I told you a lie. it wasn't a sample. It was a valentine.'

A little frown came on his brow.

'Then what did you invent it as a sample for?' he said. But he knew this weakness of hers. The touch of anger in his voice frightened her.

I was afraid you'd be cross,' she said pathetically.

'I'll bet you were vastly afraid,' he said.

'I was, Teddy.'

There was a pause. He was resolving one or two things in his mind.

'And who sent it?' he asked.

'I can guess,' she said, 'though there wasn't word with it—except—'

She ran to the sitting-room and returned with a slip of paper.

'Pearls may be fair, but thou art fairer.

Wear these for me, and I'll love the wearer.'

He read it twice, then a dull red flush came on his face.

'And who do you guess it is?' he asked, with a little virtuous indignation.

Whiston was silent for a moment.

'Fool!' he said. 'An' what's it got to do with pearls?—and how can he say "wear these for me" when there's only one? He hasn't got the brain to invent a proper verse.'

He screwed the slip of paper into a ball and flung it into the fire.

'I suppose he thinks it'll make a pair with the one last year,' she said.

'Why, did he send one then?'

'Yes. I thought you'd be wild if you knew.'

His jaw set rather sullenly.

Presently he rose, and went to wash himself, rolling back his sleeves and pulling open his shirt at the breast. It was as if his fine, clear-cut, temples and steady eyes were degraded by the lower, rather brutal part of his face. But she loved it. As she whisked about, clearing the table, she loved the way in which he stood washing himself. He was such a man. She liked to see his neck glistening with water as he swilled it. It amused her and pleased her and thrilled her. He was so sure, so permanent, he had her so utterly in his power. It gave her a delightful, mischievous sense of liberty. Within his grasp, she could dart about excitingly.

He turned round to her, his face red from the cold water, his eyes fresh and very blue.

'You haven't been seeing anything of him, have you?' he asked roughly.

'Yes,' she answered, after a moment, as if caught guilty. 'He got into the tram with me, and he asked me to drink a coffee and a Benedictine in the Royal.'

'You've got it off fine and glib,' he said sullenly. 'And did you?'

'Yes,' she replied, with the air of a traitor before the rack.

The blood came up into his neck and face, he stood motionless, dangerous.

'It was cold, and it was such fun to go into the Royal,' she said.

'You'd go off with a nigger for a packet of chocolate,' he said, in anger and contempt, and some bitterness. Queer how he drew away from her, cut her off from him.

'Ted—how beastly! She cried. 'You know quite well—' She caught her lip, flushed, and the tears came to her eyes.

He turned away, to put on his neck-tie. She went about her work, making a queer pathetic little mouth, down which occasionally dripped a tear.

He was ready to go. With his hat jammed down on his head, and his overcoat buttoned up to his chin, he came to kiss her. He would be miserable all the day if he went without. She allowed herself to be kissed. Her cheek was wet under his lip, and his heart burned. She hurt him so deeply. And she felt aggrieved, and did not quite forgive him.

In a moment she went upstairs to her ear-rings. Sweet they looked nestling in the little drawer—sweet! She examined them with voluptuous pleasure, she threaded them in her ears, she looked at herself, she posed and postured and smiled and looked sad and tragic and winning and appealing, all in turn before the mirror. And she was happy, and very pretty.

She wore her ear-rings all morning, in the house. She was self-conscious, and quite brilliantly winsome, when the baker came, wondering if he would notice. All the tradesmen left her door with a glow in them, feeling elated, and unconsciously favouring the delightful little creature, though there had been nothing to notice in her behaviour.

She was stimulated all the day. She did not think about her husband. He was the permanent basis from which she took these giddy little flights into nowhere. At night, like chickens and curses, she would come home to him, to roost.

Meanwhile Whiston, a traveller and confidential support of a small firm, hastened about his work, his heart all the while anxious for her, yearning for surety, and kept tense by not getting it.

II

She had been a warehouse girl in Adams's lace factory before she was married. Sam Adams was her employer. He was a bachelor of forty, growing stout, a man well dressed and florid, with a large brown moustache and thin hair. From the rest of his well-groomed, showy appearance, it was evident his baldness was a chagrin to him. He had a good presence, and some Irish blood in his veins.

His fondness for the girls, or the fondness of the girls for him, was notorious. And Elsie, quick, pretty, almost witty little thing—she seemed witty although, when her sayings were repeated, they were entirely trivial—she had a great attraction for him. He would come into the warehouse dressed in a rather sporting reefer coat, of fawn colour, and trousers of fine black-and-white check, a cap with a big peak and scarlet carnation in his button-hole, to impress her. She was only half impressed. He was too loud for her good taste. Instinctively perceiving this, he sobered down to navy blue. Then a well-built man, florid, with large brown whiskers, smart navy blue suit, fashionable boots, and manly hat, he was the irreproachable. Elsie was impressed.

But meanwhile Whiston was courting her, and she made splendid little gestures, before her bedroom mirror, of the constant-and-true sort.

"True, true till death—"

That was her song. Whiston was made that way, so there was no need to take thought for him.

Every Christmas Sam Adams gave a party at his house, to which he invited his superior work-people—not factory hands and labourers, but those above. He was a generous man in his way, with a real warm feeling for giving pleasure.

Two years ago Elsie had attended this Christmas-party for the last time. Whiston had accompanied her. At that time he worked for Sam Adams.

She had been very proud of herself, in her close-fitting, full-skirted dress of blue silk. Whiston called for her. Then she tripped beside him, holding her large cashmere shawl across her breast. He strode with long strides, his trousers handsomely strapped under his boots, and her silk shoe bulging the pocket of his full-skirted overcoat.

They passed through the park gates, and her spirits rose. Above them the Castle Rock loomed grandly in the night, the naked trees stood still and dark in the frost, along the boulevard.

They were rather late. Agitated with anticipation, in the cloak-room she gave up her shawl, donned her silk shoes, and looked at herself in the mirror. The loose bunches of curls on either side her face danced prettily, her mouth smiled.

She hung a moment in the door of the brilliantly lighted room. Many people were moving within the blaze of lamps, under the crystal chandeliers, the full skirts of the women balancing and floating, the side-whiskers and white cravats of the men bowing above. Then she entered the light.

In an instant Sam Adams was coming forward, lifting both his arms in boisterous welcome. There was a constant red laugh on his face.

'Come late, would you,' he shouted, 'like royalty.'

He seized her hands and led her forward. He opened his mouth wide when he spoke, and effect of the warm, dark opening behind the brown whiskers was disturbing. But she was floating into the throng on his arm. He was very gallant.

'Now then,' he said, taking her card to write down the dances, 'I've got *carte blanche*, haven't I?'

'Mr. Whiston doesn't dance,' she said.

'I am a lucky man' he said, scribbling his initials. 'I was born with an *amourette* in my mouth.'

He wrote on, quietly. She blushed and laughed, not knowing what it meant.

'Why, what is that?' she said.

'It's you, even littler than you are, dressed in little wings,' he said.

'I should have to be pretty small to get in your mouth,' she said.

'You think you're too big, do you?' he said easily.

He handed her car, with a bow.

'Now I'm set up, my darling, for this evening,' he said.

Then, quick, always at his ease, he looked over the room. She waited in front of him. He was ready. Catching the eye of the band, he nodded. In a moment, the music began. He seemed to relax, giving himself up.

'Now then, Elsie,' he said, with a curious caress in his voice that seemed to lap the outside of her body in a warm glow, delicious. She gave herself to it. She liked it.

He was an excellent dancer. He seemed to draw her close in to him by some male warmth of attraction, so that she became all soft and they lapsed along in one movement. She was just carried in a kind of strong, warm flood, her feet moved of themselves, and only the music threw her away from him, threw her back to him, to his clasp, in his strong form moving against her, rhythmically, deliciously.

When it was over, he was pleased and his eyes had a curious gleam which thrilled her and yet had nothing to do with her. Yet it held her. He did not speak to her. He only looked straight into her eyes with a curious, gleaming look that disturbed her fearfully and deliciously. But also there was in his look some of the automatic irony of the *roue*. It left her partly cold. She was not carried away.

She went, driven by an opposite, heavier impulse, to Whiston. He stood looking gloomy, trying to admit that she had a perfect right to enjoy herself apart from him. He received her with rather grudging kindness.

'Aren't you going to play whist?' she asked.

'Aye,' he said. 'Directly.'

'I do wish you could dance.'

'Well, I can't,' he said. 'So you enjoy yourself.'

'But I should enjoy it better if I could dance with you.'

'Nay, you're all right,' he said. 'I'm not made that way.'

'Then you ought of be!' she cried.

'Well, it's my fault, not yours. You enjoy yourself,' he bade her. Which she proceeded to do, a little bit irked.

She went with anticipation to the arms of Sam Adams. When the time came to dance with him. It was so gratifying irrespective of the man. And she felt a little grudge against Whiston, soon forgotten when her host was holding her near to him, in a delicious embrace. And she watched his eyes, to meet the gleam in them, which gratified her.

She was getting warmed right through, the glow was penetrating into her, driving away everything else. Only in her heart was a little tightness, like conscience.

When she got a chance, she escaped from the dancing-room to the card-room. There, in a cloud of smoke, she found Whiston playing cribbage. Radiant, roused, animated, she came up to him and greeted him. She was too strong, too vibrant a note in the quiet room. He lifted his head, and a frown knitted his gloomy forehead.

'Are you playing cribbage? If it exciting? How are you getting on?' she chattered.

He looked at her. None of these questions needed answering, and he did not feel in touch with her. She turned to the cribbage-board.

'Are you white or red?' she asked.

'He's red,' replied the partner.

