

# The Spider and The Fly

by Mary Botham Howitt

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## 1. (a) Refer to the poem, 'The Spider and the Fly' and explain the theme of the poem.

**Answer:** The poet, Mary Howitt has explained the theme of the poem in the last stanza after she has finished narrating the story of the spider and the fly. The fable of the spider and the fly is a lesson for the readers in building a strong character. The fly is a metaphor for a strong knowledgeable person who is well aware of the harm that certain attractions can cause. The fly very well understands that the claims of the spider are false, and even though the spider may possess some of what he declares, his intentions surely were not good. On the other hand, though the spider is not as sophisticated as the fly, he knows her weaknesses for sure. When he fails in enticing the fly to his lair with the claims of good food in his pantry and comfort in his parlour, he employs the technique of flattery. He begins to praise the fly, talking highly of her colour wings and physical appearance. The fly listens to all these praises and gets seduced by the words. This time when the spider invites her to his parlour, so that she herself may see her beauty in his mirror, she moves closer to his web and as she approaches close, the spider pounces on her and she is killed. Through this narrative, the poet wishes to warn her readers not to fall prey to fake praise and idle flattering words.

## (b) Why does the determination of the fly lose its ground and it ends up in the spider's den?

**Answer:** The fly in the poem possesses a strong personality and she resists the temptation to enter the spider's parlour for a long time. The spider introduces various specialities of his home to her but she refuses to accept his invitation. She says she is aware of the dangers of entering his house. She knows that those who go up the winding stairs of his parlour, never return. And those who enter his pantry are themselves reduced to food. The fly is determined not to fall prey to the enticement of the spider but finally, when he begins to praise her, her resolve starts to weaken. The flattering words that he uses for her beauty, her wings, and her eyes, makes her forget how dangerous and untrustworthy the spider was. As he keeps on praising her, she moves closer to the web and loses complete sense of the perils she is putting herself in. The spider merely gave a boost to her ego and she forgets all that she had learned about him and lands directly in his grasp. He grabs her and takes her to his lair to feed on her. The fly lost her determination because she was tempted by the seductive praises of the spider, who used great words to befool her into believing she was very beautiful.

## (c) What is the advice that the poet gives at the end of the poem? How is it beneficial to the young reader it was intended for?

**Answer:** In the poem, Mary Howitt has narrated a fable about a spider and a fly. In the initial stanzas, she narrates the story of how the spider tries to tempt the fly to come to his den but she refuses each time and finally, when he showers her with praises, she loses her self-control and foolishly comes within the spider's grasp. This leads to her being killed and devoured by the spider. After narrating the story, the poet moves on to give priceless advice to the reader. The poet advises all her readers not to be fooled by flattering words that any cunning person can use to tempt them to do something. One should have strong control over one's self because the self is hungry for praise and adulation and it is tempted by the flattery it receives. Young people don't often understand the layers of human personality. It is possible that they mostly believe the words they hear. It is necessary for the young ones to know that a person may not really mean what they say. Not everyone who praises you is a real well-wisher. It is probable that people praise us and shower us with adulation in order to make us believe a thing that is not true. A strong person is that who stands undeterred and unshaken in the face of praise or criticism.

## **Question 2.**

**(a) In the poem, 'The Spider and the Fly' the two characters have been pitched against each other. Discuss their personalities.**

**Answer:** The poem begins with a question asked by the spider to the fly, "Will you walk into my parlour?" This phrase in itself is used to indicate a false offer of friendship or help that is, in fact, a trap. The story begins with two characters -a spider and a fly, both presenting two different personalities. One is a cunning Spider who ensnares a beautiful and innocent fly by its different tricks of seduction and flattery. The personality and the intentions of both these characters are easily traceable. The spider represents evil and the fly represents innocence. The story is narrated in the third person. The narrator is unbiased and simply describes the story as it goes. Due to the contradictory personality of both the characters the spider and the fly are at odds with each other. As the spider is mean, cunning, cruel and sycophant in nature comparatively the fly is generous, simple, kind and frank. Though the fly possesses good qualities, it's this humaneness, which gets it into the trap of the scrumpy spider. The fly trusts the flattering words of the spider to be a complete truth. And at the same time though the spider is a negative character and he continuously tries to trap the fly as his prey, which he succeeds in doing at the end. The story beneath the poem is quite interesting and equally appealing to people especially kids to not trust strangers or words of flattery as that may be a trap.

