

The Singing Lesson

by Katherine Mansfield

1. (a) The story 'The Singing Lesson' provides an insight into the society of Mansfield's times. Comment.

Answer: Katherine Mansfield born at the end of the nineteenth century was a writer who aimed to bring about a modernist change through her works. Mansfield was a woman, who never yielded to the norms of society. She lived life through her free will and was seen writing her own experiences in her story, mirroring the society that existed in the times. She depicted women in her stories facing challenges due to the existence of a patriarchal world which refused woman the right to explore and operate freely within a man's world. 'The Singing Lesson' is a short story that narrates the despair of a school music teacher. Engaged to be married, her fiancé breaks up with her through a letter citing he is not a marrying man and is disgusted with the idea of it. The trauma of a broken relationship overpowers her and affects everyone around her as she fails to control her emotions.

Mansfield, in this short story, gives readers a very clear insight into the mind of an unmarried woman and her situation in society. A woman relies on a man to wed her and is desperate to see herself married as per the norms of society. The readers are informed that Miss Meadows is a maiden of thirty years old while her fiancé Basil is twenty-five. At the time when the story was written, thirty would have been viewed upon as old, when it came to a woman getting married. Thus, Miss Meadows is deeply worried to find her engagement called off as she is aware that, due to her age she may not get a proposal again and therefore she relies on Basil to uphold her stature or appearance in society through their marriage.

Miss Meadows is deeply hurt and embarrassed by the engagement being broken, to an extent that she is ready to leave school and disappear to save herself from taunts and unwelcoming comments of society. Miss Meadows is in a very conventional situation of the times. Getting married was a major criterion for a woman. Her sense of identity was incomplete without a husband. Despite,

Miss Meadows is a professional and an educated lady, she suffers from an identity crisis, which could only be completed through her marriage.

Mansfield also clearly depicts how little regard Miss Meadows gave to love and compatibility while choosing her husband. Her accounts of Basil display a childishness and inability to understand how important it is to choose a good life partner. Readers are informed that Miss Meadows is desperate for marriage and is ready to adjust with a man who loves her only a little or not at all. To Miss Meadows, it seems that she is aware of Basil

not in love with her. Despite that, she agrees to marry him forgiving him for his mistake as she fears the stigma of being an unmarried woman in society.

Miss Meadows' desperation and reliance on marriage show the situation of women in society. She is afraid to remain single and be a butt of jokes and taunting comments. She is thus, prepared to sacrifice her free will and happiness for a life where she gets the society's approval.

(b) How does Katherine Mansfield describe Miss Meadows in the story?

Answer: Katherine Mansfield was a modernist writer and as opposed to the Victorian writing style she did not believe in conforming to the set rules and traditions. She preferred a style which depicted the reality and showcased the plights that existed in society. In her short story "The Singing Lesson", Mansfield does not concentrate too much on the physical traits of her character. She devotes much effort to depict her character and the mental agony that she is going through. She concentrates on the finer nuances of her humanness and utilizes both the direct and indirect mode of characterization to introduce Miss Meadows to the readers.

The direct method of characterization is used by the narrator to describe a character with explicit detail. This means that the character's physical characteristics will be clearly explained without the reader having to make inferences. Mansfield writes, "Miss Meadows, in cap and gown and carrying a little baton, trod the cold corridors." She clearly paints the picture of a teacher walking with as little details as possible but giving out very careful insight into her mind and emotions through the setting of the 'cold corridors. The cold corridors suggest the coldness in her attitude and her feelings which will drive all the action in the story. Miss Meadows is frozen and grim and will not be moved easily, in contrast to the science mistress who is 'sweet and pale like honey'

Miss Meadows is filled with cold despair' and her actions will be 'sharp' like a knife which would cut through the hearts of others. Miss Meadows evinced in pain, would not hesitate to inflict the same in the girls. She desires to be drowned in the sorrow of lament and also wants the girls to engulf it and similarly she wants her happiness to be echoed in by everyone. Miss Meadows is selfish and desires the world to see things as black and white as she does. Miss Meadows is in a state of turmoil that has been brought about by her broken engagement. The cruel letter by her fiancé has rendered her helpless and so she felt dejected. It's not her pride that is hurt but her self-confidence and esteem as she wishes to disappear, vanish from the school and from people who know her. Mansfield has made the character of Miss Meadows a perfect embodiment of the nineteenth-century woman, who is educated, working and yet suffers from low self-esteem and a sense of helplessness and identity crisis without a man in her life.

(c) What are the various themes that Katherine Mansfield explores in her text "The Singing Lesson"?

Answer: Katherine Mansfield's short story 'The Singing Lesson' explores the theme of despair, reliance, appearance, happiness, desperation and sadness. The story narrated from the third-person perspective begins with the despair of Miss Meadows. 'With despair - cold, sharp despair - buried deep in her heart like a knife. The first line of the story itself conveys the theme of despair and sets the tone of the story. Miss Meadows is upset after her broken engagement and is deeply affected by her fiancé's cold words in the letter. The author clearly lays out the theme of despair in the character's situation and mood.