'Then you're losing,' she said, still to Whiston. And she lifted the red peg from the board. 'One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight—Right up there you ought to jump—'

'Now put it back in its right place,' said Whiston.

'Where was it?' she asked gaily, knowing her transgression. He took the little red peg away from her and stuck it in its hole.

The cards were shuffled.

'What a shame you're losing,' said Elsie.

'You'd better cut for him,' said the partner.

She did so hastily. The cards were dealt. She put her hand on his shoulder, looking at his cards.

'It's good,' she cried, 'isn't it?'

He did not answer, but threw down two cards. It moved him more strongly than was comfortable, to have her hand on his shoulder, her curls dangling and touching his ears, whilst she was roused to another man. It made the blood flame over him.

At the moment Sam Adams appeared, florid and boisterous, intoxicated more with himself, with the dancing, than with wine. In his eye the curious, impersonal light gleamed.

'I thought I should find you here, Elsie,' he cried boisterously, a disturbing, high note in his voice.

'What made you think so?' she replied, the mischief rousing in her.

The florid, well-built man narrowed his eyes to a smile.

'I should never look for you among the ladies,' he said, with a kind of intimate, animal call to her. He laughed, bowed, and offered her his arm.

'Madam, the music waits.'

She went almost helplessly, carried along with him, unwilling, yet delighted.

That dance was an intoxication to her. After the first few steps, she felt herself slipping away from herself. She almost knew she was going, she did not even want to go. Yet she must have chosen to go. She lay in the arm of the steady, close man with whom she was dancing, and she seemed to swim away out of contact with the room, into him. She had passed into another denser element of him, an essential privacy. The room was all vague around her, like an atmosphere, like under sea, with a flow of ghostly, dumb movements. But she herself was held real against her partner, and it seemed she was connected with him, as if the movements of his body and limbs were her own movements, yet not her own movements—and oh, delicious! He also was given up, oblivious, concentrated, into the dance. His eye was unseeing. Only his large, voluptuous body gave off a subtle activity. His fingers seemed to search into her flesh. Every moment, and every moment, she felt she would give way utterly, and sink molten: the fusion point was coming when she would fuse down into perfect unconscious-

ness at his feet and knees. But he bore her round the room in the dance, and he seemed to sustain all her body with his limbs, his body, and his warmth seemed to come closer into her, nearer, till it would fuse right through her, and she would be as liquid to him as an intoxication only.

It was exquisite. When it was over, she was dazed and was scarcely breathing. She stood with him in the middle of the room as if she were alone in a remote place. He bent over her. She expected his lips on her bare shoulder, and waited. Yet they were not alone. They were not alone. It was cruel.

'It was good, wasn't it, my darling?' he said to her, low and delighted. There was a strange impersonality about his low, exultant call that appealed to her irresistibly. Yet why was she aware of some part shut off in her? She pressed his arm, and he led her towards the door.

She was not aware of what she was doing, only a little grain of resistant trouble was in her. The man, possessed, yet with a superficial presence of mind, made way to the dining-room, as if to give her refreshment, cunningly working to his own escape with her. He was molten hot, filmed over with presence of mind, and bottomed with cold disbelief. In the dining-room was Whiston, carrying coffee to the plain, neglected ladies. Elsie saw him, but felt as if he could not see her. She was beyond his reach and ken. A sort of fusion existed between her and the large man at her side. She ate her custard, but an incomplete fusion all the while sustained and contained within the being of her employer.

But she was growing cooler. Whiston came up. She looked at him and saw him with different eyes. She saw his slim, young man's figure real and enduring before her. That was he. But she was in the spell with the other man, fused with him, and she could not be taken away.

'Have you finished your cribbage?' she asked, with hasty evasion of him.

'Yes', he replied. 'Aren't you getting tired of dancing?'

'Not a bit,' she said.

'Not she,' said Adams heartily. 'No girl with any spirit gets

tired of dancing. Have something else, Elsie. Come—sherry. Have a glass of sherry with us, Whiston.

Whilst they sipped the wine, Adams watched Whiston almost cunningly, to find his advantage.

'We'd better be getting back—there's the music,' he said. 'See the women get something to eat, Whiston, will you, there's a good chap.'

And he began to draw away. Elsie was drifting helplessly with him. But Whiston put himself beside them, and went along with them. In silence they passed through to the dancing-room. There Adams hesitated, and looked round the room. It was as if he could not see.

A man came hurrying forward, claiming Elsie, and Adams went to his other partner. Whiston stood watching during the dance. She was conscious of him standing there observant of her, like a ghost, or a judgment, or a guardian angel. She was also conscious, much more intimately and impersonally, of the body of the other man moving somewhere in the room. She still belonged to him, but a feeling of distraction possessed her, and helplessness. Adams danced on, adhering to Elsie, waiting his time, with the persistence of cynicism.

The dance was over. Adams was detained. Elsie found herself beside Whiston. There was something shapely about him as he sat, about his knees and his distinct figure, that she clung to. It was as if he had enduring form. She put her hand on his knee.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' he asked.

'Ever so,' she replied, with a fervent, yet detached tone.

'It's going on for one o'clock,' he said.

'Is it?' she answered. It meant nothing to her.

'Should we be going?' he said.

She was silent. For the first time for an hour or more an inkling of her normal consciousness returned. She resented it.

'What for?' she said.

'I thought you might have had enough,' he said.

A slight soberness came over her, an irritation at being frustrated of her illusion.

'Why?' she said.

'We've been here since nine,' he said.

That was no answer, no reason. It conveyed nothing to her. She sat detached from him. Across the room Sam Adams glanced at her. She sat there exposed for him.

'You don't want to be too free with Sam Adams,' said Whiston cautiously, suffering. 'You know what he is.'

'How, free?' she asked.

'Why— you don't want to have too much to do with him.'

She set silent. He was forcing her into consciousness of her position. But he could not get hold of her feelings, to change them. She had a curious, perverse desire that he should not.

'I like him,' she said.

'What do you find to like in him?' he said, with a hot heart.

'I don't know—but I like him,' she said.

She was immutable. He sat feeling heavy and dulled with rage. He was not clear as to what he felt. He sat there unliving whilst she danced. And she, distracted, lost to herself between the opposing forces of the two men, drifted. Between the dances, Whiston kept near to her. She was scarcely conscious. She glanced repeatedly at her card, to see when she would dance again with Adams, half in desire, half in dread. Sometimes she met his steady, glaucous eye as she passed him in the dance. Sometimes she saw the steadiness of his flank as he danced. And it was always as if she rested on his arm, were borne along, up-borne by him, away from herself. And always there was present the other's antagonism. She was divided.

The time came for her to dance with Adams. Oh, the delicious closing of contact with him, of his limbs touching her limbs, his arm supporting her. She seemed to resolve. Whiston had not made himself real to her. He was only a heavy place in her consciousness.

But she breathed heavily, beginning to suffer from the closeness of strain. She was nervous. Adams also was constrained. A tightness a tension was coming over them all. And he was exasperated, feeling something counteracting physical magnetism,

feeling a will stonger with her than his own, intervening in what was becoming a vital necessity to him.

Elsie was almost lost to her own control. As she went forward with him to take her place at the dance, she stooped for her pocket handkerchief. The music sounded for quadrilles. Everybody was ready. Adams stood with his body near her, exerting his attraction over her. He was tense and fighting. She stooped for her pocket handkerchief, and shook it as she rose. It shook out and fell from her hand. With agony, she saw she had taken a white stocking instead of a handkerchief. For a second it lay on the floor, a twist of white stocking. Then, in an instant, Adams picked it up, with a little, surprised laugh of triumph.

'That'll do for me, he whispered—seeming to take possession of her. And he stuffed the stocking in his trousers pocket, and quickly offered her his handkerchief.

The dance began. She felt weak and faint, as if her will were turned to water. A heavy sense of loss came over her. She could not help herself any more. But it was peace.

When the dance was over, Adams yielded her up. Whiston came to her.

'What was it as you dropped?' Whiston asked.

'I thought it was my handkerchief—I'd taken a stocking by mistake,' she said, detached and muted.

'And he's got it?'

'Yes.'

'What does he mean by that?'

She lifted her shoulders.

'Are you going to let him keep it?' he asked.

'I don't let him.'

There was a long pause.

'Am I to go and have it out with him?' he asked his face flushed, his blue eyes going hard with opposition.

'No,' she said, pale.

'Why?'

'No—I don't want you to say anything about it.'

He sat exasperated and nonplussed.

'You'll let him keep it then? he asked.

She sat silent and made no form of answer.

'What do you mean by it? he said, dark with fury. And he started up.

'No!' she cried. 'Ted!' And she caught hold of him, sharply detaining him.

It made him black with rage.

'Why?' he said.

The something about her mouth was pitiful to him. He did not understand, but he felt she must have her reasons.

'Then I'm not stopping here,' he said. 'Are you coming with me?'

She rose mutely, and they went out of the room. Adams had not noticed.

In a few moments they were in the street.

'What the hell do you mean? he said, in a black fury.

She went at his side, in silence, neutral.

'That great hog, an' all,' he added.

Then they went a long time in silence through the frozen, deserted darkness of the town. She felt she could not go indoors. They were drawing near her house.

'I don't want to go home,' she suddenly cried in distress and anguish.

'I don't want to go home.'

He looked at her.

'Why don't you?' he said.

'I don't want to go home,' was all she could sob.

He heard somebody coming.

'Well, we can walk a bit farther,' he said.

She was silent again. They passed out of the town into the fields. He held her by the arm—they could not speak.

'What's a-matter?' he asked at length puzzled.

She began to cry again.

At last he took her in his arms, to soothe her. She sobbed by herself, almost unaware of him.