**(b) Does the poem hint at a conflict between vices and virtues?**

**Answer:** "The spider and the fly" is one of the classic poems of Mary Howitt with the opening lines "Will you walk into my parlour?" by the bootlicking spider to the fly. But the

fly knowing the fact that if she enters there she would be doomed so she replies,

**"to ask me is in vain, for who goes up your winding stair can ne'er come down again."**

Similarly, we can witness throughout the poem the conflict of vices and virtues in each stanza. In the first stanza, the spider makes its best attempt to entice the fly into its parlour with promises of a lot of amazing things to enjoy. Here in this stanza, the spider uses simple words of flattery to snare the fly. In reply to this vice, the fly using its virtue against the spider by refusing in simple and straightforward words that it will never visit, its parlour as it knows whoever goes inside doesn't come back alive. In the second stanza, the spider applies another tactic by offering the fly a soft and comfortable bed to sleep on. Here again one can see the conflict of vices and virtues as the fly too, answers with an apt virtue to the spider's vice by ignoring it politely, that she'll visit some other time. Finally, the spider tries its best vice- of appreciating its beauty and this time the virtue of the fly falls flat and hence it succumbs to the spider's charms.

**(c) What vices does the spider possess that have helped him in winning the fly?**

**Answer:** The spider tries all its vices starting from words of flattery to charm her and finally, appreciating the fly's beauty to the extent of seduction owing to which the fly falls in the trap of the spider:

The spider at first attempts to lure the fly by promising wonderful things to see, to which the fly refuses. So, this vice of the spider goes in vain. Then the spider tries to provoke the fly's emotion by offering it a comfortable soft bed. As the fly would have been weary from flying the whole day. But this vice of emotional provocation too falls flat. Lastly, the vice, which makes the spider win over the fly, is its ability to seductively appreciate the beauty of the fly with extravagance. When the spider appreciates the gauzy wings and dazzling eyes of the fly, the fly finds herself unable to resist and gets trapped in his web. The fly after hearing such a brilliant complement of its beauty gets closer to the spider as if the spider has won her heart and faith both or she wished to hear some more appreciation of her beauty. And while expecting so about her own beauty she forgot to be careful hence she falls prey to the seductive vice of a spider. In the last stanza, the poet concludes with "lesson from this tale": Don't let yourself be tricked by sweet, flattering words.

### **Long Questions and Answers**

**1. Describe how the poet warns the readers of 'evil counsellors'. What should people stay away from?**

**Answer:** Mary Botham Howitt compares the Spider to evil counsellors and the Fly to common people. According to the poem, evil counsellors always suggest ideas to people,

ones that make people uncomfortable for their personal gains. To do so, they suggest features and facilities that go beyond the usual. Thus, making the facilities irresistible. Howitt describes the character of evil counsellors through the character of a creature as simple as a spider that works with similar techniques to have its daily meal.

To a Spider, a Fly is nothing but a meal but its actions display a character and the intent similar to evil counselors-people who pose to be helpful but their intention is restricted to only their personal needs. The Spider tries to lure the Fly to its den, telling the Fly how lucky it would be to enjoy luxuries at its cave. Evil counsellors are similar, offers proposed by them seem to be very helpful and attractive but later, people fall into their trap due to greed.

Howitt has made an attempt to describe the methods used by evil counsellors by relating to the life of a Spider. People, at times, consider a Spider to be a negative creature, due to the fears they have of them. Howitt also urges people to be aware of the decisions they make as evil counsellors' ideas to capture people doesn't remain stagnant. They expand continuously.

*"So he wove a subtle web, in a little corner sly,  
And set his table ready to dine upon the Fly."*

The lines above are the evidence from the poem which shows how evil counselors think and that they do not count on one single idea to capture others for themselves.

Howitt describes that people should stay away from people with Spiderlike character. In her poem, Howitt describes such people to be evil counsellors. People should stay away from ideas that seem extremely suspicious and not approach them the second time. The Fly is similar to common people who are aware of every situation they face but fail to prove their point in the end. They get lured by empty offers, which have no material in them and are meant to exploit them.

The Fly is clever at the beginning of the poem. She dodges the Spider's offers, which are directed towards trapping her, and is stubborn, acting upon her will and what she believes. There are several lines supporting this statement. Some of them are:

"O no, no," said the little Fly. 'to ask me is in vain."