The theme of reliance and appearance is touched upon through Miss Meadow's relationship with Basil. Miss Meadows is marrying Basil for convenience as she fears about her appearance in the society as a maiden, unmarried at thirty. She relies on appearance to select a life partner and is ready to spend the rest of her life with a man who loves her little. She seems to be relying on a man to provide her with the stature in society and identity which will make her lose her own value in the future. She is so worried about her appearance that she is ready to disappear from school and from her normal life.

Sadness looms large over Miss Meadows as she is hurt by Basil's cruel words and actions. She desires to extend the same sadness to her students by drowning herself in the songs of lament. Her sadness is fleeting and so are her resolutions. She forgives Basil easily to welcome happiness with a warm heart and delight on finding Basil ready to marry her and asking for forgiveness for his rude letter. Miss Meadows is desperate for marriage as she is afraid of the society looking down upon her as an unmarried woman at 30. She desires respect and identity that she can only achieve in society through marriage. Thus, sadly Miss Meadows instead of seeking happiness is desperately seeking marriage as a way of happiness to stand in the society.

2. (a) 'With despair, cold sharp despair...' What does the opening line reveal about the mood and setting of the story "The Singing Lesson"?

Answer: "The Singing Lesson" is the story of Miss Meadows, a thirty-year-old music teacher who is disturbed by the news of her broken engagement. Her disturbed emotional state does not allow her to keep her professional life separate from her personal one. The turmoil of her relationship reaches to her classroom affecting her behaviour and her responses towards her students. Her wavered thoughts clear her perspective and overpower her normal senses. Katherine Mansfield uses symbols in her short story to narrate the importance of specific events and highlight the deeper meaning beneath it.

The narrative begins on a whirlwind of emotions and sensations only to be dismantled in the next few lines with no concrete actions. Thus, the words used by Mansfield add vigour to the story and give out the exact state of mind that Miss Meadows is in. "With despair -

cold, sharp despair..." these words bring out the tension in the atmosphere as well as the internal conflict and tension within Miss Meadows. The sombre mood is heightened by the use of simile "buried deep in her heart like a wicked knife", which reminds us of death. It shows the cold attitude of Miss Meadows and her mental condition in which she could be driven to do anything, even kill someone.

Mansfield sets the beginning of her story in "cold corridors" that clearly indicates the coldness within Miss Meadows. Her cold feelings and the emotional turmoil has imprisoned her into a state of confusion with only bitterness for people she comes into contact with.

The time of the year when the story is based is autumn; another symbol used to highlight the coldness. The setting, atmosphere and environment in Mansfield's story bring out the psychological happenings in the character.

(b) Give instances of symbolism used by Katherine Mansfield in the short story.

Answer: Katherine Mansfield's story 'The Singing Lesson' is a poetic work of art. The story at the outright level is about a teacher whose engagement has been broken and the subsequent upheaval brought about by it. The story that seems so simple is laced with Katherine's fine symbolism, which readers will have to deduce to understand the layers of issues that Katherine scathingly attacks in her story. She employs the symbols to highlight the plaguing issues of the society prevalent in her times.

Mansfield sets the beginning of her story in "cold corridors" that clearly indicates the coldness within Miss Meadows. Her cold feelings and the emotional turmoil has imprisoned her into a state of confusion with only bitterness for people who she comes into contact with. The time of the year when the story is based is autumn: another symbol used to highlight the coldness that is prevalent within and without.

The noise by the students is stopped only at the arrival of Miss Meadows. She ironically is a symbol of noise and chaos herself, considering the turbulent times she is going through in her relationship. She brings an apprehension with her which makes the noise of the students to die. She beats the baton asking for silence. The baton is a sign of her power, like a magician's stick or a magic wand. However, her power is limited to her class as she has nothing that could silence her own disturbed mind.

Her thoughts are wavering at this point of time and she is unable to concentrate on the singing lessons. She channelises her lament for the lost relationship through the lament sung by her students. The lament is an expression of her own lovelorn condition. With every note, sigh and tension, there is tension mounting in Miss Meadows' heart. She is blinded by the situation. Tension is growing and to add to it is the setting of willow trees in the autumn season symbolizing the death, and sadness. She says: "Make that Drear sound

as if a cold wind were blowing through it. Dear!" She wants to express all her misery because the hope of living a happy life has been snatched from her.

Mary Beasley, Miss Meadow's favourite student hands her a "yellow chrysanthemum". The giving of yellow chrysanthemum was a ritual but that day she is unthankful and ignores the gift. The routine of every day suggests that love for her was longevity, a forever thing but the ritual is broken as Miss Meadows' love is dead from within. Miss Meadows even considered the idea of leaving school as she was ashamed to face the world after her abandonment.

The telegram that comes at the end bringing her the news of reconciliation with her lover brings back her life with it. As she crosses the labyrinth of the corridors, it is almost that life has eluded death and the music of life wins the battle in the end. Miss Meadows rushes to the music hall to sing the song of life, happiness because it is springtime again. Miss Meadows asks the girls to use their imagination as she is beaming with life and sunshine within her again with the new hope to live.

(c) Why did Basil break off his engagement with Miss Meadows? What was its impact?