'Tell me what's a-matter, Elsie,' he said. 'Tell me what's a-matter—my dear—tell me, then—'

He kissed her wet face, and caressed her. She made no response. He was puzzled and tender and miserable.

At length she became quiet. Then he kissed her, and she put her arms round him, and clung to him very tight, as if for fear and anguish. He held her in his arms, wondering.

'Ted!' she whispered, frantic. 'Ted!'

'What, my love?' he answered, becoming also afraid.

'Be good to me,' she cried. 'Don't be cruel to me.'

'No, my pet,' he said, amazed and grieved. 'Why?'

'Oh, be good to me,' she sobbed.

And he held her very safe, and his heart was white-hot with love for her. His mind was amazed. He could only hold her against his chest that was white-hot with love and belief in her. So she was restored at last.

III

She refused to go to her work at Adams's any more. Her father had to submit and she sent in her notice—she was not well. Sam Adams was ironical. But he had a curious patience. He did not fight.

In a few weeks, she and Whiston were married. She loved him with passion and worship, a fierce little abandon of love that moved him to the depths of his being, and gave him a permanent surety and sense of realness in himself. He did not trouble about himself any more: he felt he was fulfilled and now he had only the many things in the world to busy himself about. Whatever troubled him, at the bottom was surety. He had found himself in this love.

They spoke once or twice of the white stocking.

'Ah!' Whiston exclaimed. 'What does it matter?'

He was impatient and angry, and could not bear to consider the matter. So it was left unresolved.

She was quite happy at first, carried away by her adoration of her husband. Then gradually she got used to him. He always was the ground of her happiness, but she got used to him, as to the air she breathed. He never got used to her in the same way.

Inside of marriage she found her liberty. She was rid of the responsibility of herself. Her husband must look after that. She was free to get what she could out of her time.

So that, When, after some months, she met Sam Adams, she was not quite as unkind to him as she might have been. With a young wife's new and exciting knowledge of men, she perceived he was in love with her, she knew he had always kept an unsatisfied desire for her. And sportive, she could not help playing a little with this, though she cared not one jot for the man himself.

When Valentine's day came, which was near the first anniversary of her wedding day, there arrived a white stocking with a little amethyst brooch. Luckily Whiston did not see it, so she said nothing of it to him. She had not the faintest intention of having anything to do with Sam Adams, but once a little brooch was in her possessions, it was hers, and she did not trouble her head for a moment how she had come by it. She kept it.

Now she had the pearl ear-rings. They were a more valuable and a more conspicuous present. She would have to ask her mother to give them to her, to explain their presence. She made a little plan in her head. And she was extraordinarily pleased. As for Sam Adams, even if he saw her wearing them, he would not give her away. What fun, if he saw her wearing his ear-rings! She would pretend she had inherited them from her grandmother, her mother's mother. She laughed to herself as she went down-town in the afternoon, the pretty drops dangling in front of her curls. But she saw no one of importance.

Whiston came home tired and depressed. All day the male in him had been uneasy, and this had fatigued him. She was curiously against him, inclined, as she sometimes was nowadays, to make mock of him and jeer at him and cut him off. He did not understand this, and it angered him deeply. She was uneasy before him.

She knew he was in state of suppressed irritation. The veins stood out on the backs of his hands, his brow was stiffly. Yet she could not help goading him.

'What did you do wi' that white stocking?' he asked, out of a gloomy silence, his voice strong and brutal.

'I put it in a drawer—Why?' she replied flippantly.

'Why did not you put it on the fire back?' he said harshly. What are you hoarding it up, 'she said. 'I've got a pair.'

He relapsed into gloomy silence. She, unable to move him, ran away upstairs, leaving him smoking by the fire. Against she tried on the ear-rings. Then another little inspiration came to her. She drew on the white stocking, both of them.

Presently she came down in them. Her husband still sat immovable and glowering by the fire.

'Look!' she said. They'll do beautifully.'

And she picked up her skirts to her knees, and twisted round, looking at her pretty legs in the neat stockings.

He filled with unreasonable rage, and took the pipe from his mouth.

'Don't they look nice?' she said. One from last year and one from this, they just do. Save you buying a pair.

And she look over her shoulders at her pretty calves, and at the dangling frills of her knickers.

'Put your skirts down and don't make fool of yourself,' he said.

'Why a fool of myself?' she asked.

And she began to dance slowly round the room, kicking up her feet half reckless, half jeering, in ballet dancer fashion. Almost fearful, yet in defiance, she kicked up her legs at him, singing as she did so. She resented him.

'You little fool, ha' done with it,' he said. And you'll backfire them stockings, I'm telling you.' He was angry. His face flushed dark, he kept his head bent. She ceased to dance.

'I shan't,' she said. 'They'll come in very useful.'

He lifted his head and watched her, with lighted, dangerous eyes.

'You'll put'em on the fire back, I tell you,' he said.

It was a war now. She bent forward, in a ballet-dancer's fashion, and put her tongue between her teeth.

'I shan't backfire them stockings,' she sang, repeating his words, 'I shan't, I shan't, I shan't.'

And she danced round the room doing a high kick to the tune of her words. There was a real biting indifference in her behaviour.

'We'll see whether you will or not,' he said, 'trollops! You'd like Sam Adams to know you was wearing em, wouldn't you? That's what would please you.'

'Yes, I'd like him to see how nicely they fit me, he might give me some more then.'

And she looked down at her pretty legs.

He knew somehow that she would like Sam Adams to see how pretty her legs looked in the white stockings. It made his anger go deep, almost to hatred.

'Yer nasty trolly,' he cried. 'Put yer petticoats down, and stop being so foul-minded.'

'I'm not foul minded,' she said. 'My legs are my own. And why shouldn't Sam Adams think they're nice?'

There was pause. He watched her with eyes glittering to a point.

'Have you been havin' owt to do with him?' he asked.

'I've just spoken to him when I've seen him,' she said. 'He's not as bad as you would make out.'

'Isn't he?' he cried, a certain wakefulness in his voice. 'Them who has anything to do with him is too bad for me, I tell you.'

'Why, what are you frightened of him for?' she mocked.

She was rousing all his uncontrollable anger. He sat glowering. Every one of her sentences stirred him up like a red-hot iron. Soon it would be too much. And she was afraid herself; but she was neither conquered nor convinced.

A curious little grin of hate came on his face. He had a long score against her.

'What am I frightened of him for?' he repeated automatically.

'What am I frightened of him for? Why, for you, you stray-running little bitch.'

She flushed. The insult went deep into her, right home.

'Well, if you're so dull—' she said, lowering her eyelids, and speaking coldly, haughtily.

'If I'm so dull I'll break your neck the first word you speak to him', he said, tense.

'Pf!' she sneered. 'Do you think I'm frightened of you?' She spoke coldly, detached.

She was frightened, for all that, white round the mouth.

His heart was getting hotter.

'You will be frightened of me, the next time you have anything to do with him,' he said.

'Do you think you'd ever be told-ha!'

Her jeering scorn made him go white hot molten. He knew he was incoherent, scarcely responsible for what he might do. slowly, unseeing, he rose and went out of doors, stifled, moved to kill her.

He stood leaning against the garden fence, unable either to see or hear. Below him, far off, fumed the lights of the town. he stood still, unconscious with a black storm of rage, his face lifted to the night.

Presently, still unconscious of what he was doing, he went indoors again. He stood a small stubborn figure with tight pressed lips and big, sullen, childish eyes, watching him, white with fear. He went heavily across the floor and dropped into his chair.

There was a silence.

'You're not going to tell me everything I shall do, and everything I shan't,' she broke out at last. He lifted his head.

'I tell you this,' he said, low and intense. 'Have anything to do with Sam Adams, and I'll break your neck.'

She laughed, shrill and false.

'How I hate you word "break your neck",' she said, with a grimace of the mouth. 'It sound so common and beastly. Can't you say something else—'

There was a dead silence.

'And besides,' she said, with a queer chirrup of mocking laughter, 'What do you know about anything? He sent me and amethyst brooch and a pair of pearl ear-rings.'

'He what?' said Whiston, in a suddenly normal voice. His eyes were fixed on her.

Sent me a pair of pearl ear-rings, and amethyst brooch,' she repeated, mechanically, pale to the lips.

And her big, black, childish eyes watched him, fascinated, held in her spell. He seemed to thrust his face and his eyes forward at her, as he rose slowly and came to her. She watched transfixed in terror. Her throat made a small sound, as she tried to scream.

Then, quick as lightning, the back of his hand struck her with a crash across the mouth, and she was flung back blinded against the wall. The shock shook a queer sound out of her. And then she saw him still coming on, his eyes holding her, his fist drawn back, advancing slowly. At any instant the blow might crash into her.

Mad with terror, she raised her hands with a queer clawing movement to cover her eyes and her temples, opening her mouth in a dumb shriek. There was no sound. But the sight of her slowly arrested him. He hung before her, looking at her fixedly, as she stood crouched against the wall with open, bleeding mouth, and wide-staring eyes, and two hands clawing over her temples. And his lust to see her bleed, to break her and destroy her, rose from an old source against her. It carried him. He wanted satisfaction.

But he had seen her standing there, a piteous, horrified thing, and he turned his face aside in shame and nausea. He went and sat heavily in his chair, and a curious ease, almost like sleep, came over his brain.

She walked away from the wall towards the fire, dizzy, white to the lips, mechanically wiping her small, bleeding mouth. He sat motionless. Then, gradually, her breath began to hiss, she shook, and was sobbing silently, in grief for herself. Without looking, he saw. It made his mad desire to destroy her come back.

At length he lifted his head. His eyes were glowing again, fixed on her.

'And what did he give them you for?' he asked, in steady, unyielding voice.

