

Modern English Short Stories

Paper - IV Unit - B.

The Kite: W. Somerset Maugham

"Notes" V.V.I.

"The Kite" is a psychological story written by Somerset Maugham, a versatile English writer of the 20th century. By training a doctor, Maugham's knowledge of men and medicine has helped him a lot in his literary explorations.

It is primarily a story of Herbert Sunbury as told by Ned Preeton to the writer. Herbert is the only son of Mr. Samuel Sunbury and Mrs. Beatrice Sunbury. Herbert's mother is a lady of singular taste and temperament. She has brought up her son in a very careful manner. She has never allowed him to mix with other children in the fear that he might get spoiled in their company. Herbert grows into a man and gets a job as an accountant in the same office where his father, a bespeckled husband, had worked as a clerk for years. Mrs. & Mr. Sunbury have however, allowed Herbert to cultivate the habit of kite flying from the time Herbert was seven years old. It appears Herbert's mother does not want him to grow as an adult and be independent of her. That's why even at his 21st birthday, she gives him the gift of a kite. When Samuel Sunbury reminds her that their son has become grown up, may fall in love with Betty Bevan and marry, Mrs. Sunbury reacts violently saying "a man does not know his own mind till he is thirty five"

It clearly indicates that Mrs Sunbury wants to keep her son under her thumbs for the next ten to fifteen years.

But Herbert falls in love with Betty Beran and brings her to his house for his mother's approval. Stung by Oedipal jealousy Mrs. Sunbury mistreats Miss Beran and disapproves her for being "common as dirt". Yet Herbert marries her and begins to live with her in a separate house, away from his parents. Not to be out done, Mr. Sunbury tries to win her son back by communicating news of new kites to him through her husband. Herbert's obsession for kites distances him from his wife, who wants him to behave in a dignified way. Herbert returns to his parents and now pays 35 shillings a week to his wife as maintenance amount. Betty realises that she cannot live without Herbert, so approaches him repeatedly without success. Meanwhile, she senses Herbert's fondness for a box-kite which his parents have got for him. Being furious, she visits his house one Sunday while the Sunburys are at the church, and smashes the box-kite. On discovery, Herbert is a mad with anger and wants to kill Betty for this outrage. But at the advice of his mother, he stops her weekly allowance. A helpless Betty files a case before the magistrate who orders to pay her 25 shillings every week to her maintenance. Herbert refuses to pay her anything and prefers to go to jail. When the story opens he is already in jail.

There may be more than one explanation of the strange behaviour of Herbert. In the first place, it is due to the Oedipal bull of the his mother over him, represented symbolically by his obsession for the kite. Just like the kite, which can soar high in the sky only with the help of thread, so Herbert is similarly dependent on the umbilical cord of his mother. The kite hostility between the mother and the daughter-in-law is also indicative of Oedipal jealousy. Betty is aware of this Oedipal relationship between her husband and his mother, symbolical by the kite. Another explanation is only a cordillery to the first, Herbert's behaviour may be explained in terms of the training he has received from his mother. It is this training which is responsible for this big failure in his life and for all his miseries. One more possible explanation is offered at the end of the story. According to this possibility, the kite is symbolic of a sense of power, freedom and adventure - these feelings were never enjoyed by Herbert either with his strong-willed mother or with his nagging wife. Kite flying is the only means for him to experience these things. When Betty smashes the box-kite Herbert takes it as an attack on his sense of freedom and adventure. That is why he refuses to pay anything to her and prefers to go to prison. All these explanations are equally valid like a true artist Maugham leaves the option to the reader to give his final judgement.

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