Answer: Miss Meadows, the central character of Mansfield's story "The Singing Lesson" was engaged to be married to Basil, five years his junior. Miss Meadows a maiden of thirty is a singing teacher at a girl's school. The story begins with Miss Meadows reflecting upon the dreadful news of Basil breaking off his engagement with her. The reason attributed by him for breaking off this engagement was that he was disgusted with the idea of settling down. In reality, what the readers perceive is that Basil has come to realize that he was not marrying Miss Meadows out of love and he regretted his hasty decision to marry her.

The impact of Basil's decision can be felt by Miss Meadows and those surrounding her. She was despaired and was in a constant state of lament over the loss of this relationship. She wanted her sense of gloom and despair to be adopted by everyone she encountered. She wanted her students, the ambience and everyone around her to take part in the sorrow that she was feeling. Her hope to live and continue on in life had been snatched with the news of her engagement being broken.

Miss Meadows' sorrow needs to be perceived in the light of the Victorian times where every woman's ultimate goal was to get married off in life to a decent man. She is suffering from the dilemma of facing society. At thirty she was marrying Basil, who was five years younger to her. This was scandal enough for malicious talks and the sudden breakup convinces her to "leave the school" and avoid the world. Miss Meadows isn't courageous enough to handle the situation. Despite no fault of her, she lives in the continuous dread as society was accustomed to find faults in the woman when marriage was called off.

Miss Meadows on receiving the telegram of Basil readily accepts his excuse and welcomes him with a warm heart. She flies on the "wings of hope, of love, of joy", giving no thought as to why Basil would do such a dreadful thing to her. Thus, it reveals how important marriage was to her. She seems to be in love with the idea of 'love' rather than loving the man himself. She is ready to live with a man who didn't love her or like her, she was ready to adjust to any situation to remove the blot of being an unmarried woman in the society at thirty. She is superficial and emotionally fragile, to have given herself to a man who does not love her. She is foolish to judge a man on his appearance and trust him in his words.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Comment on the style of writing by which, the writer brings two plot structures to merge in 'The Singing Lesson'.

Answer: Katherine Mansfield is amazing in the way she brings two plot structures to merge together; the one is the way the protagonist is rejected by her young lover, and the other is the music lesson Miss Meadows gives her young students. Her desperate thoughts translate themselves into the treatment of her students.

The story starts with Miss Meadows, walking to the music hall, with despair-cold, sharp despair-buried deep in her heart like a wicked knife'. Her meeting with the sugary sweet science teacher repulses her. And when she enters the class, her manner has harshness, a sharpness that the expressions of the pupils conveyed their feelings 'Mead is in a wax'. The teacher did not care as she felt that her heart was bleeding to death, pierced by such harsh words of the letter. In the letter, her fiancé Basil had stated that their decision to marry was a mistake as he was not a marrying man, and the idea of settling down-filled him with regret. She even ignored the chrysanthemum offered by her pet student and said in a voice of ice. "Page fourteen, please and mark the accent well." She told them to sing 'A Lament', without expression. Every note was a sigh, a sob, a groan of awful mournfulness. The teacher began conducting with both hands with the words that their "marriage was a mistake" beating in her ears. She told the students to sing the same song in parts, still without expression and the line "Fade the roses of pleasure reminded her of Basil's last visit wearing a red rose in his buttonhole. In an icy tone, she told the students to sing the same song with expression. The torture came to an end when she was called to the Principal's office. Then something miraculous happened as she read the second telegram sent by Basil apologizing for the earlier letter. She goes wings of hope, of love and joy, her heart lights with happiness, and then she tells the students to sing a happy song of congratulations with imagination, warmth, joy and eagerness. This time hers was the leading voice-full, deep, glowing with animation.

The technique of two overlapping themes makes the story interesting, exciting and appealing. The development of thought correlates with the lessons happening in the class

so that both blend seamlessly as one harmonious whole. The despair and elation of the protagonist correspond with the way music is taught.

2. Attempt a character sketch of Basil.

Answer: Basil was Miss Meadows' fiancé who does not appear physically in the story but we get to know him through the inner workings of Miss Meadow's mind. He is described to be a young man of twenty-five, who committed to marrying her but also appears to be an insensitive and indecisive man. Miss Meadow's moods are determined by what Basil has written in his letter to her. She is devastated by his use of the word "disgust" used to describe his feelings over marrying her. He demonstrates that he does not have enough greatness to understand love.

Even though it was Basil who confessed his feelings for her on the night they walked home from church yet he seems irresolute between the thoughts of getting married or calling it off. He was an unstable man who did not have a particular stand. He is Miss Meadow's object of value and perhaps affections and thus the fear of losing him leaves her in sadness. Unable to bear the hopelessness, she changes what she had prepared for the classes and asks the students to sing the saddest song. Here "every note was a sigh, a sob, a groan of mournfulness". It appears as if Miss Meadows wanted to express all the misery, she was feeling.

Then, arrives a telegram, from Basil and in it he had apologized for the words he had used earlier. This shows that he too loved Miss Meadows and cared for her feelings. Miss Meadows feels transformed as she recovers from her sadness and becomes joyous.