Her crying dried up in a second. She also was tense.

'They came as valentines,' she replied, still not subjugated, even if beaten.

'When, today?'

'The pearl ear-rings today—the amethyst brooch last year.'

'You've had it a year?'

'Yes.'

She felt that now nothing would prevent him if he rose to kill her. She could not prevent him any more. She was yielded up to him. They both trembled in the balance, unconscious.

'What have you had to do with him? he asked, in a barren voice.

'I've not had anything to do with him,' she quavered.

'You just kept 'em because they were jewellery?' he said.

A weariness came over him. What was the worth of speaking any more of it? He did not care any more. He was dreary and sick.

She began to cry again, but he took no notice. She kept wiping her mouth on her handkerchief. He could see it, the blood-mark. It made him only more sick and tired of the responsibility of it, the violence, the shame.

When she began to move about again, he raised his head once more from his dead, motionless position.

'Where are the things?' he said.

'They are upstairs,' she quavered. She knew the passion had gone down in him.

'Bring them down,' he said.

'I won't,' she wept, with rage. 'You've not going to bully me and hit me like that on the mouth.'

And she sobbed again. He looked at her in contempt and compassion and in rising anger.

'Where are they?' he said.

'They're in the little drawer under the looking-glass,' she sobbed.

He went slowly upstairs, struck a match, and found the trinkets. He brought them downstairs in his hand.

'These?' he said, looking at them as they lay in his palm.

She looked at them without answering. She was not interested in them any more.

He looked at the little jewels. They were pretty.

'It's none of their fault, he said to himself.

And he searched round slowly, persistently, for a box. He tied the things up and addressed them to Sam Adams. Then he went out in his slippers to post the little package.

When he came back she was still sitting crying.

'You'd better go to bed,' he said.

She paid no attention. He sat by the fire. She still cried.

'I'm sleeping down here,' he said. 'Go you to bed.'

In a few moments she lifted her tear-stained, swollen face and looked at him with eyes all forlorn and pathetic. A great flash of anguish went over his body. He went over, slowly, and very gently took her in his hands. She let herself be taken. Then as she lay against his shoulder, she sobbed aloud :

'I never meant—'

'My love—my little love—' he cried, in anguish of spirit, holding her in his arms.

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) in his novels, written in the post-Edwardian years, brought a new consciousness, one helping the English world to break away from Victorian idea of morality and taboos of class. A writer of passion, he represented a romantic strain in his fiction, crafting the novels to espouse with tenacity and temperament emotional and sexual openness, the primacy of man's primitive impulses, the benignity of the natural life. *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo* are some of the masterpieces Lawrence bequeathed to the hall of fame of English fiction.

Lawrence saw the modern world as anathema to love; he saw its ugliness, its economics of greed as seizing human personality and impairing the flow of life, that wholeness, effected through a relation between the "dark self" of the unconscious and the "knowing self" of the conscious. This idea is fictionalized time and again in his novels as in his several stories which are suffused with seeds that open up in his novels.

The White Stocking : D.H. Lawrence's hallmark as a story writer lies not in presenting new forms, but in his insight into the 'wholeness' of life, into a life which may be strange or familiar to us. In this story, Lawrence masterfully depicts the emotional life of a woman and stresses, in face of conventions and false romanticism, that this emotionality deserves a full play in anyone's life. Instead of glorifying intellectual experiences, the writer probes instinctual elements in them. And he shows how these elements cast a spell on an individual's life.

The story involves a married couple, Whiston and Elsie, whose two-year of conjugal bliss is shadowed by a valentine gift Elsie receives. The gift offerer happens to be Sam Adams who steamed up her life once. Elsie worked as a warehouse girl at Adams's factory. A man of forty, his sartorial elegance and physical intimacy charmed her, and held her captive. It is Whiston who rescues her. Lawrence feels : "Inside of marriage she found her liberty." But inside the marriage, Adams's shadow looms large on her, driving the couple in two opposite directions. Whiston wants her to forget the man, but she lives with his shadow, shadows of her steamy relations with him. Ultimately, Whiston and Elsie make peace, but how much the story does not tell us.

Notes :

tousled : hair made untidy.

minx : playful girl.

a Benedictine in the Royal : a costly wine, popular in England.

Castle Rock : a town in Nottingham where Lawrence stayed for a while.

boulevard : broad tree-lined avenue.

carte blanche : blank card. May also mean the liberty to do anything.

roue : an old profligate man ; an elderly man desiring sexual intimacy.

whist : a card game for two pairs of players, with the winning of tricks.

cribbage : a card game for two, three or four players.

quadrilles : a square dance containing usu. five figures.

amethyst brooch : a precious stone of a violet or purple variety of quartz fastened to clothing with a hinged pin.

owt : British colloquial meaning 'anything'.

Study Questions :

1. Give the appropriateness of the title 'The White Stocking'
2. Write a note on the narrative techniques in the story.
3. Do you think the story is more psychological than a mere narrative of events? Give a reasoned answer.
4. Give a character-sketch of Elsie.
5. Illustrate the story as an example of the characters' inner lives or human psychology.

The Lotus Eater Somerset Maugham

MOST people, the vast majority in fact, lead the lives that circumstances have thrust upon them, and though some repine, looking upon themselves as round pegs in square holes, and think that if things had been different they might have made a much better showing, the greater part accept their lot, if not with serenity, at all events with resignation. They are like tram-cars travelling for ever on the selfsame rails. They go backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, inevitably, till they can go no longer and then are sold as scrap-iron. It is not often that you find a man who has boldly taken the course of his life into his own hands. When you do, it is worth while having a good look at him.

That was why I was curious to meet Thomas Wilson. It was an interesting and a bold thing he had done. Of course the end was not yet and until the experiment was concluded it was impossible to call it successful. But from what I had heard it seemed he must be an odd sort of fellow and I thought I should like to know him. I had been told he was reserved, but I had a notion that with patience and tact I could persuade him to confide in me. I wanted to hear the facts from his own lips. People exaggerate, they love to romanticize, and I was quite prepared to discover that his story was not nearly so singular as I had been led to believe.

And this impression was confirmed when at last I made his acquaintance. It was on the Piazza in Capri, where I was spending the month of August at a friend's villa, and a little before sunset, when most of the inhabitants, native and foreign, gather together to chat with their friends in the cool of the evening. There is a terrace that overlooks the Bay of Naples, and when the sun sinks slowly into the sea the island of Ischia is silhouetted against a blaze of splendour. It is one of the most lovely sights in the world. I was standing there with my friend and host watching it, when suddenly he said:

'Look, there's Wilson.'

'Where?'

'The man sitting on the parapet, with his back to us. He's got a blue shirt on.'

I saw an undistinguished back and a small head of grey hair short and rather thin.

'I wish he'd turn round,' I said.

'He will presently.'

'Ask him to come and have a drink with us at Morgano's.'

'All right.'

The instant of overwhelming beauty had passed and the sun, like the top of an orange, was dipping into a wine-red sea. We turned round and leaning our backs against the parapet looked at the people who were sauntering to and fro. They were all talking their heads off and the cheerful noise was exhilarating. Then the church bell, rather cracked, but with a fine resonant note, began to ring. The Piazza at Capri, with its clock tower over the footpath that leads up from the harbour, with the church up a flight of steps, is a perfect setting for an opera by Donizetti, and you felt that the voluble crowd might at any moment break out into a rattling chorus. It was charming and unreal.

I was so intent on the scene that I had not noticed Wilson get off the parapet and come towards us. As he passed us my friend stopped him.

'Hulloa, Wilson, I haven't seen you bathing the last few days.'

'I've been bathing on the other side for a change.'

My friend then introduced me. Wilson shook hands with me politely, but with indifference; a great many strangers come to Capri for a few days, or a few weeks, and I had no doubt he was constantly meeting people who came and went; and then my friend asked him to come along and have a drink with us.

'I was just going back to supper,' he said.

'Can't it wait?' I asked.

'I suppose it can,' he smiled.

Though his teeth were not very good his smile was attractive. It was gentle and kindly. He was dressed in a blue cotton shirt and a pair of grey trousers, much creased and none too clean, of a

thin canvas, and on his feet he wore a pair of very old espadrilles. The get-up was picturesque, and very suitable to the place and the weather, but it did not at all go with his face. It was a lined, long face, deeply sunburned, thin-lipped, with small grey eyes rather close together and tight, neat features. The grey hair was carefully brushed. It was not a plain face, indeed in his youth Wilson might have been good-looking, but a prim one. He wore the blue shirt, open at the neck, and the grey canvas trousers, not as though they belonged to him, but as though, shipwrecked in his pyjamas, he had been fitted out with odd garments by compassionate strangers. Notwithstanding this careless attire he looked like the manager of a branch office in an insurance company, who should by rights be wearing a black coat with pepper-and-salt trousers, a white collar and an unobjectionable tie. I could very well see myself going to him to claim the insurance money when I had lost a watch, and being rather disconcerted while I answered the questions he put to me by his obvious impression, that people who made such claims were either fools or knaves.

Moving off, we strolled across the Piazza and down the street till we came to Morgano's. we sat in the garden. Around us people were talking in Russian, German, Italian and English. We ordered drinks. Donna Lucia, the host's wife, waddled up and in her low, sweet voice passed the time of day with us. Though middle-aged now and portly, she had still traces of the wonderful beauty that thirty years before had driven artists to paint so many bad portraits of her. Her eyes, large and liquid, were the eyes of Hera and her smile was affectionate and gracious. We three gossiped for a while, for there is always a scandal of one sort or another in Capri to make a topic of conversation, but nothing was said of particular interest and in a little while Wilson got up and left us. Soon afterwards we strolled up to my friend's villa to dine. On the way he asked me what I had thought of Wilson.