"O no, no," said the little Fly. 'for I've often heard it said,"

"O no, no," said the little Fly, 'kind Sir, that cannot be;"

People often fall prey to flattery and in the same way, the Fly also fell prey to flattery by the Spider, which helped the Spider to have her for his dinner. The line *"Hearing his wily flattering words, came slowly flitting by."* shows how people, no matter how stubborn they are, fall prey to flattery. The poem's motive is to make people aware that flattery is never good and people should stay away from it.

**2. Analyze the poem and describe the situation which let the Fly be preyed by the Spider. You may use the points below for reference.**

- **educational poem for readers of all types**
- **highlights the vices of life**
- **effect of emotions on people**
- **poet's message to the readers**

**Answer:** 'The Spider and The Fly' is an educational poem, which teaches the readers to be aware of several vices in life. The poem is meant for everyone—the young and the old, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor. The poet believes that there are certain lessons taught by life to all living organisms which make them aware of mistakes one might make when trying to lead their lives. Of all mistakes made by people, there are certain errors, which are common among a majority of people and are repeated regularly. Howitt in her poem emphasizes some of the common behavioural errors made by the majority of humans and playfully explains the characteristics that lead to the downfall of a human.

The Spider suggested various ideas to the Fly on how luxurious and comfortable could living at the Spider's ever have been. There have been instances where the Spider exaggerates but the Fly is wise enough to realize that it is all a trap.

The Fly for once looks invincible, inspired by the experience and wise enough to not fall prey to the Spider. However, there is an error in her calculation as she finally decides to remain courteous to the Spider although she is aware of the risk a Spider poses to the life of weak insects like the Fly. The Spider has his strategies ready and is determined to trap the Fly. When he realizes that the Fly, unlike all other prey, doesn't get attracted to material treasure, he decides to play the emotional card. The Spider flatters the Fly and the Fly falls for his flatter thus, ruining all her efforts to protect herself from being the Spider's meal.

The poet from this incident indicates that although worldly materials may not comfort people or we may resist from being attracted to them, there is a high chance for people to fall prey to cunning social elements like the Spider. It is important for people to not fall for emotional declarations of whom they perceive as strangers because they continue to pose a threat to their lives.

The Spider wouldn't have been able to trap the Fly if she had been careful enough to realize that there was no good company with the Spider. People must be aware of the threats an environment and its factors pose and try to escape that plan as soon as possible. The situation that led to the loss of the Fly was her meekness and inability to analyze her opponent effectively. The poem teaches its readers to be aware of evil perpetrators who consistently plot ways for their prey to accept defeat.

**3. Was the Spider well prepared to trap the Fly? What positive lessons can one learn from the Spider? You may use the points below for reference.**

- use of several strategies
- never gave up on the Fly
- studied the Fly's characters
- used deception
- one must be clever in their work and analyze every problem

**Answer:** The Spider indeed was well prepared to trap the Fly. It tried its best to capture the Fly by using strategies and did not give up hope although the Fly proved to be a more difficult prey. Before the Fly left the Spider after their first meet, the Spider was confident that his sweet words had made the Fly feel welcome at his lair. His words made her feel that he wasn't that dangerous and would be able to dodge the Spider's traps because he used the same type of tricks to capture her. To her, the Spider seemed foolish. The Spider used the trick with which he created a deception and let the Fly think he was foolish and cleverly managed to invite the Fly to his lair. He was better prepared this time. He analyzed the Fly's character and planned a different strategy for trapping his prey.

From the Spider's character, one can learn to prepare for all situations that lie ahead of one's life. The Spider was able to clearly analyze his prey's character and strategized accordingly. One can also learn that not all results, however well planned may be successful if there are external factors affecting the success which means that one has to not lose hope and continue to work on achieving success by controlling the external factors by means of adjusting the results of the factors which are self-dependent.

The ultimate lesson from the Spider is to not lose hope over things and situations that are not under one's control. The Fly never fell for the offers made by the Spider because she was aware of his intention behind the sweet offers having heard about them from others. The Spider had no control of this situation and had to think of other ways to trap his prey. This inspired him to study the Fly's behaviour and plan his next steps.

Although the Spider plays a negative role in the poem and his character is portrayed as one that people should stay away from. The Spider also has traits important for people to be successful in their lives. One must stay away from people who flatter and try benefiting from others but also must be clever in their work and accomplish their goals faithfully.