

Lesson of the moth essay

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In life, there are certain sacrifices that need to be made in order to pursue prosperity and contentment. A sacrifice can be doing something fulfilling that will ultimately have dire consequences, or giving up something in order to avoid the consequences. For example, one might take a risk by pursuing a career that offers a significant monetary reward but forces them to spend time away from their family. In Don Marquis' poem, "Lesson of the Moth", through the utilization of symbolism, personification, and extended metaphor, there is an exploration of the spectrum of personal sacrifice and how individuals are willing to live a life of safety because it ensures longevity, however by being so 'civilized', individuals often neglect happiness and fulfillment. The definition of sacrifice is the act of giving up something that is valuable and important for the sake of something else or for others.

In "Lesson of the Moth" the speaker, "Archy" notices a moth buzzing around a lightbulb trying to fry himself on the wires. When Archy asks the moth why he would want to do such a thing, the moth replies with a profound statement saying "It is better to be burned up with beauty than to live a long time and be bored all the while". This aspect of personal sacrifice reveals one's true values in life. The moth would have rathered that he was happy for one moment than live his life to its fullest extent but be full of regret for not taking that one significant risk. The irony in this statement is that a moth is an insignificant creature that wouldn't appear to be wise and philosophical, yet the moth was willing to risk everything to fulfill his purpose in life, which was to immolate himself, sacrificing his life for one moment of beauty.

Contradicting this seemingly reckless and dangerous way of living life is the preservative lifestyle that the speaker lives with. Archy states that he would rather have “ half the happiness but twice the longevity”, which shows how people’s values can be remarkably different. Archy has a much more conservative point of view and he believes that his life would be better if it was longer rather than happier. This opinion is based on the fact that a longer life means more time to spend with family and friends which can also provide a sense of fulfillment. An anonymous quote that relates to this dilemma is, “ If you don’t sacrifice for what you want, what you want becomes the sacrifice”. If one chooses to live a life of safety, always fearful of the consequences, they end up by sacrificing their goals and aspirations in return for a longer life. Archy chooses to preserve his life, but what is his life worth if he doesn’t seek out the maximum level of enjoyment. One definitely should not risk their life for a short amount of beauty but the extended metaphor of the moth shows that devoting time and energy towards something important, rather than something boring and routine can provide a sense of attainment and fulfillment to an individual. Marquis employs heavy use of symbolism in “ Lesson of the Moth”. He personifies a plain and uncomplicated creature, the moth, to symbolize life and sacrifice. The personification of the moth in this instance allows us to believe that the moth is on an equal level as the speaker because the human, “ Archy” was having a deep conversation with the animated moth although insects aren’t able to speak to people.

The judgemental statement made by Archy at the end of the second stanza, “ have you no sense?”, articulates the human perspective of life and how it

should be preserved at all costs. With this judgemental attitude, Archy is unable to understand the inflexible perspective of the moth that revolves around sacrifice in order to attain whatever it is that it wants. The moth was striving to get into the light bulb which was being used to symbolize happiness and fulfillment. One could even say that the light bulb was a symbol for heaven to which the moth was desperately trying to enter. Another symbol used is the small unsightly cinder that the moth turned into after incinerating himself on the cigar lighter. The shift from a living breathing creature into a small pile of ash represents the irreversible nature of the sacrifice that was made.

Although the moth was able to achieve what he finally wanted in life, he ended up worse off than he was before. Ultimately, in the poem "Lesson of the Moth" by Don Marquis, there is an exploration of how one's willingness to sacrifice a certain aspect of their life depends on their personal values and definition of happiness. Some people believe that a longer life is a happier life but others consider a long life full of routine and safety unfulfilling and boring. Both the views of the moth and Archy aim to accomplish the same thing; a happier, more fulfilling life. For the moth, the purpose of frying himself in the flame was really discovered in the pursuit of it rather than in the end result. Although it seems as if the moth was seeking death, in reality, it was seeking life.