'Nothing,' I said. 'I don't believe there's a word of truth in your story.'

'Why not?'

'He isn't the sort of man to do that sort of thing.'

'How does anyone know what anyone is capable of?'

'I should put him down as an absolutely normal man of business who's retired on a comfortable income from gilt-edged securities. I think your story's just the ordinary Capri tittle-tattle.'

'Have it your own way,' said my friend. We scrunched over the beach, the only drawback to the bathing place being that it was shingle and not sand, and as we came along Wilson saw us and waved. He was standing up, a pipe in his mouth, and he wore nothing but a pair of trunks. His body was dark brown, thin but not emaciated, and considering his wrinkled face and grey hair, youthful. Hot from our walk, we undressed quickly and plunged at once into the water. Six feet from the shore it was thirty feet deep, but so clear that you could see the bottom. It was warm, yet invigorating.

When I got out Wilson was lying on his belly, with a towel under him reading a book. I lit a cigarette and went and sat down beside him.

'Had a nice swim?' he asked.

He put his pipe inside his book to mark the place and closing it put it down on the pebbles beside him. He was evidently willing to talk.

'Lovely,' I said 'It's the best bathing in the world.'

'Of course people think those were the Baths of Tiberius.' He waved his hand towards a shapeless mass of masonry that stood half in the water and half out. 'But that's all rot. It was just one of his villas, you know.'

I did. But it is just as well to let people tell you things when they want to. It disposes them kindly towards you if you suffer them to impart information. Wilson gave a chuckle.

'Funny old fellow, Tiberius. Pity they're saying now there's not a word of truth in all those stories about him.'

He began to tell me all about Tiberius. Well, I had read my Suetonius too and I had read histories of the Early Roman Empire, so there was nothing very new to me in what he said. But I observed that he was not ill-read. I remarked on it.

'Oh, well, when I settled down here I was naturally interested, and I have plenty of time for reading. When you live in a

place like this, with all its association, it seems to make history so actual. You might almost be living in historical times yourself.'

I should remark here that this was in 1913. The world was an easy, comfortable place and no one could have imagined that anything might happen seriously to disturb the serenity of existence.

'How long have you been here?' I asked.

'Fifteen years.' He gave the blue and placid sea a glance, and a strangely tender smile hovered on his thin lips. 'I fell in love with the place at first sight. You've heard, I daresay, of the mythical German who came to the same thing in the end. Only it won't be forty years in my case. Twenty-five. Still, that's better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.'

I waited for him to go on. For what he had just said looked indeed as though there might be something after all in the singular story I had heard. But at that moment my friend came dripping out of the water very proud of himself because he had swum a mile, and the conversation turned to other things.

After that I met Wilson several times, either in the Piazza or on the beach. He was amiable and polite. He was always pleased to have a talk and I found out that he not only knew every inch of the island but also the adjacent mainland. He had read a great deal on all sorts of subjects, but his speciality was the history of Rome and on this he was very well informed. He seemed to have little imagination and to be of no more than average intelligence. He laughed a good deal, but with restraint, and his sense of humour was tickled by simple jokes. A commonplace man. I did not forget the odd remark he had made much as approached the topic again. One day on our return from the beach, dismissing the cab at the Piazza, my friend and I told the driver to be ready to take us up to Anacapri at five. We were going to climb Monte Solaro, dine at a tavern we favoured, and walk down in the moonlight. For it was full moon and the views by night were lovely. Wilson was standing by while we gave the cabman instructions, for we had given him a lift to save him the hot dusty walk, and more from politeness than for any other reason I reason I asked him if he would care to join us.

'It's my party,' I said.

'I'll come with pleasure,' he answered.

But when the time came to set out my friend was not feeling well, he thought he had stayed too long in the water, and would not face the long and tiring walk. So I went alone with Wilson. We climbed the mountain, admired the spacious view, and got back to the inn as night was falling, hot, hungry and thirsty. We had ordered our dinner beforehand. The food was good, for Antonio was an excellent cook, and the wine came from his own vineyard. It was so light that you felt you could drink it water and we finished the first bottle with our macaroni. By the time we had finished the second we felt that there was nothing much wrong with life. We sat in a little garden under a great vine laden with grapes. The air was exquisitely soft. The night was still and we were alone. The maid brought us *bel paese* cheese and a plate of figs. I ordered coffee and strega, which is the best liqueur they make in Italy. Wilson would not have a cigar, but lit his pipe.

'We've got plenty of time before we need start,' he said, 'the moon won't be over the hill for another hour.'

'Moon or no moon,' I said briskly, 'of course we've got plenty of time. That's one of the delights of Capri, that there's never any hurry.'

'Leisure,' he said. 'If people only knew! It's the most priceless thing a man can have and they're such fools they're such fools they don't even know it's something to aim at. Work? They work for work's sake. They haven't got the brains to realize that the only object of work is to obtain leisure.'

Wine has the effect on some people of making them indulge in general reflections. These remarks were true, but no one could have claimed that they were original. I did not say anything, but struck a match to light my cigar.

'It was full moon the first time I came to Capri,' he went on reflectively. 'It might be the same moon as tonight.'

'It was, you know,' I smiled.

He grinned. The only light in the garden was what came from an oil lamp that hung over our heads. It had been scanty to eat by, but it was good now for confidences.

'I didn't mean that. I mean, it might be yesterday. Fifteen years it is, and when I look back it seems like a month. I'd never been to Italy before. I came for my summer holiday. I went to Naples by boat from Marseilles and I had a look round, Pompeii, you know, and Paestum and one or two places like that; then I came here for a week. I liked the look of the place right away, from the sea, I mean, as I watched it come closer and closer; and then when we got into the little boats from the steamer and landed at the quay, with all that crowd of jabbering tumbledown houses on the Marina and the walk up to the hotel, and dining on the terrace – well, it just got me. That's the truth. I didn't know if I was standing on my head or my heels. I'd never drunk Capri wine before, but I'd heard of it' I think I must have got a bit tight. I sat on that terrace after they'd all gone to bed and watched the moon over the sea, and there was Vesuvius with a great red plume of smoke rising up from it. Of course I know now that wine I drank was ink, Capri wine my eye, but I thought it all right then. But it wasn't the wine that made me drunk, it was the shape of the island and those jabbering people, the moon and the sea and the oleander in the hotel garden. I'd never seen and oleander before.'

It was a long speech and it had made him thirsty. He took up his glass, but it was empty. I asked him if he would have another strega.

'It's sickly stuff. Let's have a bottle of wine. That's sound, that is pure juice of the grape and can't hurt anyone.'

I ordered more wine, and when it came filled the glasses. He took a long drink and after a sigh of pleasure went on.

'Next day I found my way to the bathing-place we go to. Not bad bathing, I thought. Then I wandered about the island. As luck would have it, there was a *festa* up at the Punta di Timberio and I ran straight into the middle of it. And image of the Virgin and priests, acolytes swinging censers, and a whole crowd of jolly, laughing, excited people, a lot of them all dressed up. I ran across an Englishman there and asked him what it was all about. "Oh, it's the feast of the Assumption," he said, "at least that's what the

Catholic Church says it is, but that's just their hanky-panky. It's the festival of Venus. Pagan, you know. Aphrodite rising from the sea and all that." It gave me quite a funny feeling to hear him. It seemed to take one a long way back, if you know what mean. After that I went down one night to have a look at the Faraglioni by moonlight. If the fates had wanted me to go on being a bank manager they oughtn't to have let me take that walk.'

'You were a bank manager, were you?' I asked.

I had been wrong about him, but not far wrong.

'Yes. I was manager of the Crawford Street branch of the York and City. It was convenient for me because I lived up Hendon way. I could get from door to door in thirty-seven minutes.'

He puffed at his pipe and relit it.

'That was my last night, that was. I'd got to be back at the bank on Monday morning. When I looked at those two great rocks sticking out of the water, with the moon above them, and all the little lights of the fishermen in their boats catching cuttlefish, all so peaceful and beautiful, I said to myself, well, after all, why should I go back? It bronchial pneumonia four years before and the kid went to live with her grandmother, my wife's mother. She was an old fool, she didn't look after the kid properly and she got blood-poisoning, they amputated her leg, but they couldn't save her and she died, poor little thing.'

'How terrible,' I said.

'Yes, I was cut up at the time, though of course not so much as if the kid had been living with me, but I dare say it was a mercy. Not much chance for a girl with only one leg. I was sorry about my wife too.'

We got on very well together. Though I don't know if it would have continued. She was the sort of woman who was always bothering about what other people'd think. She didn't like travelling. Eastbourne was her idea of a holiday. D'you know, I'd never crossed the Channel till after her death.'

'But I suppose you've got other relations, haven't you?'

'None. I was an only child. My father had a brother, but he went to Australia before I was born. I don't think anyone could

see why I shouldn't do exactly what I wanted. I was thirty-four at that time.'

He had told me he had been on the island for fifteen years. That would make him forty-nine. Just about the age I should have given him.

'I'd been working since I was seventeen. All I had to look forward to was doing the same old thing day after day till I retired on my pension. I said to myself, is it worth it? What's wrong with chucking it all up and spending the rest of my life down here? It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. But I'd had a business training, I was cautious by nature. "No," I said, "I won't be carried away like this, I'll go tomorrow like I said I would and think it over. Perhaps when I get back to London I'll think quite differently." Damned fool, wasn't I? I lost a whole year that way.'

'You didn't change your mind, then?'

'You bet I didn't. All the time I was working I kept thinking of the bathing here and the vineyards and the walks over the hills and the moon and the sea, and the Piazza in the evening when everyone walks about for a bit of a chat after the day's work is over. There was only one thing that bothered me: I wasn't sure if I was justified in not working like everybody else did. Then I read a sort of history book, by a man called Marion Crawford it was, and there was a story about Sybaris and Crotona. There were two cities; and in Sybaris they just enjoyed life and had a good time, and in Crotona they were hardy and industrious and all that. And one day the men of Crotona came over and wiped Sybaris out, and then after a while a lot of other fellows came over from somewhere else and wiped Crotona out. Nothing remains of Sybaris, not a stone, and all that's left of Crotona is just one column. That settled the matter for me.'

'Oh?'

'It came to the same in the end, didn't it? And when you look back now, who were the mugs?'

I did not reply and he went on.

"The money was rather a bother. The bank didn't pension one off till after thirty years' service, but if you retired before that

they gave you a gratuity. With that and what I'd got for the sale of my house and the little I'd managed to save, I just hadn't enough to buy an annuity to last the rest of my life. It would have been silly to sacrifice everything so as to lead a pleasant life and not have a sufficient income to make it pleasant. I wanted to have a little place of my own, a servant to look after me, enough to buy tobacco, decent food, books now and then, and something over for emergencies. I knew pretty well how much I needed. I found I had just enough to buy an annuity for twenty-five years.'

'You were thirty-five at the time?'

'Yes. It would carry me on till I was sixty. After all, no one can be certain of living longer than that, a lot of men die in their fifties, and by the time a man's sixty he's had the best of life.'

'On the other hand no one can be sure of dying at sixty,' I said.

'Well, I don't know. It depends on himself, doesn't it?'

'In your place I should have stayed on at the bank till was entitled to my pension.'

'I should have been forty-seven then. I shouldn't have been too old to enjoy my life here, I'm older than that now and I enjoy it as much as I ever did, but should have been too old to experience the particular pleasure of a young man. You know, you can have just as good a time at fifty as you can at thirty, but it's not the same sort of good time. I wanted to live the perfect life while I still had the energy and the spirit to make the most of it. Twenty-five years seemed worth paying something pretty substantial for. I'd made up my mind to wait a year and I waited a year. Then I sent in my resignation and as soon as they paid me my gratuity I bought the annuity and came on here.'

'An annuity for twenty-five years?'

'That's right.'

'Have you never regretted?'

'Never. I've had my money's worth already. And I've got ten years more. Don't you think after twenty-five years of perfect happiness one ought to be satisfied to call it a day?'

'Perhaps.'

He did not say in so many words what he would do then, but his intention was clear. It was pretty much the story my friend had told me, but it sounded different when I heard it from his own lips. I stole a glance at him. There was nothing about him that was not ordinary. No one, looking at that neat, prim face, could have thought him capable of an unconventional action. I did not blame him. It was his own life that he had arranged in this strange manner, and I did not see why he should not do what he liked with it. Still, I could not prevent the little shiver that ran down my spine.

'Getting chilly?' he smiled. 'We might as well start walking down. The moon'll be up by now.'

Before we parted Wilson asked me if I would like to go and see his house one day; and two or three days later, finding out where he lived, I strolled up to see him. It was a peasant's cottage, well away from the town, in a vineyard, with a view of the sea. By the side of the door grew a great oleander in full flower. There were only two small rooms, a tiny kitchen and a lean-to in which firewood could be kept. The bedroom was furnished like a monk's cell, but the sitting-room, smelling agreeably of tobacco, was comfortable enough, with two large arm-chairs that he had brought from England, a large roll-top desk, a cottage piano and crowded bookshelves. On the walls were framed engravings of pictures by G. F. Watts and Lord Leighton. Wilson told me that the house belonged to the owner of the vineyard who lived in another cottage higher up the hill, and his wife came in every day to do the rooms and the cooking. He had found the place on his first visit to Capri, and taking it on his return for good had been there ever since. Seeing the piano and music open on it, I asked him if he would play.

'I'm no good, you know, but I've always been fond of music and I get a lot of fun out of strumming.'

He sat down at the piano and played one of the movements from a Beethoven, Bach and Chopin. On the table on which he had his meals was a greasy pack of cards. I asked him if he played patience.

'A lot.'

From what I saw of him then and from what I heard from other people I made for myself what I think must have been a fairly accurate picture of the life he had led for the last fifteen years. It was certainly a very harmless one. He bathed; he walked a great deal, and he seemed never to lose his sense of the beauty of the island, which he knew so intimately; he played the piano and he played patience; he read. When he was asked to a party he went and, though a trifle dull, was agreeable. He was not affronted if he was neglected. He liked people, but with an aloofness that prevented intimacy. He lived thriftily, but with sufficient comfort. He never owed a penny. I imagine he had never been a man whom sex had greatly troubled, and if in his younger days he had now and then a passing affair with a visitor to the island whose head was turned by the atmosphere, his emotion, while it lasted, remained, I am pretty sure, well under his control. I think he was determined that nothing should interfere with his independence of spirit. His only passion was for the beauty of nature, and he sought felicity in the simple and natural things that life offers to everyone. You may say that it was grossly selfish existence. It was. He was of no use to anybody, but on the other hand he did nobody any harm. His only object was his own happiness, and it looked as though he had attained it. Very few people know where to look for happiness; fewer still find it. I don't know whether he was a fool or a wise man. He was certainly a man who knew his own mind. The odd thing about him to me was that he was so immensely commonplace. I should never have given him a second thought but for what I knew, that on a certain day, ten years from then, unless a chance illness cut the thread before, he must deliberately take leave of the world he loved so well. I wondered whether it was the thought of this, never quite absent from his mind, that gave him the peculiar zest with which he enjoyed every moment of the day.

I should do him an injustice if I omitted to state that he was not at all in the habit of talking about himself. I think the friend I was staying with was the only person in whom he had confided.

I believe he only told me the story because he suspected I already knew it, and on the evening on which he told it me he had drunk a good deal of wine.

My visit drew to a close and I left the island. The year after, war broke out. A number of things happened to me, so that the course of my life was greatly altered, and it was thirteen years before I went to Capri again. My friend had been back some time but he was no longer so well off, and had moved into a house that had no room for me; so I was putting up at the hotel. He came to meet me at the boat and we dined together. During dinner I asked him where exactly his house was.

'You know it,' he answered. 'It's the little place Wilson had. I've built on a room and made it quite nice.'

With so many other things to occupy my mind I had not given Wilson a thought for years; but now, with a little shock, I remembered. The ten years he had before him when I made his acquaintance must have elapsed long ago.

'Did he commit suicide as he said he would?'

'It's rather a grim story.'

Wilson's plan was all right. There was only one flaw in it and this, I suppose, he could not have foreseen. It had never occurred to him that after twenty-five years of complete happiness, in this quiet backwater, with nothing in the world to disturb his serenity, his character would gradually lose its strength. The will needs obstacles in order to exercise its power; when it is never thwarted, when no effort is needed to achieve one's desires, because one has placed one's desires only in the things that can be obtained by stretching out one's hand, the will grows climb a mountain will atrophy. These observations are trite, but there they are. When Wilson's annuity expired he had no longer the resolution to make the end which was the price he had agreed to pay for that long period of happy tranquillity. I do not think, as far as I could gather, both from what my friend told me and afterwards from others, that he wanted courage. It was just that he couldn't make up his mind. He put it off from day to day.

He had lived on the island for so long and had always settled his accounts so punctually that it was easy for him to get credit;

never having borrowed money before, he found a number of people who were willing to lend him small sums when now he asked for them. He had paid his rent regularly for so many years that his landlord, whose wife Assunta still acted as his servant, was content to let things slide for several months. Everyone believed him when he said that a relative had died and that he was temporarily embarrassed because owing to legal formalities he could not for some time get the money that was due to him. He managed to hang on after this fashion for something over a year. Then he could get no more credit from the local tradesmen, and there was no one to lend him any more money. His landlord gave him notice to leave the house unless he paid up the arrears of rent before a certain date.

The day before this he went into his tiny bedroom, closed the door and the window, drew the curtain and lit a brazier of charcoal. Next morning when Assunta came to make his breakfast she found him insensible but still alive. The room was draughty, and though he had done this and that to keep out the fresh air he had not done it very thoroughly. It almost looked as though at the last moment, and desperate though his situation was, he had suffered from a certain infirmity of purpose. Wilson was taken to the hospital, and though very ill for some time he at last recovered. But as a result either of the charcoal poisoning or of the shock he was no longer in complete possession of his faculties. He was not insane, at all events not insane enough to be put in an asylum, but he was quite obviously no longer in his right mind.

'I went to see him,' said my friend. 'I tried to get him to talk, but he kept looking at me in a funny sort of way, as though he couldn't quite make out where he'd seen me before. He looked rather awful lying there in bed, with a week's growth of grey beard on his chin; but except for that funny look in his eyes he seemed quite normal.'

'What funny look in his eyes?'

'I don't know exactly how to describe it. Puzzled. It's an absurd comparison, but suppose you threw a stone up into the air and it didn't come down but just stayed there...'

'It would be rather bewildering, I said.

'Well, that's the sort of look he had.

It was difficult to know what to do with him. He had no money and no means of getting any. His effects were sold, but for too little to pay what he owed. He was English, and the Italian authorities did not wish to make themselves responsible for him. The British Consul in Naples had no funds to deal with the case. He could of course be sent back to England, but no one seemed to know what could be done with him when he got there. Then Assunta, the servant, said that he had been a good master and a good tenant, and as long as he had the money had paid his way; he could sleep in the woodshed in the cottage in which she and her husband lived, and he could share their meals. This was suggested to him. It was difficult to know whether he understood or not. When Assunta came to take him from the hospital he went with her without remark. He seemed to have no longer a will of his own. She had been keeping him now for two years.

'It's not very comfortable, you know, said my friend. 'They've rigged him up a ramshackle bed and given him a couple of blankets, but there's no window, and it's icy cold in winter and like an oven in summer. And the food's pretty rough. You know how these peasants eat: macaroni on Sundays and meat once in a blue moon.'

'What does he do with himself all the time?'

'He wanders about the hills. I've tried to see him two or three times, but it's no good; when he sees you coming he runs like a hare. Assunta come down to have a chat with me now and then and I give her a bit of money so that she can buy him tobacco, but God knows if he ever gets it.

'Do they treat him all right?' I said.

'I'm sure Assunta's kind enough. She treats him like a child. I'm afraid her husband's not very nice to him. He grudges the cost of his keep. I don't believe he's cruel or anything like that, but I think he's a bit sharp with him. He makes him fetch water and clean the cowshed and that sort of thing.'

'It sounds pretty rotten, I said.

'He brought it on himself. After all, he's only got what he deserved.'

'I think on the whole we all get what we deserve, I said. 'But that doesn't prevent its being rather horrible.'

Two or three days later my friend and I were taking a walk. We were strolling along a narrow path through an olive grove.

'There's Wilson,' said my friend suddenly. 'Don't look, you'll only frighten him. Go straight on.'

I walked with my eyes on the path, but out of the corners of them I saw a man hiding behind an olive tree. He did not move as we approached, but I felt that he was watching us. As soon as we had passed I heard a scamper. Wilson, like a hunted animal, had made for safety. That was the last I ever saw of him.

He died last year. He had endured that life for six years. He was found one morning on the mountainside lying quite peacefully as though he had died in his sleep. From where he lay he had been able to see those two great rocks called the Faraglioni which stand out of the sea. It was full moon and he must have gone to see them by moonlight. Perhaps he died of the beauty of that sight.



Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), English novelist and short-story writer, was born in Paris, the sixth son of the solicitor to the British Embassy. His talents as a novelist came to surface right in his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* where grim realism of his portraits of slum life shows the influence of Zola. But his greatest works are, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge*.

Some of Maugham's best stories can be found in his volume, *The Trembling of a Leaf*. Despite his unrivalled position as the most popular and financially successful writer of his time, Maugham never enjoyed critical acclaim. His middle-brow label stuck, due in part to a verbal predictability and shallowness of characterization, but also perhaps to his facile readability.

Maugham's beginning as a short story writer was based on Maupassant's masterly forte, a careful verisimilitude and a detached, plain narrative method. As he grew as an artist, he explored themes so trite, yet retaining an evocative human interest. The straightforward, unobtrusive style, the colloquial idiom, tones of an experienced man—all these work together to impart a distinctive status to Maugham's stories. It is useless to compare them with the stories of O'Henry, Maupassant or Chekhov. For Somerset Maugham's stories assimilate experiences of a man who could not have written otherwise. The significance of his stories lies not in great artistry, but in the sheer truthfulness of presenting common human experiences in an art form.

The Lotus Eater: The title of Maugham's story is based on a Homeric legend. 'Lotus Eaters' are a people who ate of the lotus tree, the effect of which was to make them forget their friends and homes, and to lose all desire of returning to their native land, their only wish being to live in idleness in Lotus-land (Odyssey, XI). Hence 'lotus eater' is one living in ease and luxury.

The story paints the author's curious encounter with Thomas Wilson, an Englishman who has made Capri, the Italian island, his own. The Wilson legend has grown with many conflicting views on him rending the Capri air. The author wants to check him on his own; he wants to size him up through the romantic veneer of popular conception of a man captivated by natural beauty of the place. A

widower, Wilson explains: "I don't think anyone could easily be more alone in the world than I am." But he challenges this loneliness, aloneness, with an enviable company—natural beauty, music, books. He lives on annuity that will last for twenty-five years; he does not know what might happen thereafter, nor does he care. Not blessed with people's benevolence for long, Wilson contemplates ending his life, but survives. But after the annuity period has been over, he is no longer in the right frame. In one fateful moonlit night, he loosens his bond with life, nature and Capri. The lotus-eater finally dies in midst of nature's beauty which once beckoned him to the enchantment of Capri.

Notes :

parapet : a low wall.

Hera : the ox-eyed wife of Jupiter in Greek mythology.

Suetonius : 1st century Roman historian.

Strega : a spicy orange-flavoured liqueur made in Italy.

Assumption : 15 August, on which Feast of the Assumption is celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church to commemorate the death of Virgin Mary and the assumption of her body into Heaven when it was reunited with her soul.

Marion Grawford : American novelist (1854-1909). Lived in Italy after 1885.

Sybaris/Crotona : Sybaris was an ancient Greek city in south Italy noted for its wealth and luxury. Destroyed in 510 B.C.

Crotona, an Italian city, where Pythagoras established his chief school of philosophy in 530 B.C. Thereafter the whole aspect of the town became more moral and decorous.

annuity : an amount of money invested in order to earn interest then paid to someone each year for the rest of his life.

G.F. watts/Lord Leighton : George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) was an English painter and sculptor reputed for his art based on Greek mythological subjects. Lord Leighton (1830-1896) was his follower.

Beethoven : 18th century German musical genius known for highly innovative sonatas and symphonies. Universally considered as the most creative musical genius man has ever known.

Schumann : 19th century German composer. Famed for orchestral works, notably *A minor piano concerto*, and four symphonies. Also wrote chamber music.

Schubert : Early 19th century Austrian composer. His major works include the *Trout Piano Quintet*, the *C major symphony* and the *B minor symphony*. Died young at 31.

Bach : Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Famed for 'Brandenburg' concertos and *The Well-tempered Clavier*. His main achievement was his development of polyphony.

Chopin : 19th century Polish composer. His piano works include *mazurkas*, *etudes*, *preludes*, *nocturnes*, *sonatas* etc.

Study Questions :

1. Discuss the significance of the title of the story, *The Lotus Eater*.
2. How does Maugham portray the character of Thomas Wilson in the story? Is the name, "lotus eater" appropriate to him?
3. Do you think Maugham delineates Wilson as a tragic character? Does his life give rise to feelings of pity and admiration?
4. Describe, after Maugham, the life of Wilson after his annuity period is over. Narrate his final days. Why does the writer say that "he died of the beauty of that sight"?

The Fly Katherine Mansfield

'Y' are very snug in here,' piped old Mr. Woodifield, and he peered out of the great, green-leather armchair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its pram. His talk was over ; it was time for him to be off. But he did not want to go. Since he had retired, since his . . . stroke, the wife and the girls kept him boxed up in the house every day of the week except Tuesday. On Tuesday he was dressed and brushed and allowed to cut back to the city for the day. Though what he did there the wife and girls couldn't imagine. Made a nuisance of himself to his friends, they supposed . . . Well, perhaps so. All the same, we cling to our last pleasures as the tree clings to last leaves. So there sat old Woodifield, smoking a cigar and staring almost greedily at the boss, who rolled in his office chair, stout, rosy, five years older than he, and still going strong, still at the helm. It did one good to see him.

Wistfully, admiringly, the old voice added, 'It's snug in here, upon my word!'

'Yes, It's comfortable enough,; agreed the boss, and he flipped the *Financial Times* with a paper knife. As a matter of fact he was proud of his room; he liked to have it admired, especially by old Woodifield. It gave him a feeling of deep, solid satisfaction to be planted there in the midst of it in full view of the frail old figure in the muffler.

'I've had it done up lately,' he explained as he had explained for the past—how many ?—weeks. 'New carpet,' and he pointed to the bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings. 'New furniture,' and he nodded towards the massive bookcase and the table with legs like twisted treacle. 'Electric heating !' He waved almost exultantly towards the five transparent, pearly sausages glowing so softly in the tilted copper pan.

But he did not draw old Woodifield's attention to the photograph over the table of a grave-looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographer's parks with photographers'

storm-clouds behind him. It was not new. It had been there for over six years.

'There was something I wanted to tell you,' said old Woodifield, and his eyes grew dim remembering. 'Now what was it? I had it in my mind when I started out this morning.' His hands began to tremble, and patches of red showed above his beard.

Poor old chap, he's on his last pins, though the boss. And, feeling kindly, he winked at the old man, and said jokingly, 'I tell you what. I've got a little drop of something here that'll do you good before you go out into the cold again. It's beautiful stuff. It wouldn't hurt a child. He took a key off his watch-chain, unlocked a cupboard below his desk, and drew forth a dark, squat bottle. 'That's the medicine,' said he. 'And the man from whom I got it told me on the strict Q.T. it came from the cellars at Windsor Castle.'

Old Woodifield's mouth fell open at the sight. He couldn't have looked more surprised if the boss had produced a rabbit.

'It's whisky, ain't it?' he piped feebly.

The boss turned the bottle and lovingly showed him the label.

Whisky it was.

'D' you know,' said he, peering up at the boss wonderingly, 'they won't let me touch it at home. And he looked as though he was going to cry.

'Ah, that's where we know a bit more than the ladies,' cried the boss, swooping across for two tumblers that stood on the table with the water-bottle, and pouring a generous finger into each. 'Drink it down. It'll do you good. And don't put any water with it. It's sacrilege to tamper with stuff like this. Ah!' He tossed off his, pulled out his handkerchief, hastily wiped his moustaches, and cocked an eye at old Woodifield, who was rolling his in his chaps.

The old man swall, was silent a moment, and then said faintly, 'It's nutty!'

But it warmed him; it crept into chill old brain—he remembered.

'That was it,' he said, heaving himself out of his chair. 'I thought you'd like to know. The girls were in Belgium last week having a look at poor Reggie's grave, and they happened to come across your boy's. They're quite near each other, it seems.'

Old Woodifield paused, but the boss made no reply. Only a quiver in his eyelids showed that he heard.

'The girls were delighted with the way the place is kept,' piped the old voice. 'Beautifully looked after. Couldn't be better if they were at home. You've not been across, have yer?'

'No, no!' For various reasons the boss had not been across.

'There's miles of it,' quavered old Woodifield, 'and it's all as neat as a garden. Flowers growing on all the graves. Nice broad paths.' It was plain from his voice how much he liked a nice broad path.

The pause came again. Then the old man brightened wonderfully. 'D' you know what the hotel made the girls pay for a pot of jam?' he piped. 'Ten francs! Robbery, I call it. It was a little pot, so Gertrude says, no bigger than a half-crown. And she hadn't taken more than a spoonful when they charged her ten francs. Gertrude brought the pot away with her to teach 'em a lesson. Quite right, too; it's trading on our feelings. They think because we're over there having a look round we're ready to pay anything. That's what it is.' And he turned towards the door.

'Quite right, quite right!' cried the boss, though what was quite right he hadn't the least idea. He came round by his desk, followed the shuffling footsteps to the door, and saw the old fellow out. Woodifield was gone.

For a long moment the boss stayed, staring at nothing, while the grey-haired office messenger, watching him, dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run. Then: 'I'll see nobody for half an hour, Macey,' said the boss. 'Understand? Nobody at all.'

'Very good, Sir.'

The door shut, the firm heavy steps recrossed the bright carpet, the fat body plumped down in the spring chair, and leaning forward, the boss covered his face with his hands. He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep . . .

It had been a terrible shock to him when old Woodifield sprang that remark upon him about the boy's grave. It was exactly as though the earth had opened and he had seen the the boy lying there with Woodifield's girls staring down at him. For it was strange. Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever. 'My son!' groaned the boss. But no tears came yet. In the past, in the first months and even years after the boy's death, he had declared then, he had told every body, could make no difference, Other men perhaps might re-cover, might live their loss down, but not he. How was it possible? His boy was an only son. Ever since his birth the boss had worked at building up this business for him ; it had no other meaning if it was not for the boy. Life itself had come to have no other meaning. How on earth could he have slaved, denied himself, kept going all those years without the promise for ever before him of the boy's stepping into his shoes and carrying on where he left off?

And that promise he had been so near being fulfilled. The boy had been in the office learning the ropes for a year before the war. Every morning they had started off together ; they had come back by the same train. And what congratulations he had received as the boy's father! No wonder; he had taken to it marvelously. As to his popularity with the staff, every man jack of them down to old Macey couldn't make enough of the boy. And he wasn't in the least spoilt. No, he was just his bright natural self, with the right word for everybody, with that boyish look and his babit of saying, 'simply splendid!'

But all that was over and done with as though it never had been. The day had come when Macey had handed him the telegram that brought the whole place crashing about his head. 'Deeply regret to inform you . . .' And he had left the office a broken man, with his life in ruins.

Six years ago, six years . . . How quickly time passed ! It might have happened yesterday. The boss took his hands from his face ; he was puzzled. Something seemed to be wrong with him. He

wasn't feeling as he wanted to feel. He decided to get up and have a look at the boy's photograph. But it wasn't a favourite photograph of his ; the expression was unnatural. It was cold, even stern-looking. The boy had never looked like that.

At that moment the boss noticed that a fly had fallen into his broad inkpot, and was trying feebly but desperately to clamber out again. Help! Help! said those struggling legs. But the sides of the inkpot were wet and slippery ; it fell back again and began to swim. The boss took up a pen, picked the fly out of the ink, and shook it on to a piece of blotting-paper. For a fraction of a second it lay still on the dark patch that oozed round it. Then the front legs waved, took hold, and pulling its small, sodden body up, it began the immense task of cleaning the ink from its wings. Over and under, over and under, went a leg along a wing as the stone goes over and under the scythe. Then there was a pause, while the fly, seeming to stand on the tips of its toes, tried to expand first one wing and then the other. It succeeded at last, and sitting down, it began, like a minute cat, to clean its face. Now one could imagine that the little front legs rubbed against each other lightly, joyfully. The horrible danger was over ; it had escaped ; it was ready for life again.

But just then the boss had an idea. He plunged his pen back into the ink, leaned his thick wrist on the blotting paper, and as the fly tried its wings down came a great heavy blot. What would it make of that? What indeed ! the little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would happen next. But then, as if painfully, it dragged itself forward. The front legs waved, caught hold, and, more slowly this time, the task began from the beginning.

He's a plucky little devil, though the boss, and he felt a real admiration for the fly's courage. That was the way to tackle things ; that was the right spirit. Never say die ; it was only a question of . . . But the fly had again finished its laborious task, and the boss had just time to refill his pen, to shake fair and square on the new-cleaned body yet another dark drop. What about it this time? A painful moment of suspense followed. But behold, the front legs

were again waving; the boss felt rush of relief. He leaned over the fly and said to it tenderly, 'you artful little b . . .' And actually had the brilliant notion of breathing on it to help the drying process. All the same, there was something timid and weak about its efforts now, and the boss decided that this time should be the last, as he dipped the pen deep into the ink-pot.

It was. The last blot fell on the soaked blotting paper, and the dragged fly lay in it and did not stir. The back legs were stuck to the body; the front legs were not to be seen.

'Come on,' said the boss. 'Look sharp!' And he stirred it with his pen in vain. Nothing happened or was likely to happen. The fly was dead.

The boss lifted the corpse on the end of the paper knife and flung it into the wastepaper basket. But such a grinding feeling of wretchedness seizes him that he felt positively frightened. He started forward and pressed the bell for Macey.

'Bring me some fresh blotting paper,' he said sternly, 'and look sharp about it.' And while the old dog padded away he fell to wondering what it was he had been thinking about before. What was it? It was . . . He took out his handkerchief and passed it inside his collar. For the life of him he could not remember.

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), born Kathleen Beauchamp, died early like several other illustrious short-story writers, Chekhov, Maupassant and Poe. An ultra-Bohemian, as her letters and journals show, Mansfield read Chekhov in German translation and he was a great influence on her development as a writer. With some of her stories closely echoing Chekhov in storyline and style. Like him, Mansfield uses small moments to unfold their broad significance in the lives of people, and, like him, she probes ironies ingrained in many human situations.

Some of her best stories are collected in the volumes, *The Garden Party* and *The Dove's Nest*. Most of them exemplify a language so lyrical and expressive. She does not merely denote a character's feelings, she recreates them. Her language intimately tracks a character's sensitivity, perception and intensity. This technique at its best invites the reader close to the emotional centre of the story, leaving the writer, the reader and the protagonist to occupy the same space and experience, the same emotions. H.E. Bates in *The Modern Short Story* writes about Mansfield's technique: "she delights in making her characters show their thoughts by a kind of mental soliloquy, fluttering, gossipy, breathless with question and answer." This certainly gives many of her stories a psychological edge.

The Fly: The story has an intriguing plot which smoothly runs its course for the best part, but halts to a screech towards the end when the protagonist comes across a 'fly'—a symbol of realization, a realization that comes to him but eludes most readers. What the story tells is deceptive, it evokes differing responses. The message of it may be an acceptance of adverse conditions or fate in a human life.

In the story, the boss is haunted by a dead son for whom he always fervently built up his business. For long six years, he has been carrying in his heart the heavy pain, the grief. He immerses himself in wine and work to forget the pain. His friend, Mr. Woodfield, in one of his weekly gossips, reminds the boss of his dead son. When alone, the boss is lost in memories of the son, he sits puzzled and his son's picture looks to him stern, cold, and distant. At this psychological moment, the boss sees a fly struggle to get out of an

ink-pot. He tests its resilience and lust for life. But it hurtles to death as he drops ink on it more than once. Mansfield shows how this trivial event brings him a sense of wretchedness and a fear. And a forgetfulness. The boss is to renew his life—but in what direction? Mansfield does not clearly say, but her suggestions may prompt a many-sided reading of the story. Each reader is invited to analyze the boss's situation on his/her own.

Notes :

snug : comfortable and well-arranged.

the city : an area in central London where there are many large banks and financial institutions.

boy in uniform : the boss's dead son. The story written in 1922, probably suggests that he, like Mansfield's brother, was killed during the first World War. An autobiographical note broods over the story.

QT : abbreviation of 'quiet', used in the phrase, "on the strict QT."

Windsor Castle : the residential palace, one of many of the British Royal Family.

man jack : every man.

the old dog padded away : reference to the office attendant Macey and his slow-paced movement. Mansfield uses the term to indicate the unconventionally not-so-bustling activity in the boss's office employing age-beaten workers.

Study Questions :

1. Write a note on the portrait of the boss in the story.
2. Assess the role of Mr. Woodfield in the story.
3. Explain the importance of the story's title. Bring out the meaning of the "fly episode" in the story.
4. Illustrate the story's psychological interest with reference to the protagonist, the boss.
5. Compare and contrast the characters of the boss and Mr. Woodfield.

Notes



Joseph Brodsky once told some American students – read great writers but forget not those with great ideas. Seven stories in the book probe different human spaces, focus different questions and explore distinct worlds of ideas, all our own. Merit of each story may face different judgments, but each addresses truths all humans search, or answer questions all humans ask, if inwardly. These stories tell us, among all truths, that each writer, valued by history as big or small, has some truths to offer, some worlds to unravel and some task to elevate human triviality into art. Readers are only to discover them, and realise that no other passion can offer them a better source for too many worlds at a time and in such small spaces.

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